



BY REQUEST...

THE POWER OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SCHOOLS

FEBRUARY 2001



NORTHWEST REGIONAL
EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY



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FOREWORD

This booklet is the 15th in a series of “hot topic” reports produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains a discussion of research and literature pertinent to the issue, a sampling of how Northwest schools are addressing the issue, suggestions for adapting these ideas to schools, selected references, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet gives practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success in certain areas. The goal of the series is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

Other titles in the series include:

- ◆ *Service Learning in the Northwest Region*
- ◆ *Tutoring: Strategies for Successful Learning*
- ◆ *Scheduling Alternatives: Options for Student Success*
- ◆ *Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?*
- ◆ *Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students at Risk*
- ◆ *All Students Learning: Making It Happen in Your School*
- ◆ *High-Quality Professional Development: An Essential Component of Successful Schools*
- ◆ *Student Mentoring*
- ◆ *Peaceful Schools*
- ◆ *After-School Programs: Good for Kids, Good for Communities*
- ◆ *Parent Partners: Using Parents To Enhance Education*
- ◆ *When Students Don't Succeed: Shedding Light on Grade Retention*
- ◆ *Making Positive Connections With Homeschoolers*
- ◆ *Increasing Student Motivation and Engagement: From Time-on-Task to Homework*

SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC, THEN AND NOW

In 1950, Mrs. Foster, a fifth-grade teacher in a growing suburb, didn't know how good she had it. Her school building was new and state of the art; her textbooks fresh from the publisher; her students attentive; their parents supportive, deferential, but detached; and funds for education arrived each year without debate or angst.

Schools today face obstacles that were unheard of then, such as:

◆ **News media scrutiny.** From reports of disappointing academic performance to shockingly violent acts by a few students, schools have had an overabundance of negative publicity in the past several years. Some of these stories have been legitimate, fair, and carefully reported; others unfair, poorly done, and sensationalized. Nevertheless, schools are left to deal with the resulting images and impressions, justified or not.

◆ **Increased competition.** Unlike 50 years ago when parochial schools were the primary public school competition, public schools today lose students, funds, and voter support to private schools, charter schools within the public system, home schooling, the privatization of public schools, and school choice (open enrollment).

◆ **Demographics.** Fifty years ago, the baby boom was just warming up. As boomers swelled school attendance rolls into the late 1970s, schools had a willing base of support. In 1970, for example, there were four million more school-age children than adults in the United States. By 1996, that ratio was turned on its head with 33 million more adults than school-age children.

Today, there are more people than not who see themselves as having no personal stake in the success of public education (Carroll & Carroll, 1994).

◆ **Rampant cynicism.** Almost 40 years of growing skepticism over government's effectiveness, from Vietnam to Watergate to the partisan politics in legislatures today, has seriously eroded trust in public institutions. And with the publication in 1984 of *A Nation at Risk*, the United States was shocked out of its complacent belief that all was well with our schools. Seventeen years later, public schools still feel the fallout with voters often reluctant to pass tax increases for schools, concerned that the return is not worth the investment. And more recently, the 1995 *Third International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) presented evidence that our students are not performing as well as students in other nations. Math and science performance of students in the United States was compared with students from 41 other countries. U.S. 12th-graders scored well below the international average in math and science, and eighth graders scored below the average in math. These results have caused concern among politicians, policymakers, and the public.

The irony is that schools, partly due to the wake-up call of *A Nation at Risk*, have become more rigorous and streamlined. But perceptions lag behind reality, and a knowledge economy places new and greater demands on public education. For good or for bad, education is an issue that absorbs many public anxieties about values, cultures, race, crime, taxes, and jobs.

Despite the obstacles, in most schools today, the building blocks to regain public support are in place: good people, a good product, and good results. With strong leadership and an effective public relations plan, schools can forge a new and stronger

relationship with the public—a partnership where the public is empowered and given value.

Unfortunately, schools of education do not provide training in public relations, and most superintendents, administrators, and teachers have little or no communications and public relations training. Many are uncomfortable in “selling” themselves or their services. But the fact is, schools must promote themselves because in the absence of the facts, “people will create their own information and it won’t be right” (Bradley, 1996). Schools must take it upon themselves to tell their own stories, and to listen better to their partners, the public, so they can provide the value the public wants.

WHAT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS?

School public relations used to be about getting positive messages out; it was a one-way communication street designed to showcase the best of a school or district to gain community support. But because people today are bombarded with information about schools, this model is not as effective as it once was.

Today, school public relations is less about conveying information than it is about establishing and promoting partnerships within the community. An effective school public relations plan provides value by giving people information they can use, not just information that the school needs to convey about process. Effective public relations means schools ask for and receive information just as much as they transmit it.

Of course, even with a school/public partnership paradigm, many adults are not “partners” of public schools by choice. Older people often vote against school funding measures, economically disadvantaged adults may feel they have no stake in the process, and private school parents may not want to support a public institution. The fact is, however, every voting citizen has the ability to have a positive impact on student achievement, and the overall good of their community. A good public relations program can show them the reciprocal value from their support.

THE FUNCTIONS OF SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS

With the overall goal of forging partnerships and providing value to parents, employees, and the public, the following functions describe the roles played by school public relations (National School Public Relations Association [NSPRA], n.d./d.)

- ◆ *Promoting community input*
- ◆ *Anticipating image problems; providing solutions*
- ◆ *Handling all aspects of district publications, e.g., external newspaper and internal newsletter, Web site*
- ◆ *Acting as the key contact for the media: writing news releases; working to get media coverage of district news*
- ◆ *Designing objective, informational materials for budget/bond issue campaigns*
- ◆ *Designing all levels of communications, including writing a crisis communication plan*
- ◆ *Conducting public relations research, surveys, and polls; interpreting results for management*
- ◆ *Creating avenues for student/staff recognition*
- ◆ *Training employees in the importance of public relations*

SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC—A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Regardless of what often seems to be overwhelming negative perceptions, the public is still largely sympathetic to the mission of public education. In the 1999 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 71 percent of respondents favored public schools, and strengthening them rather than starting to look for an alternative system (Rose and Gallup, 1999).

The difference between this public and that of earlier generations is that people today want to be a part of any changes that are planned at their local schools. People used to be content to let administrators make the decisions. In the past, when bond measures for new school buildings came up, the need seemed understood by all, and the money was readily approved. Today, the funding may be approved, but not without a lot of explanations and justifications.

Because today's public demands accountability, educators have to provide ever more detailed information about schools. But merely shoveling out information is not always a good thing. According to one district's public relations specialist, the biggest mistake school public relations staff can make is to talk *at* people. She says, "If the message is not getting across, the answer is not to buy a bigger megaphone" (P. Farrell & L. Frederick, personal communication, June 1, 2000).

The answer is engagement—interactivity: People want to participate in decisions and policymaking because they rightly perceive that public schools are their schools. This means that to create a satisfying partnership with the community, one that will reap the reward of community support, educators must

seek outsiders' input in areas that used to be the sole province of administrators: designing new assessments, approving new graduation requirements, setting standards, providing input on new construction, and hiring key staff.

Of course, most people are not education experts. Schools do not have to yield to every whim of their partners, whether they are parents, legislators, or the business community. And that is the public relations challenge: to sincerely accept and welcome public input, and to lose the insular tendency to deny outsiders' opinions, while still maintaining the integrity of an administrator's ability to be the final arbiter in any decision. It is a fine line, one that educators years ago did not have to walk.

