

Do a good job and make  
sure people know about it

# Educational public relations: An historical perspective

By John H. Wherry

The history of educational public relations—indeed the history of any kind of public relations—has its roots in surprisingly recent times as a formal profession. But the fact is that the public relations function has been carried out by governments and other social institutions since the earliest days of civilization.

## Let's Define Our Terms

Edward L. Bernays, one of the early pioneers in the public relations profession, wrote the first book on the subject, **Crystallizing Public Opinion**, published in 1923. In that book Bernays, in describing the function of professional public relations and its practitioner, the Counsel on Public Relations, points out that good public relations depends on socially responsible action based on the realization that the public and private interest coincides. That good public relations depends not only on words, but also on action deserving public support and education of the public to acquaint it with such action is made abundantly clear by him.<sup>1</sup>

Simply stated, public relations is doing a good job and making sure that people know about it.

## Public Relations in Early Civilizations

While the practice of professional public relations

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dates only from the early 1920s, it is clear that the work of adjustment and persuasion has been going on for many centuries as organizations and individuals have worked to develop the public support necessary in order to function.

In his 1952 book, **Public Relations**, Bernays interprets the ancient concept of the divinity of kings as a public relations move, claiming that the Pharaoh of Egypt, the monarch of Babylonia, and the King of Kings of Persia were called gods so that they might maintain their power through the force of acceptance of religious beliefs in their strength. Similarly, the Greek Olympic games served a public relations purpose by developing a national spirit of unity among the Greeks as protection against the Barbarians.<sup>2</sup>

Scott Cutlip and Alan Center in the 1964 edition of their book **Effective Public Relations** point to the Latin **vox populi vox Dei**—"the voice of the people is the voice of God"—as an example that the importance of public opinion was well established even during Roman times.<sup>3</sup>

Little is known about the growth of public relations during the Dark Ages, but it was most likely stifled like everything else. Indicating that public relations did not re-emerge until the Renaissance of the 15th century, Bernays says:

Above all the Renaissance freed the human mind to think for itself, to investigate and to persuade. These developments required and brought about free discussion. In turn, free discussion brought about a reliance of people and movements on new public understanding and relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Renaissance thinkers such as Machiavelli recognized public opinion as an important force. Machiavelli's essay, **The Prince**, might actually be thought of as a public relations textbook to show rulers how to mold public opinion.

About the same time the church also discovered that public opinion was important and could be modified, as may be witnessed by the emergence of the term propaganda and the establishment of a committee for the propagation of the faith during the Counter Reformation. Later, in 1792, the first propaganda ministry in history was formed in France by the National Assembly to flood France with propaganda and drum up support for the Revolution. Napoleon was adept at public relations, using bulletins, proclamations, parades, and censorship to influence the public.<sup>5</sup>

Authors agree that public relations played an important part in American life from the earliest times. The fact that the colonies had access to printing presses made public relations activities an important part of the clashes between the colonists and British authorities. However, the epitome of such activities is, perhaps, best viewed within the context of the Declaration of Independence, where Thomas Jefferson says:

When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, **an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification.** This was the object of the Declaration of Independence not to find out new principles or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but also to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves and the independent stand we

are compelled to take neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Later in our history, the efforts of Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison in bringing about national acceptance of the Constitution are described as an extraordinary public relations job by Cutlip and Center, in their 1964 volume, **Effective Public Relations**.<sup>7</sup>

Gradually through the political campaign methods of the 1800s, the press agency of show business, and the "public be damned" era of the early 1900s came the beginnings of a new profession—public relations counsel. Probably among the first to have a public relations department was the Westinghouse Company. This department was used to promote and defend its alternating current system of electricity in competition with the direct current system of the Edison Electric Company.<sup>8</sup>

Cutlip and Center trace the activities of the public relations counsel from the early 1900s to the present day through five general periods of development.

1. 1900-1917—The era of muckraking journalism, which was countered by defensive publicity.
2. 1917-1919—World War I with its great promotion of war bonds.
3. 1919-1933—The application of promotional activities learned during the War to political campaigns and charitable organizations.
4. 1933-45—activities generated by the Depression and World War II.
5. 1945-present—A time of tremendous expansion of public relations, especially in business.<sup>9</sup>

#### Need for Educational Public Relations

Any educator today can quickly point out the beating the institution of public education has taken from the media, from influential leaders, and from the general public about the perceived poor job of education being carried out today. In recent months **Newsweek** ran a series of three issues featuring a series "Why Public Schools Are Flunking."<sup>10</sup> In April 1981 **The New Republic** published eight articles in a single week about education stating that, "We are doing so because the topic, American Education, is so important and because American education, particularly public education, is in such a bad state."<sup>11</sup> To these can be added many other examples of attacks by the TV networks, prominent national newspapers, and local newspapers.

