Public Relations in Educational Organizations: Practice in an Age of Information and Reform

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CHAPTER II

Working With the Media
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Contact with the media has always been a cogent topic for school administrators, but the issue has assumed much greater importance in recent years. Transition to an information age and protracted demands for school reform have forged new expectations for those who hold public office. In partisan politics, for example, individuals have often been elected and, once in office, evaluated on their ability to be "great communicators." In a very similar fashion, school superintendents or college presidents, especially at publicly funded institutions, are often appointed, and their performance judged, on the basis of their ability to create positive relationships between their organizations and the communities in which they function.

Regrettably, many school administrators are inclined to avoid reporters. In part, this posture is predicated on fear—fear of negative stories and fear of being treated unfairly. But even if such trepidation were warranted, administrators have little to gain by dealing with the media in this manner. Richard Wallace (1990) commented that while most administrators do not like to handle sensitive issues with reporters, they must realize that everyone benefits when education business is dealt with forthrightly and candidly. He added that proper information exchanges with the community were far more likely to occur when schools had developed a program for media relations. He cited three indices of a sound program:

- Administrators establish realistic expectations of the media.
- Media relations are personalized so that school officials know the reporters who are assigned to cover them.
- Administrators maintain some control over access to the media and messages that are transmitted.

Each objective requires leadership (deciding what to do) and management (deciding how things should get done). Each requires that educational administrators know something about journalism, journalists, and local media markets. This chapter addresses key issues that pertain to effective working relationships between school officials and reporters.
WHEN THE REPORTER KNOCKS ON THE DOOR

If there is anything that can make a school official wince, it is a pack of angry parents; add a lone reporter and you have the recipe for an ulcer. Any administrator who has had this experience will readily testify that it can be very unpleasant, but the degree to which it is pleasant or unpleasant often depends on readiness. That is to say, weathering the storm usually depends on the administrator's preparedness to deal with the situation.

Too often school officials attempt to avoid conflict by acting bureaucratically—ignoring telephone calls, refusing interviews, or failing to release information—or they attempt to concoct some semblance of a public affairs office as a public relations crisis mounts outside the school doors. Both tactics can prove fatal. The effects of having been unprepared become visible once the dust has settled. Some administrators may lose their jobs; the community may lose faith in the public schools; bond issues may become impossible to pass; support for necessary programs may be seriously eroded; volunteers and donors may seek other outlets for their time and money. But most tragically, a loss of public faith makes the students the real losers.

Not too long ago, the television program 60 Minutes did a feature on custodial salaries and job performance in the New York City schools. In an interview on the show, Joseph Fernandez, then chancellor of the school system, tried to explain how union contracts and past practice made it nearly impossible for him to deal with the situation (Kowalski, 1995). While few school officials will ever be put in such an uncomfortable position on national television, most will encounter journalists in their local communities. And for some, the experience will be exceedingly stressful. It is what Hemet (California) Unified School District Superintendent Jack McLaughlin (1993) called “media phobia.”

While some administrators may never feel comfortable being interviewed by the media, all should prepare to meet this responsibility. For those who do not possess the necessary self-confidence or communication skills, neither hiding nor knee-jerk reactions will suffice. McLaughlin (1993) suggested that those administrators who have made every effort to work with the media, but remain fearful and insecure, must create alternatives that allow some other person to serve as spokesperson for the organization. Bill Gephardt (1993), a Hollywood, California, television reporter, agrees. “If you don’t think you’re any good being yourself,” he points out, “then go find someone who can be himself and let him represent you.” When the reporter knocks on the door, the administrator’s level of anxiety is usually determined by self-awareness, knowledge about journalism, and the degree to which this information has been used to forge a plan of action.

UNDERSTANDING JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS

Education officials are likely to encounter the media on a regular basis; for this reason alone, they ought to know something about journalism and journalists. From university presidents to assistant principals, administrators need some skill in dealing with reporters. Even in organizations where there are public information officers, administrators should know the reporters who are likely to cover them and their schools.
Misunderstandings often arise because educators have little insight into the practice of journalism. A superintendent may judge that local reporters are only interested in negative stories, in problems and scandals. Administrators may not understand why there is not an eagerness to do stories when things are going very well, or why reporters are not willing to praise schools when they educate students with less than adequate budgets (McQuaid, 1989). And more often than not, these perceptions cause administrators to steam silently or to complain to each other. Neither behavior increases the knowledge base they need in order to work effectively with the media.