The superintendent of one large urban district tells citizens, "This is your district. Let's do this together." He believes it is far worse to be accused of hiding something than it is to own up and get information out, even if the news is bad. He knows that strength and a partner-orientation must start at the top. Every employee gets the message: the public is your partner. His pledge to share complete information is beginning to restore the public's trust in the district, observers say (Sherman, 1999).

The bottom line in school public relations is not about letting everyone make decisions; it is about letting them feel that their input is valued and considered seriously, and they are welcome and needed.

DESIGNING A PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

What does your school or district want to achieve with its public relations program? To increase enrollment? To generate support for school reform? To counteract negative media publicity? To help reluctant or overworked parents learn how to help their child succeed? Worthy goals, but first, before sending any information out, take some in. What issues are people concerned with? What complaints do they have? What impressions (right or wrong) do they hold of the public schools? Only when a school has determined its community's concerns, formed an answering strategic plan, and developed a public relations strategy will its public relations output find its best mark. The following public relations steps can help a school or district determine what is important to the people in its community.

I. FIND OUT WHAT THE PUBLIC IS SAYING

◆ **What do the polls say?** In 1999, the annual *Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* poll (Rose and Gallup, 1999) showed that 98 percent of respondents chose the quality of the teaching staff as the most important factor they would use to select a school, if choice was unlimited. Other factors important to public school partners are student discipline and curriculum, each at 89 percent; and class size, at 75 percent. Poll data like these are free, easily obtained, and provide a great starting point for public relations. For example, a district could give its partners specifics on the high quality of its teaching staff; it could hold a community forum on discipline; it could regularly spotlight a spectacular teacher or an innovative project. All of these directly address the public's—its partner's—concerns.

◆ **Ask existing users.** Current public school parents were once newcomers to the school system. Ask them what their initial impressions of the school and district were, positive and negative. With the increasing choice parents have for their children's education, a bad first impression can mean a lost student (revenue lost), and a lost set of parents and two sets of grandparents (potentially six votes in support of public education lost). Whatever negative first impressions current parents once received, make sure incoming parents do not. Ask these veteran parents what their ideal public school would look like.

◆ **Take your own polls, and turn the data into information that gets used.** One Illinois elementary school district paid a professional research company \$4,500 for a survey of students, teachers, and parents. The findings: students wanted more meaningful homework, staff wanted stronger support from principals, and parents wanted more say in the selection of teachers. The district's superintendent said he got the message and is using the information to make changes. He plans a follow-up poll in two years to assess the district's progress (Walsh, 1996).

◆ **Meet with business leaders.** School administrators must get out of their offices and visit owners and managers of their community's industries and services. Ask what their skill requirements are, and build a personal relationship with them (NSPRA, n.d./b).

◆ **Seek out the non-users.** "Focus groups are a wonderful way to get very concrete opinions," says the community relations manager of a Washington district. "You cannot make assumptions about how people think" (Bradley, 1996). Hold a focus group of private school parents: Why didn't they choose public schools? What changes might make them reconsider? What elements do their private schools provide that the public schools

don't? Ask business people if entry level workers have the skills they require. What improvements can schools make to help create a generation of concerned, skilled, and informed citizens?

2. HAVE A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT

Before press releases are written or coalitions formed, a school or district must have an overall strategic plan, separate from its public relations plan. One large urban district, after being criticized for a lack of a coherent plan and struggling with a loss of credibility, threw out the old model of board members drafting a strategic plan within the safe confines of the boardroom. Instead, it held a series of public speak-out sessions to help it create a strategic plan. Every segment of society was invited: parents, teachers, students, administrators, government officials, clergy, business executives, union leaders, community activists, and school support staff. A core team then distilled the essence of these meetings into a draft plan that lays out the district's mission, core values, objectives, and strategies. A district or school must have an internal strategic plan before its public relations and the subsequent marketing can be effective. The best public relations in the world cannot hide incompetence or a lack of direction.

3. FORM A PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMITTEE

The next step is to designate a public relations steering committee of parents, teachers, and as many other stakeholders as feasible. (Or delegate the public relations committee function to an existing group, like the school site council.) Of course, a trained communications, marketing, or public relations professional is the best way to ensure that public relations is handled efficiently. Lacking that resource, the job must be delegated to a group that has the resources

it needs to educate itself about the public relations function, form public relations goals and objectives, plan strategies, and be accountable to school leadership. And, before the committee implements any public relations strategies, it should do some homework:

◆ **Review the literature.** An excellent resource is the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), which has books, periodicals, and videos on school public relations (see <http://www.nspr.org>). The United States Department of Education Web site (<http://www.ed.gov>) also offers information and links to explore.

◆ **Read about what other schools are doing.** A global search on the Internet or at sites such as *Education Week* (<http://www.edweek.org>) using school public relations key words (like public engagement, image marketing, public opinion, community relations, advertising, parental involvement, and public support) will lead to good examples of public relations in action in the public schools.

◆ **Visit schools known to have a good public relations program.** Larger school districts often have a dedicated public relations professional with a title like “Director of Communications and Community Involvement,” or “Community Relations Manager.” Ask your state’s Department of Education to point you toward successful schools you can visit and learn from.

4. TURN THE DATA INTO A PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

With all the valuable information it has accumulated, a school can plot its public relations plan. How will it address the community’s concerns? Which strategies will it employ to show the community that its priorities are being addressed? Which techniques can be used to counter common misconceptions?

Which events can be planned to enhance perceptions? Which strategies will be effective with which market segments? The next section will discuss specific public relations strategies. It is important to remember that public relations strategies should not be reserved for a “public relations campaign.” They must become a way of life. Every small action creates a positive experience that comes back when it is time to garner support for school improvement efforts or ballot measures.

SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES

Some of the strategies that follow address feelings: How welcome does a parent feel in the school? Some address knowledge: How informed are people in the community? What do they know about the school’s accomplishments? Some address power: How much influence do parents feel they have over their child’s education? The result of these efforts should be parents who feel, as one put it, “My voice matters here.” A parent with that attitude is a satisfied partner, one who is loyal and supportive.

Every citizen, whether public school parents, members of the business and religious communities, politicians, private school parents, and voters without school-age children has a need for public schools. The challenge is to determine what that need is, and then provide value. For example, every citizen needs to know that his or her tax money is being well spent; every business needs to know that its employment requirements are being addressed; every concerned citizen wants to be proud of his or her community, and that includes public schools. The following strategies provide value to various stakeholders in public education.

MEDIA

Schools can use media of all types: newspapers, magazines, newsletters, radio, television, and the Internet to target various groups in the community.

