

The journey has just begun

By Philip T. West and Robert Shoop

Educational public relations owes its origin to the marketplace, where free and liberal exchanges of information are customary among a diverse citizenry. This is essential to the democratic way of life. Exemplifying this same citizenry, the schools' publics, to whom the schools belong, have both a right and a responsibility to know what is happening in them. Without a formalized public relations program, however, information emanating from the schools is often disparate, seldom enlightening, and occasionally elusive.

Unfortunately, schools, in their zeal to educate youngsters sometimes, quite unintentionally, overlook the importance of sharing with their publics the magnitude of their task. In turn, an uninformed and non-understanding public is rarely supportive of its schools.

Today, the schools are besieged by problems, among them taxpayer revolts, dwindling tax dollars, desegregation and busing, and declining enrollments and test scores. All of them demand by necessity a close relationship between the schools and their various publics to resolve.

While educational public relations may not be a panacea for the ills of the schools, it is surely a significant step in the right direction. A true adversary of hucksterism

or hype, educational public relations is an honest, intelligent, and organized way of not only informing but also involving the schools' publics in educational matters that concern them—opportunities and problems. It is listening as well as telling, with the promise that responsible feedback will bring about desired change and, in so doing, better meet the needs, interests and aspirations of a given community. It is, also, including in this two-way communication process not only parents but every member of the community, each of whom is encouraged, by virtue of this participatory process, to partake fully of services offered by the schools. In this sense, educational public relations, like its ally community education, is a strong advocate of the notion of education as lifelong learning.

Too, educational public relations is conducive to effective administrative-staff-student relationships. Open lines of communication enhance both learning and morale. In-service for administrators and staff in the importance of public relations heightens their awareness and appreciation of the contribution each member of the school family is able to make in promoting the success of the educational enterprise.

In an era characterized by choice, consumerism, and competition for the taxpayer's dollar, educational public relations is quick to point out the availability and kinds of educational benefits and services a community may derive from its schools. Through the media, press, television, and radio, an array of school publications, and a network of satisfied clients, educational public relations tells the school story often and well.

Finally, with the expansion and increased sophistication of educational public relations has evolved a new and dynamic role for the educational public relations specialist. Standing on the shoulders of the school publicist of a yesteryear, this person, as a full-fledged member of an administrative team, council, or cabinet, is called upon to perform a long and impressive list of duties and to share in the decision-making process. And the future promises not fewer but more demanding roles and responsibilities for the educational public relations specialist, whose forte, communication, permeates every facet of life.

Educational public relations has traveled a long way since its inception. However, measured by the distance it may be expected yet to go, the journey has only just begun. All school systems, large and small—rural, suburban, and urban—need some kind of formalized public relations program and a full or part-time person or staff to carry it out properly. And all colleges and universities and administrator and teacher associations, through coursework, seminars, and conferences, must address this nationwide need. Until these needs are recognized and acknowledged, educational public relations will not have completed its journey.