McLaughlin (1993) offered several suggestions regarding ways in which administrators can enhance their knowledge of journalism. One is to follow his example and actually take a course in journalism. Another is that administrators should offer to do some writing for a local newspaper. And a third is to invite one or more reporters to a meeting with administrative staff to explain what newspaper, radio, and television consider news. Similarly, Kim Walker (1990) suggested that in the context of today’s confrontational reporting practices media training for administrators is essential. She recommended a staff development approach for addressing the need.

In addition to knowing something about journalism, administrators need to know the people who report on them and their organizations. Experienced reporters and school officials agree that there are many benefits to being acquainted before a crisis situation or scandal evolves. A new school official might want to invite the reporter to lunch and have a friendly discussion of responsibilities. Each party can benefit. As with all professions, journalism has some good employees, some bad. Some reporters are prone to twist stories or sensationalize issues. While administrators may not prevent such things from occurring, they can deal with them more effectively if they understand the person who is responsible.

KEY ISSUES IN EFFECTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS

As in all professions, school administrators share accumulated wisdom commonly referred to as “craft knowledge.” One pearl commonly passed from generation to generation is the caveat—a paraphrase of Mark Twain—that educational leaders ought not fight with persons who buy their ink by the barrel (Akers, 1983). While serving as executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, Paul Salmon developed a list of old-fashioned, commonsense guidelines for successful practice. Among them were the following two pieces of advice: (1) Recognize the importance of empowerment and effective communication; (2) develop a positive relationship with the media (Shannon, 1994). But seasoned administrators are quick to point out that such goals are far easier to articulate than they are to accomplish. Good relationships with the media must be fostered; they are most likely to occur when they are predicated on a mutual understanding of responsibilities.

Reporters and administrators who understand each other’s responsibilities are in a position to maintain effective communication. For the administrator, this means possessing knowledge about fundamental facets of journalism and the role of journalists. What follows is a summary of critical dimensions of a reporter’s world.
Working with Deadlines

One area that often creates tension between reporters and school officials relates to deadlines. Stories often must be submitted hours before publication or airing because the copy may require the preapproval of several editors. Time parameters necessitate expeditious information exchanges, and thus reporters are often perplexed when school officials either fail to return their telephone calls or return them after deadlines have passed. If inquiries are not answered promptly, reporters usually have no alternative but to publish the story without the administrator's perspective. Some administrators may believe that avoiding a reporter's inquiries will kill the story, but more likely, the story will run anyway and their silence will only serve to place them and their organizations in a precarious position.

Administrators should try to provide comprehensive and detailed responses to all media inquiries. Sometimes this is difficult or impossible to do spontaneously. Nick Pedro (1989) recommended that, when answering media questions, administrators be willing to admit ignorance if they cannot respond honestly. The administrator can always ask for time to look into the matter and prepare an informed answer. Doing so may reduce suspicions about why an answer is not forthcoming immediately. Even where deadlines do not permit consultation, a follow-up story may be planned to allow school officials to state their positions on the matter.

Encountering New Reporters

First and foremost, education leaders need to recognize that the press can be an ally in communicating the school's message to the public (Shaw, 1987). This consideration is especially crucial for school administrators. Reporters change beats and jobs often; education reporters change jobs more frequently than most. Surveying coverage of higher education institutions, Marilyn Posner (1994) found that even reporters for the nation's largest and most prestigious newspapers do not stay in their jobs very long. She found that smaller papers, those with circulations of less than 75,000, still tend to assign a reporter to several beats. This condition makes it more difficult for many reporters to concentrate on schools (and thus to learn about them) and more likely that they will seek promotions to assignments that have a single focus.

Change is also spawned by success. That is, good education reporters are often rewarded by being assigned to new beats—winning a prize for outstanding reporting in education can lead to a promotion away from the education beat (McQuaid, 1989). This pattern of being promoted away from education reinforces the proclivity of assigning the beat to novices.