- ◆ **Press releases.** According to NSPRA, the public wants more substance from education reporters, including reporting on ideas and programs that offer potential solutions to their school's problems. Forty percent of the public says that public schools are the local issue they are most interested in learning about (Public Agenda, 1999). Local schools, when writing a press release touting achievements of their school, staff, or students, should include statistics like that, to prompt reporters to report substantive and positive stories, and not just sensational, negative stories about their local schools.
- ◆ **Paid advertisement.** Some districts, faced with school choice, have placed display advertisements to tout their school's academic programs. Some market themselves in magazine and newspaper advertisements as attractive and more affordable alternatives to private schools (Goldman, 1992).
- ◆ **E-mail.** Redesign enrollment forms to include e-mail addresses. Use e-mail as a modern-day "grapevine" to convey news to parents, teachers, and school partners. When the media are covering a story about the school or district, make sure employees and parents are e-mailed with the news as soon as possible, before they hear or see it in the media. Also use e-mail informally, to provide useful information or reminders to parents and employees. Remember that all families do not have e-mail; rapidly distribute printed notices as well.
- ◆ **Web site.** More and more school districts are using Web sites to reach parents, students, teachers, potential employees, and businesses—anyone who might be interested in the schools. But before jumping into Web site design, first determine the site's purpose. Is the primary goal to provide a high-tech bulletin board, or is it to offer interactive curriculum pages for teachers or homework help for students? Look at past community needs surveys to tailor the Web site to constituents' needs. Consider the number of families who have Internet access. A Web site can be a very effective way to market a school and to communicate with the community if it is designed to meet the needs of those who will use it the most.
- ◆ **Radio.** According to NSPRA, 49 percent of people over the age of 12 get their first news of the day from a radio station, making it a good medium to reach those demographic groups targeted by the station. Radio news departments are rather small; they will use a story if it's interesting. To determine what kinds of stories interest a station, call and ask first (NSPRA, n.d./c).
- ◆ **Proactive communications.** One school public relations specialist recommends that school leaders add the media to their "must call" list in case of a crisis. The media will find out anyway; let them hear your side of the story before they draw any conclusions. Another public relations professional recommends being forthright even when you have misunderstood or erred. When times are good, establish and nurture two-way communications with news media. Then, if and when a crisis strikes, a relationship of trust already exists.
- ◆ **Creative use of materials.** Use ordinary materials creatively to communicate to parents. For example, use the back

of the lunch menu to discuss current or upcoming issues, or create a high-quality color calendar that uses student artwork. Each month explain some local education-related issue, like new curriculum frameworks, how tax dollars are spent, or how boundaries are drawn or changed. Of course, with the increasing number of portals through which people receive information, printed materials are often ignored. Alone, they cannot be relied on to disseminate information.

OUTREACH

Another way to engage people is to reach out to them in unexpected ways.

◆ **Frank communications.** Use a weekly newsletter from the principal to share student successes, invite parents to assemblies, and frankly discuss issues. When parental concerns arise on topics such as curricula or staff, acknowledge problems and discuss solutions being implemented. Knowing that constructive action is being taken and that problems are not being swept under the rug helps parents have faith in the integrity of school personnel. On a higher level, openness helps demystify school for those parents who are intimidated by it, and it shows voters that their school is acknowledging problems, and is not just paying lip service to improvement.

◆ **Home visits.** When other efforts have failed to bring low-income or otherwise disadvantaged parents into the schools to support their children, some principals and teachers are finding home visits effective. A friendly visit eases the discomfort level and time constraints that prevent some parents from attending school events.

◆ **Welcome baby.** Some effective schools use easily obtained legal records of local births to send out a congratulatory flyer that welcomes the new baby to the community, provides highlights of the local school, and invites the parents to call or visit any time. Why wait until the parents have a child enrolled in the school? New parents are a sympathetic and fresh audience; try to gain their support early on, before a private school or competing district does, or before negative media publicity makes an impression.

One caveat: Beware of jargon in written materials: one parent complained that the literature her local school sent her “teemed with educationese—‘developmentally appropriate’, ‘child-centered learning methodologies.’” She says she found the information “about as helpful as the nutrition information you find on the side of a cereal box” (cited in Goldman, 1992, p. 29).

LITTLE THINGS

Big gestures sometimes fall flat; little ones tend to be a hit, and require little effort.

◆ **Personal notes.** One principal, as he visits classes, keeps a supply of business cards in his pocket. Each time he notes a child performing well or having a good time learning, he whips out a card, writes a quick note, and gives it to the child to pass on to his parents (NSPRA, n.d./a). It’s an easy bit of communication that thrills parents with its personal nature, and makes for a point of pride that they will likely share with family and friends.

◆ **Reflection.** Urge parents to ask their children what were the two best things that happened in school today ...and ask teachers

to wrap up their day by answering that question as well (NSPRA, n.d./a).

◆ **Telephone response line.** Schools that use a telephone response line find it is a minor investment that yields big results. It can give parents an avenue for expressing their concerns and frustrations, and help a school or district determine what community issues it needs to address in its school improvement efforts. Invite comments, criticisms, suggestions, and praise. Respond quickly with a thank-you and an explanation of action taken, if applicable, to all callers, even if no reply is requested. Schools that use a telephone response line report that even non-users are impressed that the district cares enough to solicit their opinions (Forde, Polk & Butler, 1997). The same policy should apply to e-mails received by staff.

FACILITIES

The best teachers and staff in the world can't totally erase the impression left by a decrepit and joyless building and grounds. Simple improvements not only work as positive public relations strategies, they also lift the spirits of the very people doing the hard work of education: teachers and students. Here is where even small efforts can make a big difference.

◆ **First impressions.** When parents walk into the building, how are they greeted? Turn desks around so visitors are not greeted by someone's back, someone they'll have to interrupt to gain attention. Have comfortable adult-size chairs, magazines, and evidence of children's accomplishments in the waiting area. Even if the building is old and needs repairs, make sure visitors feel welcome, and give them positive images of children learning the minute they step over the threshold.

◆ **The school building.** If there is opportunity for construction or renovation of a school building, ask the community for its wish list. One district found supporters in unlikely places when it invited community input for a new building. After many meetings and compromises, it was able to give its partners, the general public, largely what it wanted: a well-built building that was a point of civic pride, and a school loaded with technology that could accommodate group projects, community performing arts events, and conferences of local groups. Another benefit: its openness made some converts. Says one district resident who served on the facilities design team, "I had voted down the [school] levy. They had to educate me about what was going on in education. It got to be really exciting" (Bradley, 1996).

◆ **The grounds.** Encourage pride of place in parent volunteers, or finance improvements through a well-written grant. Flowers planted and student art installed outside the front door will remind newcomers and visitors that this building is about the joy of life and learning. Local nurseries, when asked, will often donate bedding plants that have gotten too "leggy" to sell.

When people already have negative impressions of schools, seeing a severe, barren building will not do much to dissuade them. One district has volunteer maintenance guidelines in place so it can make use of parent volunteers who want to spruce up their school's building.

◆ **The library, restrooms, and classrooms.** New paint and volunteer labor to apply it is inexpensive and can have an amazing effect on the appearance of a school, both inside and out. Cover freshly painted walls with samples of student art. Keep restrooms clean and free of graffiti. Encourage teachers to keep their classroom doors open so the school's atmosphere is open and inviting.

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE

Awards and honors aren't just for the recipient; they are a flag to wave to show off student and staff accomplishments.

◆ **Academic boosters club.** Some schools have successfully drawn the support of members of the business community by forming booster clubs. Three common club goals are to recognize excellence for academic achievement, acknowledge teachers' outstanding accomplishments, and support activities that promote academics. Non-school parents on the board meet to review accomplishments and reward merit. Booster clubs breed appreciation for what public schools are achieving by informing influential adults who are outside the parent/teacher/student loop (Decker & Decker, 1988).

◆ **Student of the year award.** If knowledge of this award goes no further than the honored student, family, and peers, it is a failure. An award for academic excellence or citizenship is about a public school's successes, about a community's pride. It's an opportunity to show business leaders, politicians, neighbors, and voters the very best of a public school. It is a definite candidate for a press release.

◆ **Student achievement.** It's probably an urban myth that the cashier at the local McDonald's didn't know how to make the correct change when the power went out. Actively fight such commonly held assumptions that perpetuate beliefs that schools aren't doing their job. Hold math nights to show that kids are being challenged, and that they are acquiring good skills. Publicize the specific achievements of students through press releases and letters to influential supporters. Address the myth, and then shatter it.

