

To produce and disseminate information is only half the responsibility

Developing two-way communication

By Robert J. Shoop and G. Kent Stewart

Public education, like society and most of its other institutions, is experiencing painful and profound crises and confusion. The educational system in the United States is in trouble. Americans are questioning the content of the curriculum, the methodologies being employed, the cost of public education, and the competence of both graduates and those who teach. The students demonstrate their displeasure by measuring record highs of truancy, drop out rates, and school vandalism. Parents express their criticism by taking their children out of the public schools and by openly questioning educators' abilities to teach. Communities express their dissatisfaction by rejecting bond elections and tax proposals and by passing propositions that limit school expenditures. And legislatures voice their criticism by proposing changes in every operational aspect of the school system.

A gulf is developing between the schools and the communities that they were created to serve. As this gulf widens alienation grows and discontent spreads. Many schools have become islands set apart from their community. Many teachers experience frustration in knowing that much of what they accomplish during the school day may be undone by the many forces that affect the child in the larger community. Many teachers have come to believe that their task of education is hopeless. It is not uncommon to hear such comments from teachers as, "I can't do anything with him, the situation in his home is impossible" or "How can they expect me to teach this child how to read when both of his parents are illiterate and there is not a book in the home?" Many teachers are very much aware that what happens during the school day is only one part of the child's education. The child's at-

titudes toward education are constantly being affected by his parents and his peers.

In addition to the frustrations that teachers feel regarding the child's total environment, many teachers are also concerned about the difficult task of attempting to communicate with the parents of their students. A common teacher complaint is, "The only parents that we see are the parents of 'good' students and we only see them once a year at the school open house. Even then there is seldom any real communication."

These feelings of frustration exist to some degree in all schools. Many teachers feel they are fighting a losing battle. This feeling leads to depression and a loss of job satisfaction. However, it is not only the teachers and school administrators who are concerned about the widening moat between the school and the community. Many parents share this frustration and confusion with the current state of education. These concerns often take expression in open hostility toward the schools and the teachers who work there. A growing number of parents are articulating their frustration with the schools their children attend and for which they pay taxes to support.

It is not possible to attend any meeting of parents without hearing such comments as, "The students don't want to go to school in the morning"; "My daughter is in the ninth grade, and her teacher told me she is reading on the fourth grade level. What do those teachers do all day?"; "My child is going to graduate from high school this spring, and he isn't prepared to do anything. What's wrong with those schools?"

At no time in the history of our nation has there been more attention focused on the matter of public education. It is clear from the comments of teachers, administrators, and parents that many people are dissatisfied with public education. Poll results indicate that although the public trusts the schools more than most other public institutions, this trust is declining.

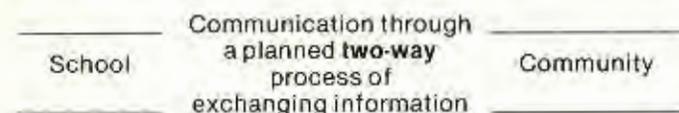
Although many creative efforts are being made by individual teachers, administrators, and parents to improve public education, most people agree that more needs to be done.

Many teachers believe that schools are surrounded by indifference and opposition. Many educators believe that it is up to them to determine if these surrounding communities will overflow and drown education or be tapped so they may nourish and strengthen the schools. Educators cannot continue to take the task of education as their sole responsibility; they must actively draw upon the various resources of their communities and join hands with their communities in the cooperative effort of education.

Over a period of time, education has become a specialized activity. In order to rejoin the people with their schools, conscious effort must be made to involve the community in the life of the school. Educators must strive to find ways to take the public more into their confidence regarding the educative process. However, these efforts must be more than window dressing. Educators must involve the people not simply to make them feel important or even to provide them with the opportunity to give their opinions, but because decisions will be better if they are made as the result of the efforts of all those who are concerned. The philosophy that underlies all of these efforts at creating two-way lines of communication is that of synergy, the belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; or stated more directly, we are smarter together than we are alone.

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In order to stop the trend toward greater alienation and bring the school and the community into a renewed partnership, school communications must embrace the concept of a planned two-way process of communication. The key word is **two-way** as illustrated by the following model.

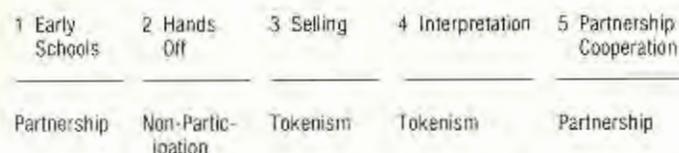


Two-Way Communication Model

School public relations, or school communications, have evolved through several developmental stages. In early years schools were the center of the community, and the school was a common ground where the community was directly involved in all of the educational decision making. As the schools evolved and became larger, they began to shun relationships with the community. The professional educator replaced the citizen at the locus of control. The lay citizens were considered ill informed and unsophisticated in the means and methods of education. Little or no communication existed between the community and the school.