School officials not only need to learn about journalists, many are faced with the unenviable task of having to educate newly assigned reporters. These journalists often know little about the inner workings of a university or school system, and they are even less likely to know the history of the challenges facing a specific institution. For example, one of the toughest assignments for a new reporter is to accurately cover a school board or board of trustees meeting. Topics discussed and the procedural nature of these meetings
may be unfamiliar and confusing. In addition to these potential barriers, reporters almost always are required to write their stories on a tight deadline with little or no opportunity for follow-up interviews. Frequently they have only seconds to check name spellings and titles before submitting their work. Michael Fallon (1993) offered the following advice to administrators: "With new reporters, you may have to underscore the importance of an action taken at a meeting. To strengthen coverage of school board meetings, send out the agenda...with a note highlighting key issues...a few days in advance. On rare occasions, when a highly complex plan is to be presented, consider holding a news conference in advance. The intent is to allow a district to get its plan into print before the meeting." Such procedures can reduce the probability of errors and help to establish a positive working relationship with the media.

Even experienced reporters can benefit from contact with a public information officer who keeps abreast of educational issues. These administrators can point reporters in the right direction, suggest ways of documenting stories, and provide ideas for stories that may be of high interest for the local media. Rhoades and Rhoades (1991) offered several suggestions for aiding newly assigned reporters:

- Help the journalist better understand the pressing education issues of the day.
- Provide research and related information that the reporter can use as background material.
- Direct the reporter to individuals outside the school organization for additional or different perspectives on an issue.
- Show the reporter documents that clarify or add accuracy to their issues.

Dealing with Negative News

Administrators certainly like stories that put them in a good light. These are the articles that are posted on bulletin boards and showcased at public events. But not every story is a good-news story; some are highly critical of a school or its leaders. Unfortunately, when this occurs, administrators are prone to blame reporters for distorting events in order to increase newspaper sales or to gain more listeners or viewers. In reality, reporters see themselves as public watchdogs, not salespeople. Most would find it impossible to even describe how marketing and sales occur within their organizations.

While negative news about education is unavoidable, it can have a silver lining if properly managed. For example, consider the potential of doing a story that criticizes overcrowded conditions in a large city school system. Principals may go to great lengths to keep reporters away from the schools so that they will not see thirty-five or forty students crammed into a classroom or laboratory designed for far less than that number. They fear they will be unduly criticized if the public discovers that some students are forced to sit on the floor because there are not enough desks. Or, they do not want to answer questions regarding the failure to assign homework because there are not enough textbooks to go around. Disclosing such situations to the general public can certainly lead to outrage and anger; infuriated patrons may indeed respond to the news by writing negative letters to
school board members and the editor of the local newspaper. But consider the alternative. If the truth is kept from the public, will these deplorable conditions ever be eradicated? Will school officials be able to muster the support to pass a bond referendum to get the needed resources? Deciding to do nothing with a negative story is as important a decision as preparing a specific response (Shaw, 1987).

There are three key facets to dealing with negative situations. First, admitting problems exist is better than the alternative. School officials who attempt to suppress problems, to keep them hidden from the public, are playing a dangerous game. Second, the impact of disclosing problems is usually softened when the administrator explains that there is a plan of action. Many citizens realize problems are inevitable, and they are impressed when leaders are prepared to deal with them. And third, administrators need to communicate their plans in language that can be understood by the reporter and readers. If an eighth-grade student cannot comprehend the solution being offered, it is likely that a large portion of the general audience will also be lost.

Negative news is a form of conflict. School officials who seek an ongoing information exchange with their wider environments realize that conflict can be source of change—a means for solving problems. In this respect, the ultimate value of negative news depends on the quality of management used by administrators.

**Speaking Off-the-Record**

Speaking off-the-record means different things to different people; more importantly, the rules regarding such communication vary among reporters. Thus, administrators should always exercise caution when deciding whether to communicate with journalists in this fashion. Certainly, the practice of doing so should never become a habit.

