

## Administrators realize much effort must focus on face-to-face communication

# Establishing a PR program

By Don Bagin

Which of the following are important in a school district's public relations program:

- a. the way secretaries answer phones
- b. signs that greet visitors in buildings
- c. effective parent-teacher conferences
- d. memos from principals
- e. newsletters
- f. news releases
- g. surveys to determine how staff and community members feel about the schools
- h. pats on the back for staff and students who do a good job
- i. none of the above
- j. e and f only
- k. all of the above

Not too many years ago many school officials would have chosen "j." Administrators and board members often equated public relations efforts with getting good school news in the newspaper and publishing a district newsletter for students' parents.

But much has changed for the better in recognizing what's important in establishing an effective public relations program. Many administrators are realizing that much of the public relations effort must focus on face-to-face communication rather than the printed word. Therefore, the correct answer is "k," all of the above.

Many school officials are now effectively using ideas listed in the question above. Some of the ideas are working well; others probably aren't. The first step in establishing an effective public relations program is:

**1. Determine which public relations efforts are working now and encourage more staff members to implement those ideas.** This can be done in a variety of ways.

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One practical, low cost technique was developed by the National School Public Relations Association. Called the building level workshop, this program involves everyone working in a school building. The staff meets for anywhere from 90 minutes to three hours and identifies the various school audiences. In groups of four to six, staff members select an audience: students, colleagues, parents, taxpayers without children in school, etc. They, then, list as many ways as practical to communicate effectively with their chosen audience.

Each table leader reports the group's best ideas to the entire staff. After the meeting the ideas are typed and reproduced for all who attended the meeting. This approach involves all staff in suggesting ways they can do a better job of public relations. It clearly points out that the responsibility belongs to everyone and that public relations is, indeed, significantly more than a series of news releases and newsletters.

**2. Make a commitment at the top to implement a solid public relations program.** Too frequently top level administrators fail to commit time and resources to public relations. They, on the other hand, point to problems that occur because of a poor or almost non-existent public relations program. In most instances this lack of commitment occurs because administrators have had very little practical training in school public relations. As a result many gloss over such responsibilities. Yet if the leadership does not clearly communicate to its staff that public relations is a priority, the staff can be hardly expected to treat it as one.

Here are some specific first steps a school leader can take to establish an on-going public relations program.

a. Have a written board policy adopted to communicate that public relations efforts will be an integral part of the district's operation. Sample policies can be obtained from the National School Public Relations Association, the National School Boards Association, or from your state school board association. Here is one you might consider. It comes from an article on school board public relations policies.

### A Sample Policy

To illustrate how the recommended statements might be used by officials in a school district in the development of a PR policy, the following model has been constructed.

The Board of Education of the Oakpark Public School System believes that the public must have confidence in its schools and that mutual trust between community and school is essential. Community attitudes and expectations are, therefore, important for boards and administrators to know, for support is achieved through effective two-way communication systems between school and community. Citizen participation imparts direction and meaning to the school program and keeping the press (media) informed enhances school-community relations, as an informed staff is a productive one. An open school climate is conducive to effective administrative, staff, student and parent relationships, and open board meetings further enhance good school-press (media) relations.

Given these values, the Oakpark Board sets the following goals to be achieved:

1. To establish a two-way communication system between the school and its various publics (a) to interpret board and administrative action, (b) to eliminate rumor and misunderstanding, and (c) to develop a good working relationship with the media;
2. To disseminate information to certificated and noncertificated personnel;
3. To provide in-service in school public relations to teachers, administrators and board members;
4. To interpret the school's curriculum, along with its budget, to the school's publics; and
5. To report student achievement to parents and the public.

To accomplish these goals, the Oakpark School Board authorizes the employment of a full-time school public relations director, whose responsibility is to see that the school district's public relations activities are carried out by both the central office and individual schools, in which school principals are charged with the responsibility of carrying out their own PR activities with the aid of the school public relations director.