◆ **Staff achievement.** Honor the great work of school staff—professional and classified. Hold public award ceremonies and publish the award winners in as many media sources as possible. Involve everyone in the recognition process. Many school districts, such as Vancouver (WA) Public Schools, have strong staff recognition programs in which employees nominate their peers for special recognition. Staff recognition not only shows the staff how important they are to the school, but shows the community as well.

NETWORKING

Networks are not easy to set up, but over time, they can reap big results in the form of broad community support and fresh ideas.

◆ **Religious leaders.** Cultivate a relationship with neighborhood religious leaders. Even if they have an affiliated private school, they can be valuable partners to public educators. Let them know of neighborhood children's successes (especially if the child is a member of their congregation); ask them to help publicize school events in their announcements and newsletters; invite them to school activities; ask their support for school reform efforts. Show them concrete examples of the social justice that is inherent in a good public school, and they can become enthusiastic and loyal partners.

◆ **Business partners.** Too often, educators focus almost exclusively on the benefits to students when they seek a business partnership for their school. But as in any contract, consideration must be given on both sides. Don't pursue a business partnership with only the school's needs in mind—think about the benefits such a partnership would have for the business. Interview the business owners, and ask them what they want to see

from their public schools. Give them creative options for partnering with your school, options that provide value to them. Start small, with success, and then use this base to do more. Do not ask for a business' support when in a crisis. It may offer short-term support out of guilt or a need for a tax write-off. That kind of guilt giving does not engender long-term support. Most businesses look for value, both monetary and intrinsic: the value of getting its name on local projects, the value of a strong community, the value of corporate responsibility. Play to those values. A business that sees its school partner as a winner, as one that contributes to its long-term health, is a loyal and supportive partner. Finally,, don't forget to thank them for their support.

◆ **Coalitions.** Set up a coalition of community agencies such as the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, the school board, and city government. Use this advisory council to involve other agencies that are concerned with equitable school finance and reform, as well as other community issues like services for seniors, affordable housing, or commercial development (Decker & Decker, 1988).

◆ **Key communicators.** Some people are better connected than others. They sign up, they go to meetings, they protest inequities and poor service, they chronically volunteer. They are the backbone of democracy. They are also key communicators of a school's efforts. Some schools use these key communicators to broadcast information to other members of the community and to be listening posts, passing on to school officials rumors and community concerns. One large district uses more than 1,110 key communicators (Decker & Decker, 1988) who receive a monthly newsletter that explains decisions the district faces and provides ways to get involved in the decision making process. It's a simple and inexpen-

sive method for a school to keep its ear to the ground, and to pass along positive news.

Key communicators are especially effective if a school or district is trying to reach a non-English-speaking community (NSPRA, n.d./b). Trusted bilingual community members can pass information back and forth and answer questions that school officials may never be asked.

◆ **Existing resources.** PTA members, Scout leaders, and community groups who use the school building are likely already enthusiastic partners. Include them in your public relations goals and strategies and ask for their help in getting out positive messages.

OPEN DOORS

Be creative in drawing people into the school building.

◆ **Parental buttons.** Not every parent will respond to an open house or an invitation to attend a PTA meeting. Those who don't, however, may enthusiastically attend an arts night or a family math or science program. Other ways to draw parents into the building are community service projects, creative arts performances, special assemblies (let parents know via the school newsletter when the Reptile Man comes), talent shows, science fairs, library help, and task forces on computers, literacy, foreign languages, or the arts. Even parents who have their own negative history with school want to see their children perform. If educators see these events as opportunities to make parents happy and comfortable, their support is more likely.

One school with little parental involvement decided to provide professional development opportunities for parents, to eliminate some of the perceived secrecy that surrounds the education profes-

sion. The goal of its parent empowerment workshops was to give parents the knowledge to participate fully in their children's education. Weekly forums, hosted by school board members, English as a Second Language specialists, the local school advisory committee head, the Parent Teacher Organization president, the principal, or business partners covered various aspects of school, such as curriculum, testing, hiring procedures, special education programs, and keys to successful parent-teacher conferences. Attendance rose further when the workshops were moved into the community, aided by collaboration with a local priest, reporter, and the director of a community center. The school reported that after these sessions a wall came down; parents' comments noted that before these classes, they had been afraid, insecure, and intimidated by school (Wells, 1997). Afterward, their confidence level went up and so did their ability to support their child's school.

◆ **The crowds.** Open the school to community events such as "bring your own blanket" family movie nights in the school gym, or evening read-ins at the school library. Offer performing art spaces and conference rooms that welcome meetings of the public or local businesses. One school even hosted a juried show of professional artists, and used the opportunity to showcase its own students' art. Change the mindset that schools are only for children. The more a school draws people in, the more familiar people get with it. Familiarity breeds empathy. Empathy breeds support.

◆ **The lawmakers.** Bring legislators into the schools and make sure they stay for more than a few minutes, so they can see something positive: kids engaged in challenging tasks and teachers providing meaningful content. The goal is for them see that tax dollars are being spent wisely and profitably. Engage them before the legislative session, before a bond measure comes up or an education-related issue is slated for a vote. The aim is to show them

how their support of schools reflects favorably on them, proving that their position to support public education has been wise.

WHAT DOES A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Successful districts know that the closer people can get to their local schools, the more they will support them. They don't overlook the neighborhood school when planning public relations efforts: they know that for most of the people in a school's service area, parents and non-parents, their local school alone represents the entire system (Decker & Decker, 1988).

What does a school that has its public relations act together look like? Here are elements of schools that enjoy widespread community support:

◆ **Leadership.** School leadership instills a culture of openness and collegiality with community partners, and provides a strong central focus and plan.

◆ **Teachers and staff.** Schools that have used public relations successfully involve every staff member. Their daily commitment is the cornerstone of a successful marketing effort (Carroll & Carroll, 1994). They have absorbed the culture of excellence, and it influences their everyday actions and interactions with others. Even bus drivers, crossing guards, cafeteria workers, secretaries, and maintenance staff are aware that they can influence the community's perception of the school system.

◆ **School facility.** Every aspect of the school is open, helpful, and friendly (especially the front entrance, the reception area, and the classrooms themselves). Successful schools place them-

selves in the mind of a first-time parent with a tiny kindergartner. They assess their facility with a critical eye: Is the school inviting and friendly? Does it look like children are learning there?

◆ **School communications.** Knowing that any one form of communication is not sufficient, successful schools disperse their communications: press releases, Web sites, telephone hotlines, frequent newsletters that have useful content written in plain language, materials like lunch menus and calendars that are used to answer voters' concerns, and even informal handwritten notes home to parents.

Communications are responsive, not static. One school, after being criticized because parents were not informed of school assemblies, placed an events calendar in its weekly newsletter, so parents would know they were always welcome to stop by for special events and assemblies.

◆ **Parents.** Parents are given a role to play as collaborators in the education process; they co-sign learning contracts with their child and teacher (Decker & Decker, 1988). They are encouraged to comment on school policies and share in some decisions. The school offers diverse engagement opportunities so parents can choose the event that most suits their style.

Parents who feel empowered take initiative. One school principal noted that a candidate for a teaching position drove by the school one evening to look around, and saw a parent weeding the flowerbed by the front entrance. Such evidence of community pride and commitment is contagious: the teacher noted that she wanted to be part of such a community.

◆ **Businesses.** Businesses are asked for their input, and they see it being acted upon. They are given chances for community involvement that serves their needs.