On occasions when officials feel the need to speak off-the-record, they should first ask the reporter to state his or her position on such communication. In particular, one should determine if the reporter intends to share the information (in any form) with others, for example, an editor. As a general rule, an administrator who does not want a reporter to know something ought not relay the information, even off-the-record. Accordingly, agreements about speaking in this manner should be made at the front end of the conversation, because a reporter is unlikely to let an administrator go off-the-record retroactively. Off-the-record conversations between an administrator and reporter should take place only when there is a trusting relationship between the parties and only when such conversations are absolutely necessary.

There are occasions when school officials find it advantageous to go off-the-record. Consider the example of a superintendent who is about to disclose a complicated financial plan. The superintendent wants positive media coverage; however, he will be out of town the entire week before the plan is to be unveiled. Thus he seeks to do an interview with the reporter before his trip, with the understanding that the story will be “embargoed,” or held, until the plan is formally disclosed a week later. If there is a trusting relationship, the advance interview benefits both parties. The reporter has more time to do the story; the superintendent is able to communicate the nature and purpose of the plan despite his schedule.
The Option of "No Comment"

Clearly there are times when administrators are unable to answer a reporter’s questions. For instance, the inquiry may pertain to a confidential or personnel matter. On such occasions, talking to the reporter is still preferable to saying, “No comment.” The administrator can provide the reporter with reasons why the information cannot be shared, or the administrator can direct the reporter to another school official (for example, the school-district attorney) who may be in a position to provide answers. For example, an administrator may not be able to answer a reporter’s questions about a child abuse case because state statutes prohibit this disclosure. In this situation, the administrator has an opportunity to educate the reporter and public about the statute and its intent.

Explaining why direct answers are impossible is far different from simply responding, “No comment.” McLaughlin (1993) argued that refusing to comment only inflames the situation because reporters typically are encouraged to dig further. For many citizens, “no comment” conjures ideas of guilt. A preferable alternative is to indicate why direct responses are impossible. In the case of a breaking crisis, for instance, the administrator may be best served by saying something like, “I really can’t respond until we are able to sort things out ourselves.” This is especially useful if the reporter is promised information at a later date. The relationship between the administrator and reporter will remain intact if the reporter is convinced that there is no intent to withhold information.

Telling a Lie

One of the cardinal principles of public relations for administrators is to never lie to the media. School officials often find it tempting to mislead reporters, especially when the circumstances are personal. But experience has proven that lies come back to haunt those who tell them. For public officials, the gamble is especially great. If caught, they can lose public trust and destroy relationships with the media that took years to build—a tremendous price to pay for having gained the convenience of keeping reporters temporarily at bay.

Posner (1994) noted that a public relations person who lies or obscures facts will not prevent a good reporter from finding the real story. Thus the gain may only be a temporary obfuscation of the truth—and the potential price is high. Just one lie can forever taint the credibility of the administrator, and by extension, the entire educational organization.

Staying on Track

When reporters contact administrators, they almost always have a specific story or set of questions in mind. Further, they are probably operating under certain time parameters. Occasionally, school officials meander to other topics during the interview, either by avoiding questions or by raising new issues between questions. Diversions can create problems for the reporter. If there is another story that merits media attention, the administrator can make this suggestion to the reporter at the end of the interview (Ordovensky & Marx, 1993). Judy Parker (1991) has offered a general yet cogent suggestion: “Help, don’t hinder the communication” (p. 5).
Getting the School’s Story to the Media

As noted earlier, administrators often lament the lack of positive stories about their organizations. What they see as news may be rejected by the media, not because the story is positive but simply because it is not news. If administrators want their stories in the newspapers and on television, they have to perfect their pitch. They need to ask themselves a series of questions such as these:

- Would I want to hear this story?
- Who is the audience for this story?
- Why should taxpayers care about the story?
- Are there interesting photo opportunities that accompany the story? (This is a factor that can be crucial with television.)

Many times, stories that administrators want to see in print simply do not lend themselves to newspaper articles. A folk dancing group at a high school and a Thanksgiving skit at an elementary school exemplify activities that reporters may not see as newsworthy, but they could make their way into publication because they are suitable for stand-alone photos—that is, photos that are used without accompanying stories. Media coverage for schools is enhanced when administrators understand how news stories and features are used, but it is also enhanced when administrators understand that timing is important. Features that are not suitable for news stories can attract media attention if they are brought forward at an opportune moment. Bryan Patrick (1993), a photographer for The Sacramento Bee in California, said he likes school assignments that have some linkage to current events. Thus, a photo of science students setting off a rocket experiment typically may not get much attention, but when it is taken in conjunction with a story on NASA, it becomes more relevant.