Diane Ravitch, in the above cited issue of **The New Republic**, quotes educational philosopher Boyd Bode from another issue of this publication as saying:

To the casual observer, American Education, is a confusing and not altogether edifying spectacle. It is productive of endless fads and panaceas; it is pretentiously scientific, and at the same time pathetically conventional; it is scornful of the past, yet painfully inarticulate when it speaks of the future.<sup>12</sup>

Typical, we might say, of Bode's criticism. But the fascinating fact is that Ravitch quotes Boyd from a 1930 issue of **The New Republic**. Looking over that long span of

time, Ravitch comments, "Since then, American schools have lurched from crisis to crisis and their internal confusion and aimlessness remains intact."<sup>13</sup> It is not only clear that educational public relations is desperately needed today, but also that the need is one of long standing.

#### The Development of Educational Public Relations

Exact records do not exist, but it is possible to trace the relatively slow development of educational public relations to the present day from its earliest beginnings, just a few years after Bernays first coined the term "public relations counsel" in his 1923 book, **Crystallizing Public Opinion**.<sup>14</sup>

In the same year, 1923, Harland C. Hines and Robinson G. Jones published a book called **Public School Publicity**.<sup>15</sup> In 1927 Arthur B. Moehlman published **Public School Relations**.<sup>16</sup> Another work, **Public Relations for The Public Schools** was published by J. Flint Waller in 1933.<sup>17</sup> While it was clear, then, that there was some activity in the field of educational public relations, progress was slow.

In 1938 Moehlman revised and expanded his 1927 **Public School Relations** into a new volume called **Social Interpretation**. Looking back at his earlier book and the slow early progress, Moehlman says:

In 1927 the public schools were still riding the prosperity wave. Money came easily and the need for institutional interpretation appeared to be just another academic idea. Whenever a need became urgent, an emotional high pressure campaign, following both the best and worst practices of the business world, quickly brought the needed authority for much unwise borrowing and for desirable increases in teachers' salaries.<sup>18</sup>

The National School Public Relations Association traces its origin to July 4, 1935, when a handful of specialists in school public relations attending the annual convention of the National Education Association in Denver decided to create an organization of their own. During the 1935-36 school year, the new organization, known tentatively as The National Association for Educational Publicity, enrolled 23 members. Reflecting the influence of the fledgling public relations profession, the name of the organization was changed in 1936 to the School Public Relations Association. Records indicate that the organization grew slowly for a decade.

In 1945 the Association published its first handbook. Entitled **Today's Techniques**, it featured successful practices in school public relations throughout the nation.<sup>19</sup> In 1950 the Association became a full fledged department of the National Education Association, and its name was changed to the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). At that time, perhaps 200-300 school public relations practitioners could be identified throughout the nation.

To serve the growing numbers of practitioners and even wider spreading interest among teachers and administrators, the Association began publishing newsletters, handbooks, and special reports on public relations techniques and timely topics in educational news.

In the mid-1950s NSPRA began its series of annual national seminars, attracting 75 leaders in school PR for the first seminar in New York City in 1954. By 1969 NSPRA membership included 664 individual members, and more

activities and publications were developed to serve the growing demands from members and other educators.

In 1970 NSPRA adopted a Code of Ethics for Educational Public Relations and, shortly thereafter, Standards for Public Relations Programs and for Public Relations Professionals.

At the present time, NSPRA membership includes approximately 1,500 individual members, a majority of whom are full-time school public relations practitioners in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. A good guess would be that there are between 2500-3000 full- or part-time school PR practitioners altogether in the United States.

In the entire field of public relations an estimated 30,000-50,000 people are currently employed in this country. The field of public relations, including educational public relations, could be described as entering early adolescence with all the identity problems that brings.