To assist the school public relations director, a school public relations committee will be created by the board. This committee will consist of board members, administrators, staff, students and parents. This committee, under the direction of the school public relations director, will develop strategies to attain district-wide school public relations goals and specific procedures for an ongoing assessment of the school district's public relations program. The school public relations director reports directly to the superintendent of schools.<sup>1</sup>

**b. Insist that all administrators and supervisors be evaluated yearly on their public relations undertakings.** If each management person is expected to establish goals and objectives, insist that an area of public relations be included as one of the goals. This will communicate that the district is getting serious about public relations.

**c. Devote at least five minutes to public relations at every cabinet or staff meeting.** Ask a different administrator to share a five-minute report on a public relations idea that's working. A one-page handout explaining the idea should be distributed to all who attend. This lets all know that public relations is a continuing effort.

**d. Lead by example.** Keep employees informed; praise those who do something special; use language that's free of jargon and generally let people know that this is a district that is doing a good job and is getting better. If it's not, all the public relations efforts in the world won't help.

**e. Make better communications the system's theme for the year.** Start with a motivating keynote speech on the public relations role of every employee. This topic cuts across all disciplines and all job levels. It appeals to custodians as well as secretaries. Why? Because all play a vital role in how their schools are perceived.

**f. Sell the board and community on the need to commit resources to public relations.** Although some public relations strategies and techniques can be implemented at almost no cost, others will require money. When administrators look at the three biggest crises they encountered in the previous year, they can usually trace two of them to a communications breakdown. Usually the breakdowns caused education to suffer.

For years many administrators and boards hid the costs of public relations efforts in the budget. However, it's time to get serious about public relations. In an era that promises challenges to public schools via tax credits or vouchers, much more must be done to improve the quality and image of public schools. Solid communications and public relations efforts will help accomplish that goal.

With a tight budget, it's always difficult to add money for a new commitment. Therefore, it's sound practice to involve the students, staff, and community in a study of communications and public relations needs and efforts. An advisory committee and a survey will enable school officials to know the thinking and recommendations of the community regarding the public relations need. Responding to community needs, the board can then more easily commit funds for public relations.

Once the community sees the benefits of a district's public relations commitment, it will generally support this budget item. In 1979, the Bensalem, Pennsylvania School Board announced it was abolishing the full-time public relations position. At the next board meeting more than 400 taxpayers waving dollar bills protested the decision.

They explained that they didn't mind paying less than a dollar per taxpayer (for the PR budget) to be informed about the \$14 million school budget. Representatives of the taxpayers' group, the senior citizens, and other organizations that saw the benefits of a socially responsible public relations program spoke for the program. It was reestablished.

After a commitment is made to establish the position, one of the first steps should be to determine the position title and description. Although public relations is gaining more acceptance in the corporate sector, many taxpayers still think of public relations as a deodorant used to cover up a bad smell caused by a problem. If your community believes that public relations is, indeed, the practice of social responsibility by the schools, use the term "public relations" in the title. If not, consider communications director or some other title. Information services director is too one-way oriented. Community relations director leaves out the staff, a key audience. The title should communicate that the person holds a responsible position in the district and is not merely a news release writer and a newsletter preparer. Many districts are calling the person, "administrative assistant to the superintendent."

The job description should evolve from the study that determined the need for the position. Excellent samples are available from the National School Public Relations Association and the National School Boards Association.

The person should report directly to the superintendent if the job is to be done right. Although this may bother other management team members, the communications person must enjoy the confidence of the chief executive in every facet of the school's operation. Clearly, the staff position carries no line power.

### Picking the Right Person

The most important decision regarding the program centers on selecting the proper person for the job. Here are some practical tips:

- Be sure that you are comfortable with the person and that other staff members—from top aide to custodian—are comfortable, too. This person will be representing the schools in a variety of ways. Solid judgment and a pleasant personality are important. This is not to be confused with the back-slapping, glad-hander that many will perceive as phony.

- Be certain that the person writes very well in a style that non-educators will understand. A person with a master's degree in English may write excellent poetry but could be a disaster when asked to prepare news releases. Give the finalists for the job a writing test, and ask someone who knows journalistic style to evaluate the writing.