Besides understanding the nature of news and the value of timing, administrators need to know their local media markets. Those who do are more apt to get their stories printed or on television. Consider, for example, the tremendous differences that usually exist between urban and rural areas. A small-town newspaper is usually more willing to cover “puff” pieces—stories that have no news value and little human interest but are published to keep good relations between the newspaper and the school district. Hence, reporters for these papers might do a photo and short story about a principal having lunch with the straight-A students, whereas a big-city paper is likely to reject the idea out of hand.

Michael Fallon, a former public information officer with the California School Boards Association noted there are many activities, such as presenting certificates to outstanding students, that are important to the school’s mission but are rarely newsworthy (Fallon, 1993). He suggested that school officials concentrate on other areas where they have an opportunity to get news in print:

At the local school district level, some examples come immediately to mind . . . scores (good or bad) on standardized state and national tests, violence or drug abuse on a campus, the impact of budget cuts, school closures, attendance boundary changes, collective bargaining that goes awry. At the state level, trends in admission of students to state universities, the influence of the legislature in setting educational policy, and research reports on a range of topics . . . from students with a limited knowledge of English to student performance comparisons in other states. Surveys
and research reports at the local level also can have a strong news value, particularly reports of educational innovations and new school programs that produce successful results.

In discussing ways to gain positive media coverage, he offered the following suggestions:

- Understand that there are slow and busy news days. This can make a difference in covering education stories.
- Realistically, schools should expect a combination of positive and negative stories. Unfortunately, positive stories are more quickly forgotten. But some negative stories can lead to positive stories, for example, a plan of action for a particular problem, or how a problem was eradicated. Always look for public relations opportunities—even in negative stories.
- Do not hesitate to make suggestions for future stories. Reporters like to receive ideas from administrators, and while they may not act on them immediately, they may place the ideas in their file for future reference.

Parker (1991) suggested that open and honest relationships require administrators to share both positive and negative news with reporters. Admitting setbacks or problems tends to reduce the “shroud of mystery so often connected with large institutions” (p. 5). She also observed that in many smaller communities, reporters are often the friends and neighbors of school officials. These contacts can serve to draw the reporter’s attention to a desired story.

Using Press Releases and Press Conferences

Writing a press release is a simple process and a good way to eliminate misunderstandings. The release should be typed and include the full name and telephone number of the contact person the reporter can call for additional information. If the contact person, for example, a teacher, is not readily available during the workday, the reporter should be provided with appropriate instructions about making inquiries. Press releases should be sent about a week before the event—even sooner if it is anticipated that other institutions will seek coverage on the same issue. The releases may be mailed, faxed, or hand-delivered to assure that all media receive them in a timely fashion.

Ordovensky and Marx (1993) recommend that press releases be written in journalistic style and address the “five Ws” in the first paragraph (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) (p. 23). They also urge that any opinions contained in the press release be attributed to individuals as direct quotes.

Press conferences are usually more complicated matters for school officials. Perhaps this is one reason why they are used less frequently than press releases. There are three primary reasons for holding a news conference: (1) the need to communicate with multiple media outlets simultaneously, (2) the media’s need to ask questions about breaking news, and (3) the need to make a knowledgeable source available to the media for a limited period of time (Ordovensky & Marx, 1993). Administrators should give ample notification to all media, including radio and television. In many communities, community-access cable television has become an outlet for school news. A press release should be distributed at the start of the conference, and it should include the exact announcement that will be read.
Successful press conferences don’t just happen—they are planned. Among the key considerations are the following:

- Anticipate questions that will be asked and prepare appropriate responses.
- Know exactly what can be said at the conference.
- Be prepared to explain how reporters can get additional information.
- Avoid emotional behaviors that convey fear, nervousness, or anger.
- Identify measures for maintaining control of the conference—measures that ensure simplicity.
- Be sure that the purpose of the conference is newsworthy.
- Always know how the conference will end. The preferred method is to announce that only one more question can be asked. Never leave news conferences abruptly.