In 1923 Bernays addressed this problem, when he said:

There is not even any one name by which the new profession is characterized by others. To some the term public relations counsel is known by the term 'propagandist'. Others still call him press agent or publicity man. . . . Many organizations simply do not bother about an individual name and assign to an existing officer the duties of the public relations counsel. One bank's vice president is its recognized public relations counsel. Some dismiss the subject or condemn the entire profession generally and all its members individually.<sup>20</sup>

In 1979, while speaking to participants at NSPRA's national seminar in Portland, Oregon, he addressed it again:

Mr. Wherry tells me you are called by 11 different terms . . . you are directors of communications, directors of public information, directors of school community relations, special projects coordinators, special assistants to the superintendent, public affairs directors, publications administrators, administrative assistants, communication editors, information specialists, and occasionally as directors of public relations.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly confusion about the role persists even to the present day.

#### **Increased Public Relations Professionalism**

For some years now the Public Relations Society of American (PRSA) has operated an accreditation program and now requires that all active PRSA members pass the accrediting examinations. In 1976 NSPRA began a voluntary accreditation program in an effort to raise the status of its members in the very credential conscious world of education. Recently a special Task Force on The Stature and Role of Public Relations published its report and recommendations sponsored by 11 major public relations associations after a year's study. This report will serve as the basis for continued discussion and development as the entire public relations profession increases its sophistication.

#### **Present Observations**

It is clear that the profession of school public

relations is alive and well today. NSPRA membership enjoys a steady growth. Demand for information about public relations techniques is high. Few school public relations positions are facing the budget axe today even though it was common practice in the 1960s to eliminate the entire public relations department in a time of financial crisis.

More and more school districts as well as community colleges and institutions of higher education are coming to understand that just as they retain legal counsel to represent the agency in a court of law, so must they also employ public relations counsel to represent them in the larger and much more influential court of public opinion. It is clear that the public will no longer tolerate even any hints that its educational leaders may be refusing to provide pertinent educational information in the guise of "saving taxpayers money." Survey after survey indicates that the public will willingly support educational expenditures to keep reasonably informed about schools.

Increasingly during the past several years NSPRA has come to play a more central role in coordinating the public relations activities of national education associations. The Educational Leaders Consortium and the Forum of Educational Organization Leaders, both national groups including most major education associations, have worked cooperatively with NSPRA in the development of plans for building public confidence—activities ranging from coordinated individual efforts by the involved groups to the development of public service announcements for radio and TV broadcast during the National Football League games. Current NSPRA activities include work toward reorganization of a national level Citizens Committee for Public Education in America and a parallel effort to convene interested education groups several times each year to coordinate efforts in the area of building public confidence in education and to improve public relations techniques.

#### **The View From Here into the Future**

Educational public relations is here to stay. Its role has never been more important in helping the public understand the problems, needs, and accomplishments of its educational system. The professionalism of school public relations practitioners is increasing rapidly even as the number of practitioners steadily increases.

Public relations existed from the earliest days of society and it flourishes today. Rapid changes in the field may be expected in the next few years as significant new directions for public education are considered by society and as rapid technological changes vastly alter our means of communicating with one another. There will always be the need for schools to work for the best interests of society and to use the tools of communications and persuasion to build public support . . . to do a good job and to make sure people know about it.

#### **Footnotes**

1. Edward L. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1969), p. iii.
2. Edward L. Bernays, *Public Relations*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), p. 12.
3. Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, *Effective Public Relations*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 17.
4. Bernays, *Public Relations*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

6. Ibid.
7. Cutlip and Center, p. 21.
8. Ibid. p. 30.
9. Ibid. p. 33.
10. Lester Bernstein, ed., "Why Public Schools Are Flunking." **Newsweek**, April 20, 1981, pp. 62-73.
11. Martin Peretz, ed., "Schoolhouse Blues." **The New Republic**, April 18, 1981, p. 7.
12. Diane Ravitch, "The Schools We Deserve." **The New Republic**, April 18, 1981, p. 23.
13. Ibid. p. 23.
14. Bernays, **Crystallizing Public Opinion**, p. 11.
15. Harlan C. Hines and, Robinson G. Jones. **Public School Publicity** (New York: The Macmillan Co., New York, 1923).
16. Arthur B. Moehlman. **Public School Relations**. (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1927).
17. J. Flint Waller. **Public Relations for the Public Schools** (Trenton, New Jersey: MacCrellish and Quigley Co., 1933).
18. Arthur B. Moehlman. **Social Interpretation** (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938), p. vii.
19. National School Public Relations Association. **Today's Techniques**. (Washington, D.C.: National School Public Relations Association, 1945).
20. Bernays, p. 12.
21. National School Public Relations Association. "Kingsley Memorial Lecture" July 1979, Portland, Oregon. Unpublished lecture.