◆ **Voters with no children.** Successful schools have a multi-layered outreach strategies to build a rapport with everyone in the community. Community residents are asked to solve district problems, like setting standards or designing new school buildings. Through opportunities like these, skepticism melts away. Through constant outreach efforts, even people who do not directly interact with the district are impressed at its efforts to solicit their opinions.

OBSTACLES

Implementing a good public relations program will not set well with everyone. Along with its rewards are some pitfalls that public relations-savvy schools and districts have experienced, as well as their suggestions for dealing with the following issues:

◆ **Convincing staff and teachers.** As one school community relations manager put it, "Developing a consumer orientation is the hardest thing I've ever had to work with." (Bradley, 1996). Schools may experience resentment from teachers and administrators that all these outside publics are having a say in the educational process, and making demands on their already overworked schedules.

However, if they don't listen and respond, schools will deteriorate, their working conditions will become less favorable, and in the long run, they will be hurt by the public's lack of engagement. It is in everyone's best interests to open the doors and let the public in as meaningful partners. As long as schools can convey that the best interests of children are at the core of their activities,

and that they have the will and capacity to successfully implement their strategies, the public will be satisfied. The public does not want or need to be involved in the minutiae of school management. When people feel schools are run capably they are happy to let administrators administrate and teachers teach.

◆ **Balking at the cost.** The perception is widespread that public relations is not a legitimate expense for a public entity. Yet, frequently there is concurrent demand for schools to communicate better and more openly. Some districts have solved this problem by funding public relations activities creatively, sometimes through grants from local businesses or targeted federal and state support. Others, in their efforts to involve parents and recruit students, are able to draw on federal funds marked for desegregation efforts (Goldman, 1992) to fund public relations strategies such as parent information centers.

◆ **Giving lip service.** Relegating the public relations function to a person or committee without the skills, time, or resources to perform constructively is a mistake. Without a plan, and training and resources to back it up, public relations efforts will be scattershot and ineffective.

◆ **Forgetting the audience.** Educational jargon is off-putting to a reader. It implies exclusivity, the very image schools want to avoid. As every good writing teacher stresses, “remember your audience.” Most people are annoyed by others’ use of jargon.

◆ **Doing too much.** Define goals narrowly, then choose no more than three to accomplish in a given year. Then, as those goals are accomplished, establish additional goals. When you say you will do something, be sure to take action and do it.

CONCLUSION

Public relations is a function schools cannot afford to ignore. No longer is the “back fence” the primary source of news for people. For schools to get out their message, they must make a coordinated, concerted effort to counteract other sources of information people receive that may be untrue or unfair. And they must provide people with the services and information they desire.

In the sense of attracting community support and drawing in parents, especially those who shy away from school involvement, school public relations is less about transmitting information, and more about listening and responding to the expectations and concerns of all citizens. Schools cannot operate as independently as they once did: the public demands more accountability and more participation, and parents have more school choices than in the past.

The goal of school public relations should be a community of citizens that believes the motto, “public schools ... there is no better place to learn.” When that happens, schools will have the resources and community support they’ll need in the always-changing educational environment.

THE NORTHWEST SAMPLER

The following pages contain descriptions of five Northwest school districts that have made notable efforts in public relations. These profiles are by no means meant to represent an exclusive listing of exemplary programs; rather they are just a few of the many excellent ones found in the region and throughout the county. They include larger districts as well as a small, rural district. Though each has a unique approach, all share a common goal: to build relationships with the community. Included for each site is contact information, a description of the program, observed outcomes as a result of the program, and tips directly from these educators looking to implement similar efforts.



LOCATION

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DESCRIPTION

Planning effective public relations strategies is a challenging job. It is more than just compiling newsletters, putting up a Web site, or writing newspaper articles. Being a public relations director means building relationships with community members by informing and involving them as much as possible with school programs.

Linda Baird, Twin Falls School District's school/community relations director, does all of the above and more. She and her one assistant produce a semi-annual newsletter distributed to more than 20,000 businesses and residents. She oversees the design and content and contributes to the writing of the district's Web site, while her assistant is the designer and page manager, and does much of the writing. Baird's role, however, is far more extensive than just publicity director. As she sees it, her primary responsibility is looking at the big picture: determining the most effective ways to communicate the district's goals to a variety of audiences. Not only does she spend a significant amount of time connecting with parents and community leaders, Baird also helps other school staff understand their role in promoting the district and communicating effectively with the public.



Last year, new teachers to the district were given a crash course in public relations. While “PR 101” may not be a typical part of new teacher orientation, the district felt it was important to include because most teachers are not used to marketing themselves. And recently, negative press from the local newspaper highlighted the importance of public relations even more. While seasoned teachers may be used to public criticism, newer teachers are not necessarily hardened to such scrutiny. Baird wanted to show teachers that they have the power to turn public opinion around by promoting the positive things that are happening in the schools as well as promoting themselves as professionals. She emphasized that teachers are the best PR tool schools have and are in the best position to promote the school. Baird stresses that the most effective means of communication are one-on-one conversations with people, not fliers or other printed materials. People form opinions through personal experiences (or the experiences of family or friends). In terms of shaping opinions regarding the quality of local schools, teacher interaction with individual parents or patrons is very powerful—even more so than that of the media. And, as with all public relations efforts, “planning, preparation, and persistence” are important to developing a teacher’s personal PR lesson plan.

Although the newspaper has in the past been critical of the schools, Baird has worked hard to establish relationships with local reporters. Media roundtables were held between district, school, and media representatives to discuss ways to improve communication. From these, the district developed a series of “Media Guidelines” outlining the procedures for reporters to gain access to schools. In addition, a procedure was developed for parents who wish to restrict media coverage of their child. Both are in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. Baird is quick to point out that she does not want



to be, nor should she be, the primary spokesperson for the district. Whenever possible, she asks that someone else in the district be interviewed about the school. Everyone has his or her role to play in getting the word out about the district’s success.

One way the district has informed people about its schools has been by taking groups of legislators, civic leaders, and realtors on tours of the school district. The district could have just mailed brochures out to these groups, but it wanted key community members to see for themselves just how diverse schools are today. As Baird says, “Meeting federal and state mandates, providing for individual student needs, and creating safe schools have fundamentally altered the way we do business.” The tours are tailored to each target audience. For example, the legislative tours focused on special needs programs such as Gifted and Talented, Limited English Proficient, and Early Childhood Special Education programs.

Comments from tour participants, post-tour evaluations, and requests from other organizations prompted another tour in November 2000 for realtors. The district’s superintendent, Terrell Donicht, sent out invitations to realtors saying “you are on the front lines in terms of fielding questions about our local schools.” Featured in this tour were reading programs, including the new Idaho Reading Initiative for kindergartners, citizenship training, standards, and advanced course offerings at the high school.

The tours are creative, well planned, and the agenda is interesting. Participants received tour booklets that contained one-page fact sheets on each program. Breakfast and the school bus ride between locations served as time to discuss district academic achievement, and fact sheets were included on the school food service and transportation programs.



Another aspect of Baird's job is involving parents as much as possible in their child's learning. For example, last summer the district held a workshop especially for parents of incoming kindergartners. The purpose was very specific: to help the parents know what is expected of their children to pass the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), a test that identifies early reading skills. Based on last year's IRI data, the district found that kindergarten students' reading readiness skills lagged behind the rest of the state. As Baird says, "Our hypothesis was that if parents knew what was expected of their children, they would assist us in preparing their children for school." At the workshop, the parents received a packet that included a card noting exactly what skills were expected. At the end of the year, the parent is sent a card for their child's next grade level.