One argument for using news conferences sparingly is that reporters will fail to attend if they find the activity to be unworthy of their time. Good media relations are not nurtured when school officials gain the reputation of inviting reporters to frivolous conferences.

Making Corrections

As in all human endeavors, mistakes are made in media stories about schools. And errors are made on both sides of the fence—by reporters and by school officials. The key for the school administrator is to be prepared to act when an error occurs. As John A. G. Klose (1993), the former public information officer for the Stockton (California) Unified School District, advised, “You never let a mistake go. Even if a reporter gets someone’s title wrong, let the journalist know.”

Often good relations between the reporter and the administrator are best served when mistakes are pointed out directly to the reporter. Going to a supervisor may give the impression that the administrator is trying to get the reporter in trouble. There may be occasions when sloppiness or unfairness persist, and these circumstances provide a justification for the administrator to contact the reporter’s editor—but it is advisable that this be done in a diplomatic, nonthreatening manner (Fallon, 1993).

Several years ago, a newspaper story mistakenly reported that a school district had paid $250,000 to a junior high school girl who had sued her teacher for sexual harassment. After the story broke, new court cases appeared, school officials filed their own complaints against the teacher, and disciplinary action took place. Countless stories followed in the city’s two newspapers. Reporters came and went, relying on previous stories for historical background. Not until five years later did the superintendent tell an education reporter that the insurance pool, and not the school district, had paid the damages to the girl. Despite taxpayer complaints spanning four years, school officials had never set the record straight. As it turns out, the superintendent had not made the correction because he feared that it would damage the reporter and he wanted their positive relationship to remain intact.

Printing corrections ought to be determined jointly by the reporter and the administrator. In some instances, corrections will only repeat damaging or negative information that the educational organization prefers to avoid. But even in situations where the school
officials do not pursue printed corrections, the error should be pointed out to the reporter. If not, it is likely to recur in subsequent stories.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO TELEVISION

While the foregoing issues are relevant to dealing with reporters working in all types of media, there are other media-relations issues that are unique to television. For example, administrators who are asked to do interviews in this medium often find themselves asking a series of questions. What do I wear? Should I use makeup? How will I come across on television? Should I be casual or formal?

Bill Gephardt (1993), a television reporter in California who gives lectures on dealing with reporters like himself, offers the following suggestions:

- Dress depends on the nature of the story. If it’s about outdoor education, jeans and flannel shirt are okay.
- Try to avoid the traditional scene of the school official sitting behind a desk in his or her office. Viewers don’t remember interviews when the interviewees all look the same.
- Try to avoid televised news conferences. The public tends to equate news conferences with bureaucracy. Viewers are generally more interested in the human side of stories.
- Don’t try to be too polished, since then viewers may not believe you. Credibility increases when administrators are seen as real people.

Commenting on personal appearance, Orlovsky and Marx (1993) warned that administrators ought not overdress for television interviews. Doing so may result in more attention being given to the individual than to the message. They urged administrators to dress just like they do every day, that is, wear what is commonly worn to the office. They also urged them to (1) prepare answers to anticipated questions, (2) suggest questions that could be asked by the reporter during the interview, (3) look at the interviewer while responding, and (4) thank the interviewer and the television crew for the opportunity to present a message.

Parker (1991) summarized her advice for administrators who will be on television by noting that they should be prepared, be calm, look great, take charge, and use good visuals. With regard to taking charge, she urged educators to

- Use related questions to make points
- Build a cutoff into an answer as a mechanism for dropping a topic
- Avoid repeating hostile questions
- Avoid appearing defensive
- Politely request that adequate time be allowed to answer a question

Television reporters who cover school board meetings usually look for short pieces that can be integrated into the nightly news broadcast. These spots provide opportunities for administrators to deliver a message, but the time is limited—maybe only forty-five seconds or less. Thus, words must be chosen very carefully (Parker, 1991). In this respect,
planning is critically important. But being prepared for television encounters is essential for at least one other reason. Walker (1990) warned that administrators often find television reporters more confrontational than their peers in the print media. Administrators should therefore anticipate questions and have at least some broad conception of how to address them.