- Be comfortable with the person's ability to represent the district with the media and with school groups. Often this person will be called on to handle controversial issues. Will you trust the person's judgment? (Of course it's unfair to expect this trust relationship to build overnight, but during the interview and when checking references, pursue the judgment factor.)

- Ask to see samples of the person's publication ability. Undoubtedly the job will entail preparing newsletters, announcements, programs, brochures, etc. All things being equal, you might as well hire someone who is good at layout and design.

- Feel that the person understands administration. If the candidate does not understand how administrators work, the adjustment period could be prolonged. Gaining the acceptance of other staff members will be the major challenge facing the PR person. Do you feel this person can do it?

- Choose an idea person. In the interview, did he or she suggest ideas that might work for you? It makes sense to pick someone who will bring practical ideas to the position.

- Select someone capable of implementing two-way communications techniques that will involve the community in the schools and will let management know the community pulse. This will help avoid those surprises that often shorten a superintendent's tenure.

- Consider only candidates who communicate that they get the job done. Some candidates will want hours that run from 8:30 to 4:30. This just won't work for this position.

- Consider using the placement services of the National School Public Relations Association and of the three colleges that prepare students to assume school public relations responsibilities. (A list is given later.)

### Some Sources That Will Help

During the past 10 years many sources have been developed to help school officials start or improve a public relations program. These include books, tapes, and other audio visual materials along with increased leadership from state and national organizations.

Among the books that can help are:

- **School Communications Ideas That Work.** This is a practical, no-footnotes, how-to-do-it book that explains the basics of almost all key school PR areas. Communicaid Inc., P.O. Box 233D, Woodstown, N.J. 08098. \$8.95

- **Building Public Confidence in Your Schools.** Another how-to-do-it book loaded with ideas that work. National School Public Relations Association, Dept. SC, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209. \$13.95

- **How To Start and Improve a School's PR Program.** This includes the basics of how to get started. National School Boards Association, 1055 Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, DC 20007. \$5.00

- **The School PR Almanac.** A collection of in-depth how-to-do-it articles that explain step by step how to implement ideas. The Educational Communications Center, Dept. BG, P.O. Box 657, Camp Hill, PA 17011. \$8.95

- **The School and Community Relations.** A college text that offers theory and practical ideas, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632. \$18.95

### Other Materials

- **Journal of Educational Communications.** Magazine that focuses on school public relations. Educational Communications Center, Dept. BG, P.O. Box 657, Camp Hill, PA 17011. \$18.00/year.

- **Basic School Public Relations Kit.** Includes special topic books and materials designed for school administrators who want to improve their PR program. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209. \$96.00.

- **School PR Tape Library.** A 1981 collection of six cassettes, this library offers in-depth help from national experts on a variety of key school PR topics. Educational Communications Center, Dept. BG, P.O. Box 657, Camp Hill, PA 17011. \$39.95.

- **Your Public Is Listening.** A filmstrip that shows the public relations role of each school employee. Carlock/Langden, Inc., 4122 Main St., Dallas, Texas 75226. \$69.00.

### Organizations, Graduate Programs

**The National School Public Relations Association,** 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209. Provides a wide variety of publications, materials, workshops, and leadership in the field of school public relations. Most states have local chapters that conduct workshops and share ideas.

**Educational Press Association.** Provides services, workshops, and newsletters for editors of educational publications. Glassboro State College, Glassboro, N.J. 08028.

The following schools offer a graduate degree in school public relations:

**Glassboro State College,** Glassboro, N.J. 08028  
Contact: Dr. Don Bagin, Communications Department.

**Northern Illinois University,** DeKalb, IL 60115  
Contact: Dr. David Carr, Educational Administration Department.

**Texas A&M University,** College Station, TX 77843  
Contact: Dr. Philip West, Educational Administration Department.

### Footnotes

1. Philip T. West. "The Basics of a Written PR Policy." *Journal of Educational Communications*, 4 (March 1981) 25.