Teaching staff members PR skills, inviting community members to tour the schools, and providing workshops for parents are just a few of the many ideas Baird has for promoting positive relations between the schools and community members. The key to having successful programs, says Baird, is to have a broad view of what needs to be done, while focusing on specific issues. It is also crucial to obtain constant feedback from everyone involved so that certain goals are being met.

Baird's efforts have been recognized nationally by the National School Public Relations Association and other organizations. Baird says her favorite part of her job is getting to brag about the achievements of district staff and students. A large part of public relations is indeed self-promotion, even if it is uncomfortable to do. While we are all taught not to brag or be boastful, we need to overcome this when talking about our schools. People will not know about the great things taking place in the classroom on a daily basis and how well our schools are doing if they are not told by those who know it best—the school staff.



OBSERVED OUTCOMES

- ◆ District tours have given participants a clearer picture of schools today: the resources needed for all the programs, and the level of expectation we have for our students. We have received positive press coverage of our tours.
- ◆ Kindergarten Idaho Reading Indicator workshops have received positive feedback from parents. Last fall 25 percent of kindergartners were reading at grade level; the 36.5 percent proficiency level this year is a positive indication that if parents know what is expected of their kids, they can help them get ready for the tests.
- ◆ Teachers and district staff are becoming more aware of their role in school PR. Media tips received from teachers are passed on to the media in a "Weekly Tip Sheet."
- ◆ Media relations continue to improve. The media guidelines have eased the process for news coverage, allowing reporters more access to students and facilities.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ◆ Focus on the big issues: communicate main points of district goals.
- ◆ Find multiple opportunities to communicate key messages over and over.
- ◆ Encourage everyone in the schools to constantly communicate with the public about how the youth of the community are being educated. Impress upon everyone that their role in public relations is as (or) more important than brochures and news articles.
- ◆ Develop a communication plan that is an extension of the school improvement plan or strategic plan. School PR should fit hand-in-glove with other district initiatives. If not, it is simply one more layer added on to an overwhelming work load—and one that will most likely be ignored.



LOCATION

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DESCRIPTION

Brian Barrows, the superintendent for Chester Public Schools, doesn't have the luxury of hiring a communications director, especially when the schools lost 40 students and his budget was cut by 16 percent last year. However, this does not mean that communications efforts go by the wayside. Barrows coordinates all public relations work from his office. "Because of this," he says, "I know all of the details and strategies being used." It also means he ends up taking work home to do on his laptop.

The population of Chester, Montana, is about 1,000, the population of the county a little more than 2,000. Chester is 40–60 miles from two larger towns Havre (10,700) and Shelby (3,000). Chester has one K–6 school, one junior high school, and one high school with about 277 students in all. The schools are, by almost any definition, isolated. In a state where schools are often consolidated, many students travel up to 45 miles on a bus to get to school.

Chester Public Schools does not have a Web site like larger school districts. But Barrows uses other media sources to inform



the public about what the schools are doing. One very successful approach has been using the local cable channel to provide information. Consistent pages throughout the year include the hot lunch menus, junior and senior high school activity schedules for the month, college visit dates, and a listing of any other school activities.

Because this rural community is spread over a wide area throughout the county, the use of the cable and radio stations is even more important to get the word out and to involve the community in school events. The radio station in Shelby, for example, broadcasts school basketball games across the county.

In a community where the local newspaper is the main media source for local news and events, it is very important for the superintendent to maintain a good working relationship with the editor. Liberty County Times editor Jeanne Carson says she has an excellent relationship with Barrows. Not only does Barrows write at least one article a month for the paper, but whenever the editor writes an article about the school, she runs it by Barrows before it goes to press. Larson says that small agriculturally-based communities are really dependent on local schools for all sorts of things: adult education programs, entertainment provided by school activities. Because of that there is a lot more involvement by the community in the local schools. The public uses school facilities for special meetings, concerts, and other events. The interactive television classroom is available to the public for conferences with other groups or agencies in the state. The message that Barrows communicates to the community is that "it's your school."

Public relations is truly a community effort in Chester, one in which the students also get involved. The high school technol-



ogy class helped the all-school reunion committee develop a comprehensive mailing list. Journalism students redesigned the Liberty County Chamber of Commerce brochure last year. The choir sang Christmas carols at the Sweet Grass Lodge before Christmas. The art classes participate in a show each year at the Liberty Village Arts Center.

Because the community is so involved with the school, Barrows emphasizes that it is important to carry out promises you make. For example, the district told the public that they would have access to the new computer lab when they approved the new levy to purchase the computers. When the computer lab was set up, the school organized an evening schedule for the public to come in and get training to use the computers.

With the community so involved in the schools, it is not surprising that the district has been very successful with levies and special projects. The entire school staff gets involved with some projects, such as a special levy. School staff members help with presentations to different service clubs and organizations. They work as callers on a phone tree to ensure that all taxpayers are informed about the levy issues. Teachers really make an effort to communicate to the parents how their kids are doing. Every Wednesday, the K-6 teachers send the students home with an envelope that contains school papers, messages from the staff, and other information. Parents expect to receive this envelope and look for it.

Chester Public Schools may not have the extensive communication activities that larger schools have, but the schools have a dedicated staff that make community involvement and communication a priority. As Barrows says, “It takes extra time and



energy to keep the public informed but the dividends are well worth it.”

OUTCOMES

- ◆ Greater participation in school activities by the community
- ◆ Strong support at levy elections
- ◆ More opportunities for success
- ◆ Higher student achievement

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ◆ Be on the offense rather than the defense when it comes to responding to issues. If you know a particular issue is coming up, lay the groundwork and move forward with the game plan.
- ◆ Go to the local grocery store at least three times a week to be visible in the community.
- ◆ Choose your responses carefully.
- ◆ Give credit where it is due.
- ◆ Attend all school activities.
- ◆ Be active in at least one community service organization.
- ◆ If you make a mistake, admit it and move on.
- ◆ Know the dynamics of your community.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to toot your own horn—no one else will do it for you.



LOCATION

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DESCRIPTION

If you can't get the public to come to your school open house, maybe you should try taking your open house to them. That's what the Forest Grove School District has done for the past four years. All nine schools take part in a districtwide open house at the local Fred Meyer department store.

Bringing the school to the community may seem like a novel concept, but for Connie Potter, the district's Public Information and Volunteer Coordinator, the idea just made good sense. Only about one-fourth of the community has children in school, and those without children don't usually get into the schools to see what's going on, says Potter. Schools have changed dramatically from what they were just a few decades ago. Students must meet rigid academic standards and then demonstrate what they have learned. So why not have the students show what they have learned to the entire community, rather than just to parents?



The open house is set up like a trade show, with about 16 different stations along the main aisles of the store. At one station students dig for artifacts in a huge wooden box. At another, fifth-graders demonstrate "hands-on algebra" using manipulatives. Further down the aisle, high school artists demonstrate their techniques using clay, drawing, and painting.

The open house is not simply a way to showcase the student's work, but also allows the community members to interact with the students. One year several senior citizens danced in the aisles to the music of student violinists.

Coordinating the open house logistics is certainly not easy, admits Potter. Teachers must send 150 kids on the bus to and from the open house. Substitutes must be provided for the teachers who accompany the students. "It takes a great deal of cooperation among the bus drivers, transportation department, teachers, parents, and students to make it all work, but we think it's well worth the effort," according to Potter. The National School Public Relations Association agreed; it liked the idea so much that it awarded the district its Golden Achievement Award in 1999.