THE USE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS

Larger school districts often employ a public information officer, a specialist who is prepared to work with the media. But many educational organizations either ignore this responsibility or address it by routinely giving the duties to a current employee (who probably has not been adequately prepared for it). In some smaller organizations, the responsibility may even be given to a secretary who has no professional training in either journalism or education. Superintendents or college presidents who pursue these alternatives often see the duties of a public information officer as merely editing a periodic newsletter and making available general information about programs. But when crisis hits these organizations, top-ranking administrators soon realize that they have nowhere to turn.

John Klose (1993), himself a public information officer formerly with the Stockton (California) Unified School District, has little sympathy for school officials who put themselves in this position. As he noted, "That's tough biscuits ... you shouldn't hire a nonprofessional to do a professional's job." Discussing an incident in his district in January of 1989 (commonly known as the "Stockton schoolyard shootings"), Klose said, "Your phone is going to ring off the hook. You've got to be prepared now for things to happen. Not 'if' they'll happen because they will happen." He warned that staff must be trained before a crisis, because once it occurs, there is no time to teach staff how to behave.

With regard to operating a public information office, Klose offered the following suggestions:

- School officials should direct all telephone calls regarding media relations to the public information officer. That person can either handle the matter or redirect the call to another administrator.
- If the school is in a bilingual area, be sure to have staff who are bilingual. Public information offices deal with parents as well as the media.
- School board members should speak for themselves because they are elected (or appointed) officials, though the public information office can provide guidelines and training for school board members in how to deal with the media—for example, in how to avoid making quotes on matters with which they have little familiarity.
- Always treat reporters with respect.

Clearly, small organizations may not be able to afford a specialist or to establish a public information office within the organization. This means that the responsibility has to be shouldered by some administrator as part of his or her total assignment. When this occurs, the organization should invest in staff development for the person to assure that the responsibilities can be met adequately.
### TABLE 11-1
Working with the Media: Key Considerations of Administrators

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building a positive relationship</td>
<td>Take charge; don’t wait for the reporters to come to you. Make yourself known to them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding the work of reporters</td>
<td>Learn something about journalism and journalists; gain insight into their responsibilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to telephone calls</td>
<td>Realize that deadlines are usually involved; return telephone calls and other inquiries promptly.</td>
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<td>Working with a new reporter</td>
<td>Education reporters change beats and jobs often; be prepared to educate a newly assigned reporter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with negative news</td>
<td>Don’t run and hide; be prepared to offer a course of action in relation to the problem or crisis; look for positive aspects. (For example, Can the conflict lead to positive change?)</td>
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<td>Speaking off-the-record</td>
<td>Don’t—unless it is absolutely necessary; only do so with reporters with whom you have a degree of trust.</td>
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<td>Answering questions</td>
<td>Never lie; avoid using the evasive statement, “No comment”; stick to the topic raised by the reporter; avoid using language that the reporter or general public may not understand.</td>
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<td>Getting your story in the media</td>
<td>Judge whether the story is really news; evaluate timing of the material. (That is, Is the material more interesting because of current events?)</td>
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<td>Issuing press releases</td>
<td>Try to use an accepted journalistic style; include pertinent and accurate information, especially about people whose names appear in the release; be sure that the objective of the release is clear.</td>
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<td>Holding press conferences</td>
<td>Use them only when necessary; remain in control; be prepared to bring the session to closure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with errors</td>
<td>Always bring errors to the attention of the reporter; determine if a correction or retraction is in your organization’s best interest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appearing on television</td>
<td>Dress appropriately; anticipate questions you may be asked; suggest questions to the reporter; look at the interviewer when responding; express appreciation for the opportunity.</td>
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### SUMMARY

Transition to an information age has increased expectations that school administrators be able to develop and maintain positive relationships with the media. Doing so requires that educators know something about journalism and journalists. More specifically, they need to know their local media markets and the degree to which education reporters understand the governance structure of schools and the pressing issues of the day. Good relations between administrators and reporters don’t just happen. They occur when both parties are willing to learn and there is a mutual appreciation of responsibility. Table 11–1 provides a summary of key issues for school administrators with regard to media relations.
Administrators ought to recognize that media coverage will include both positive and negative stories, and over the long run, there is likely to be a balance between praise and criticism (Shaw, 1987). When confronted with negative press, school officials ought not bury their heads in the sand or run for cover. Nor should they concentrate on making excuses. Rather, they should attempt to manage the conflict, and they can do this by publicly discussing potential solutions. Even the most negative stories present an opportunity for change and improvement. When leaders confront problems by telling the public how they will deal with them, when they reveal a positive plan of action, they may be able to use the conflict to build support for their organizations and themselves.

**CASE STUDY**

**Mismanaging a Sensitive Situation**

School administrators are apt to face a variety of unforeseen situations, but none can be as anxiety-producing as those involving inappropriate relationships between faculty and students. Not long ago, a high school football coach was placed on paid leave after one of his players reported that the coach had asked him to have sex with the coach's wife. The story made its way to school officials who then acted to remove the coach from the school environment pending a legal investigation.

Knowing that rumors would fly as soon as reporters started asking questions about the coach's being placed on leave, the school's principal called a faculty meeting. Without releasing details of the problem, he emphasized to the staff that they should keep personnel matters confidential—in essence, he urged them to refrain from talking about the matter. Following the general faculty meeting, the principal met with the school's counselors and told them to be alert for relevant student problems.

Despite efforts to keep the matter private, the story was leaked to a local newspaper prior to the conclusion of a police investigation and the eventual arrest of the coach. On the very day the coach and his wife were taken into custody by law enforcement officials, a story confirming the investigation and the alleged sexual misconduct became front-page copy.

Faced with a media crisis, the school board decided to designate one of its members as the official spokesperson. This board member was to field all media inquiries, including those made to school district employees. But this action did not deter television crews and newspaper reporters from descending on the high school. Interviews were sought with students and teachers. Unable to control conversations with the media, school officials were stunned to watch students who had no real knowledge of the incident embellish tales on the nightly news; they were dismayed by anonymous quotes appearing regularly in the local newspaper.

Information in one of the articles was clearly wrong, but school officials decided not to call the matter to the reporter's attention. This decision was largely predicated on the fact that the newspaper that printed the story was a small local publication and they figured that making a correction may not be worth the effort. But shortly after the local story appeared, the Associated Press picked it up and ran it across the country. The error was now compounded.
Another major decision made by the school board was to hire a private investigator for $10,000 to determine whether any employees had prior knowledge of the sexual misconduct involving the coach and his wife. This decision sparked a good bit of criticism. Because the district was not in a good financial posture, taxpayers questioned whether such an expenditure was necessary. Their anger only increased when they learned that the private investigator had found nothing to show that any employee had had advance knowledge of the coach's misconduct.

Eventually, the coach and his wife pleaded guilty to the crimes. Two teenagers who were found to be victims in the crimes then sued the school district, alleging that school officials had failed to adequately protect them from the coach. When asked about the lawsuits, school officials and the board member designated as the official spokesperson uniformly responded, "No comment."

Many disgruntled patrons cited school officials for three failures. First, many concluded that proper supervision of employees could have averted the incident in the first place. Second, the problem should not have been compounded by spending money for a private detective. And third, the school district now faced more financial losses because of the suits filed by the students.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Case Study

1. This chapter emphasized positive relationships with the media. To what extent do you believe that school officials in this case study had established such a relationship? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Should the principal have called a faculty meeting when he did? Why or why not?
3. Evaluate the decision to designate a school board member as the spokesperson.
4. What could school officials have done to control media access to students? To faculty?
5. If you were the superintendent in this district, what would you have done when the local newspaper printed the inaccurate story?
6. Assess the employment of the private investigator from the perspective of (a) the superintendent, (b) a school board member, (c) a teacher at the high school, (d) the principal at the high school, and (e) a taxpayer.
7. Would the school district have been in a better position to deal with this matter if it had had a public information officer?
8. If you were the superintendent in this case, what directions would you have given the principal about fielding questions from parents and students?

Chapter

9. Can school officials restrict access by the media to public buildings? Discuss the issue from the perspective of your state's laws.
10. Identify ways in which school officials in small districts can prepare principals to work effectively with the media.
CHAPTER 11 • WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

SUGGESTED READINGS


REFERENCES