This unique partnership with a local business is just one strategy to communicate effectively with the community. Many other successful projects are in place as well. Experience Corps, a federally subsidized program, places senior citizens in one of the elementary schools as volunteers. An internship program gives high school students the opportunity to work in a local auto dealership, where they spend two hours a day rotating among different departments. A career motivational workshop, "Soar With Your Dreams" held at the local university, gives kids the opportunity to experience a variety of careers through hands-on exhibits in a variety of trades.



One might think that Forest Grove School District has a large communications department to be able to do all these things. Not so; in fact, Potter **is** the communications department in a district of 5,300 students. That is why she believes it is so important to have a targeted communications plan to understand what the important goals are, because you can't do it all. "By mapping it all out at the beginning of the year, and providing a tangible tracking of what you do, you can really justify what you do," says Potter. "The district really needs to make communications a focus, whether or not you have a full-time person. A hit-or-miss approach to effective communications will not work."

One major accomplishment last fall that showed just how well these communications strategies are was the passage of a \$39.4-million bond measure to build two new schools and renovate existing schools. The bond measure was approved by more than 64 percent of the voters in a district where elections have traditionally been close. The superintendent, Jack Musser, credits this passage to a strong citizen volunteer effort. "I feel the reason this was successful is that it wasn't only a school district bond levy, but a community bond levy," he said in the district's November community newsletter. Potter also emphasizes that it couldn't have passed without strong community participation. The bond committee did everything from producing mass mailings, to delivering voter registration forms to the homes of senior citizens, to presenting information about the bond at about 40 different community meetings.

The district was invited to give a presentation at the Oregon School Boards Association's Bonds and Ballots workshop in January. One of the things Potter will stress at the workshop is that no one piece stands alone in a bond campaign. You must educate the public before you ask them for any-



thing. Ways to educate the public are ongoing, from newsletters to meetings to the open houses. Good PR may look easy, says Potter, but it is more than just what goes into the newspapers. A lot of strategy and planning goes into it.

OBSERVED OUTCOMES

- ◆ School improvement bond measure passed with more than 64 percent of the votes.
- ◆ The number of volunteer hours contributed to the schools increased from 30,000 in 1997-98 (the first year of a formal volunteer program) to more than 51,000 in 1999-2000, about 10 hours of adult help per student. More than 83 percent of parents rated the district as "exceptional" or "very good" in a survey last spring.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ◆ Administrators should make communications a priority. This means not only committing someone to the role of communications coordinator, even part time if necessary, but also committing to funding the programs.
- ◆ Develop a communications plan so the communication goals can be targeted to specific audiences, and so the programs will not be hit or miss.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to take a few risks along the way. Try a strategy; if it doesn't work; do something else the next time.
- ◆ Understand the news media's importance in getting the word out. They won't know what you are doing if you don't tell them.
- ◆ Cultivate contacts with local reporters.



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DESCRIPTION

Like many suburban/urban school districts across the country, North Clackamas School District is undergoing dramatic changes. The number of students in the Free and Reduced Lunch program has tripled in the past 10 years. Special education students have increased by 50 percent in the last 10 years, and English-Language Learners have quadrupled in the last four years.

To meet the needs of this changing student population, community and government relations director Joe Krumm has added more two-way communications efforts—building community connections—to accompany the one-way roles of mass mailings, cable access and the Web site. Krumm has, in fact, borrowed a new definition of “PR” from other PR professionals to mean building “personal relationships” rather than just maintaining public relations.

Ultimately, you have to get two-way conversations started with the community to understand people’s real concerns, emphasizes Krumm. Just as any good service organization would, the district should ask, “How can we serve you better?” Krumm and



other district leaders have met with several community groups to ask that question. For example, the district now meets with a Hispanic group on a regular basis. The group has told district staff members that they would like more textbooks in Spanish, and that it is really important to have someone in each school who speaks Spanish with whom they could speak.

North Clackamas has developed their communications plan by listening to the community through focus group meetings, surveys, and other community research. The plan has identified marketing strategies targeted to specific audiences based on this research with a goal of increasing participation and awareness within the community. As Krumm mentions in the communications plan, targeted marketing strategies are more effective than strategies that are not targeted to a specific group.

Senior citizens are especially emphasized in the communications plan. The plan lists several ways to enable the seniors to feel more connected to the school, as well as ways to promote relationships between students and seniors. These activities consist of ongoing programs as well as single events. As part of the Willamette View Manor Program, for example, seniors who live in this retirement community provide one-on-one tutoring to students who need help in math and reading. The program started in fall of 1998 and hopes to expand within the retirement community and other communities. Each activity has an “outcomes measurement” built in to make sure the strategy is working. In the case of Willamette Manor, students, staff, and residents were polled to measure the program’s success.

One highly successful event that brought seniors and students together was the Living History Day held at Milwaukie High. More than 800 veterans from four wars attended last year. The event, through the hard work of Milwaukie students and staff,



has now been expanded to serve other schools in the county and across the region. Anecdotal evidence and surveys showed that if the community has a better understanding of school needs, they will be more likely to support bond proposals. In fact, a bond measure passed soon after this event. “This is an example of the best we can do,” says Krumm, “where community connections lead to better student learning.”

The district’s volunteer program also increases community connections. The program is primarily composed of parents and grandparents. According to Nancy Giersch, coordinator of community involvement, the program has been very effective in showing the volunteers just how many needs schools have and how tax dollars are spent to meet those needs. This understanding has developed greater support for teachers as well.

Building connections between the community and the school is just half of Krumm’s job. The other half is internal: being a resource for district and school staff. This means providing support and leadership—demonstrating how public relations strategies can make projects more successful. It does take time for staff to trust you, to feel good about what a difference PR can make, acknowledges Krumm. For a lot of people, PR is low on the priority list. The key is to be committed to building rapport with people—to be visible and accessible to the staff.

Krumm talks frequently with each school’s staff about customer relations. He encourages staff to look at public relations from the public’s point of view, and to ask themselves, “How are the parents’ (or other groups’) experiences working with us? How can we improve our relations with them?”



“I am convinced that it isn’t just a matter of good ideas, it is a matter of having a real commitment to public relations,” says Krumm. “I am an advocate for those who don’t get spoken for in our community. Public relations can only be successful if it contributes to the real bottom line: student success.”

OUTCOMES

- ◆ Parent approval ratings jumped from 86 percent to 91 percent in two years ending in 2000. A similar increase has been seen among the general community, where 80 percent rated the district excellent or good.
- ◆ Regular opinion research practices with students, staff, and parents have aided district accountability and helped the district win grants. Practices help clarify effective communication and instruction methods.
- ◆ Parent, business, and community members are involved extensively in student curriculum and instruction, especially through school-to-career opportunities. This is a reflection of close ties between the departments of community relations, curriculum, and instruction.
- ◆ Public relations goals are part of Board-approved district short- and long-range objectives.
- ◆ People want to work in the school district.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ◆ Base communication strategies on research.
- ◆ Continually evaluate your strategies.
- ◆ Build connections with your community by listening and responding to their needs.
- ◆ Target your strategies to specific audiences. This is much more effective than mass mailings.
- ◆ Be a cheerleader, supporter, and advisor for the district staff. Staff members then become ambassadors for the district.



LOCATION

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DESCRIPTION

Everett Public Schools is a large, diverse district located about 30 miles north of Seattle, Washington. Its 25 schools have nearly 18,000 students. The goal at Everett Public Schools is to “ensure all students learn to high standards.” A critical factor in doing this is to involve the whole community in the schools. But, Gay Campbell, Director of Communications, stresses that one must first develop strategies to listen to the community to determine what their needs are. Building trusting relationships with the community is one of the most critical things one can do.

The Everett staff builds these relationships by involving those who are affected by the decisionmaking. District Superintendent Carol Whitehead has open, honest communications meetings with groups of staff, parents, and others. In an interview published on the district’s Web site, she says, “When I meet with teachers, custodians, parents, and community members, I give them the opportunity to talk with me. As they talk, I listen for an issue that permeates all parts of the organization.”



One example of how the staff involves the community in key decisions is the process of looking at early release days for the district. The district has formed a committee to get input from everyone concerned, before any recommendations are made. Parents on the committee survey other parents, students survey students, and teachers survey teachers.

Campbell notes that what works for one segment of the community may not work for other segments. Parents of school-age children have different needs and concerns than community members without children in the schools. Therefore, communication strategies must be targeted to those specific groups. For example, about 1,500 parents are e-mailed the latest news. All their questions are answered promptly and honestly. Newsletters are also sent out to parents with news of critical district activities or decisions. The content of the newsletters may be different from school to school depending on the audience.

One communication is also designed for families without children in the schools. The principal of each elementary school mails personalized letters to about 100 households in each school’s area. The letters go to people who have been most active in the community and most interested in the schools. The letters invite these people to volunteer in the schools, and to provide input as to how the schools can meet their needs.

Everett’s Communication Plan is directly tied to the District’s strategic plan. The community relations/community services department supports student learning through active communication and services that encourage a positive district culture, shared partnerships, and a communitywide appreciation for lifelong learning and support for public schools.



The plan first outlines how the community needs were determined, and then clearly states the district's message to that group. Then strategies are listed to communicate the message. An important part of this Communications Plan is a built-in evaluation component for each strategy. This is a very important ongoing process to measure whether each strategy actually worked.

EVERETT COMMUNICATIONS PLAN, 2000–2001 [EXCERPT]

Strategic Public: Citizens with no school-age children living in their homes

Communications research data used as a basis for planning how to reach this group:

- ◆ Responses by non-parents to 1999 Community Attitudes Survey
- ◆ Responses obtained from group meetings attended by this audience

Primary message for this group:

- ◆ Everett Schools are on the right track

Sub-audience:

- ◆ Those who have expressed an interest in schools

Strategies for delivering message:

- ◆ Target information in *Everett Schools* (newsletter) to the needs of this group

Primary Responsibility:

- ◆ Marcee

Timeline:

- ◆ Three times a year

Evaluation Method:

- ◆ Survey conducted in 1999 shows increased number naming this publication as primary source of info about schools. Will survey again in 2001.

Comments:

- ◆ Everett Schools is segmented through planning info most needed/wanted by people in each high school attendance area, changing the cover for each area.
-



The excerpt from the plan on the previous page shows how each strategy is based on research, is targeted to a specific audience, for a specific purpose, and is evaluated for effectiveness. Each strategy is then revised, eliminated, or expanded as needed.

Spearheading the formula and carrying out this plan is just one of Campbell's responsibilities. Her position is very challenging; it requires a wide range of abilities and experience to handle a variety of challenges—from responding to a major school crisis to producing a news release in less than 10 minutes. The most important role Campbell plays is as a “counselor” for management. She provides advice that will help avoid problems in the future on everything from asbestos removal to changing school boundaries.

Another important, and difficult, part of Campbell's job is in getting other staff members throughout the district to understand their role in public relations and how much of the public's attitude depends on them. She provides workshops in schools and departments that focus on what school staff members say and how others hear it. The communications staff provides special workshops for administrators to assist them with various information needs, such as writing a letter home to parents during a crisis.

Campbell's communications work often extends beyond her district. In addition to helping other school districts with bond measure campaigns, she shares her strategies at workshops, such as the Oregon School Boards Association Bonds and Ballots workshop.

Campbell and her staff work hard to get the public support they need to provide the best possible education for the children they serve. When asked what she enjoys most about her job, Campbell replied, “Seeing kids progress and learn. Seeing parents and other community members engaged as partners



in their schools in ways that contribute to better student learning. Knowing that education is the most important work anyone can be involved in ... That is the bottom line for me.”

OUTCOMES

- ◆ Everett residents have supported schools by consistently approving local operating levies.
- ◆ Voters have passed capital improvement measures that provide for modern, well-maintained schools.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ◆ Build personal, trusting relationships. These strategies take the most time, but are much more effective than strategies such as mass mailings that supply information but do little to build the kinds of relationships that result in a high level of support for schools.
- ◆ Target marketing techniques that really look at each customer group—their perceptions, what they need and want, and the results we want with and from them.
- ◆ Learn about internal audiences in your district, like school staff. Really listen to them.
- ◆ Don't assume that everyone knows how to communicate well and that just anyone can handle communications for your district.
- ◆ Be well-grounded in communications theory and practice.
- ◆ Have the courage to represent the unpopular view with management.
- ◆ Have a dedication and love for education, young people, and schools.

APPENDIX I

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CONTACTS

National School Public Relations Association [NSPRA]
15948 Derwood Rd.
Rockville, MD 20855
(301) 519-0496
<http://www.nspra.org>

Provides public relations professional development to school leaders with services such as:

- ◆ Workshops and presentations for school staff on topics such as building-level PR, dealing with the media, and marketing schools
- ◆ Communication audits tailored to specific needs
- ◆ National seminars and academies providing information on passing school bonds, developing crisis management plans, and engaging the community
- ◆ Monthly membership newsletters with practical help for principals and other building-level leaders
- ◆ Communications publications on school and teacher marketing, practical PR for principals, and crisis management
- ◆ Online information on starting public relations programs, sample school public relations policies and plans, examples of exemplary public relations programs, and samples of job descriptions for public relations professionals
- ◆ Contact information for 40 state chapters that provide local networking opportunities

REGIONAL CONTACTS:

NSPRA Regional Vice-President

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APPENDIX 2

OTHER RESOURCES

Bagin, D., & Gallagher, D.R. (2001). *The school and community relations* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

For all school administrators, this book provides theories, tips and techniques to help with daily communication challenges. Topics include managing crises, working with the news media, and communicating with external and internal publics. It also includes a section on how to evaluate public relations plans, an important part of an effective plan.

Hughes, L.W., & Hooper, D.W. (2000). *Public relations for school leaders*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Although written for graduate students in education, this book is also very useful for school administrators. It provides a “solid conceptual base” for developing school public relations programs while also providing practical applications for the school leader. The book begins with a discussion of public criticism and conflict and ends with suggestions for community needs analysis and public relations program development.

Resnick, M.A. (2000). *Communities count: A school board guide to public engagement*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.

This book emphasizes the importance of school board members becoming engaged in the community to sustain the public’s interest in the schools. Common principles of effective community engagement are described as well as what steps need to be taken for success.

Wright, A., & Saks, J.B. (2000). *The community connection: Case studies in public engagement*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.

This is a great resource for those wanting to see what other schools are doing to engage the community. The report first discusses trends in managing strategic planning and engagement and presents specific strategies for sustaining community involvement and overcoming obstacles to engagement. The second half of the report profiles districts from around the country that are engaged in effective strategies.

Washington Education Association. (n.d.). *Building community connections: Initiating a community relations program for your school*. Federal Way, WA: Author. Retrieved January 17, 2001, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.wa.nea.org/PUBLICAT/COMMUNIC/BLDGCOMM.HTM>

This report offers tips for building community support, with a list of suggested community involvement activities.

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