In the 1930s the schools entered the selling era. Patterned after the advertising campaigns of big business, public relations developed. The use of short, intensive campaigns designed to gain public support emerged. Limited long range plans were made. The school saw public relations as interpreting what they were doing to the citizens.

With the advent of integration and citizen involvement in the 1960s the citizens began to demand a greater voice in education. The schools and the communities began to form uneasy partnerships. The following model illustrates this historical overview.



In many ways we are getting back to an earlier philosophy, namely that the educative process is the responsibility of the TOTAL community, lay citizens as well as the professional educators. In the two-way communication model both the school and the community has power—the power to send as well as to receive information. This model involves transmitting and receiving information about goals and strategies, successes and failures, and facts and opinions concerning all components of the educational process.

Using this model as an ideal, even a cursory review of randomly selected school systems reveals that considerable information is being transmitted into the community from the schools, but only limited information is being fed back to the schools from the communities.

Although some very important information is received informally, only limited formal effort is being made to solicit information from the community. In most communities only one-half of the goal of public relations is even attempted. If the public schools hope to survive and thrive in these difficult times of public alienation, they

must begin efforts to strengthen their programs of two-way communication.

As noted earlier, considerable information is being transmitted from the school to the community. But two very important questions must be answered. First, are the materials transmitted to the public being understood and assimilated? Secondly, are the real concerns of the public being brought to the attention of the professional educators?

It is critically important that these two questions be answered in the affirmative before any communication efforts can hope to be effective. The remainder of this article will describe and discuss a variety of strategies that can be used to obtain information from the public about their schools and their school system.

The Advisory Committee. The theory behind the creation of a citizen advisory committee suggests that a group of lay people representing a cross section of the community can reflect needs and express opinions representative of the whole community. The advice of the committee is generally presented to the board of education; however many school principals use advisory committees for policy-making and problem solving in an individual school.

Another type of advisory committee is more accurately termed a study committee. The essential difference between the lay advisory committee and the study committee is the makeup of their memberships. While the lay committee consists of only lay people within the school community, the study committee usually includes school personnel and students in addition to citizens in general.

Either organizational option can be quite effective. The keys to success are in the selection of members, the charge under which they operate, and the leadership or resource help provided by the school system. Regardless of the purpose of the lay advisory committee or study committee, each is a very effective way to obtain vital information from the community. At the same time each promotes within the citizenry a high esprit de corps and provides a feeling of ownership, involvement, and even responsibility for the success of the communities' schools.

Forums and Conferences. Forums, conferences, and even community seminars are suitable means for obtaining open and frank exchanges of views and ideas about topics of current interest to citizens in general and to parents, teachers, and students. In all three settings—forum, conference, or seminar—one or more speakers are invited to express their viewpoints; then respond to questions from either a reaction panel or from the audience or both.

While the forum/conference option is quite effective as a means for obtaining feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction about schools, the results should not be taken as being a statistically accurate reflection of community sentiment on a given subject. Nonetheless, it does serve as a way for school officials to obtain public input on issues of current interest and to help involved and other interested citizens broaden their knowledge of schools by being more aware of school problems and needs.

As is true for advisory committees, it is important that school officials provide the leadership and resource help necessary to assure success of any forum, conference, or community seminar. Also, it is a good idea to publish the

proceedings of the activity. This provides a permanent record and serves as a way to bring the meeting highlights to the awareness of the total community.

Mailout Questionnaire. The mailout questionnaire is the most sophisticated option available to school administrators for obtaining public opinion on a given issue. By using statistically accepted procedures for developing a mailing list, designing a questionnaire, and analyzing results, an accurate portrayal of public opinion can be obtained. From this kind of flow of information from the public about its schools, the officials can then respond in timely and appropriate fashion to the public will.

Because of its accuracy and timeliness for gathering information about schools, the mailout and questionnaire is gaining in popularity. Caution should be taken to be sure that proper statistical procedures are followed in each step of the survey. However, there is ample material and professional help available to insure success in using this option as a way to obtain the public's opinion about their schools.

Direct Interviews. A strategy that is similar to the questionnaire mailout is the direct interview. This option requires that a trained interviewer personally interview a predetermined number of people using a carefully developed set of questions as an interview guide.

This provides an excellent way to obtain information from the general public or from a specific group concerning the schools. The essential disadvantage of the interview option is the necessity for using only trained interviewers. To provide the training is time-consuming and to conduct the interviews also requires a commitment to time and cost.

The Telephone Interview. The telephone interview has the same principal disadvantage as the direct interview—cost. However, this is offset largely by the speed with which telephone interviewers can call a relatively large number of citizens.

This option also has the advantage of having several citizens involved as callers. The required training can be provided in minimum time; and virtually all the calls can be made in one or two sessions. However, it must be kept in mind that the brevity of calls and the factor of surprise at being called both contribute to receiving information which may not really reflect the thoughtful judgment of respondents.

Home Visitations. The process of building a bridge between the school and the community is not just a process of involving the citizen in the life of the school; it is also involving the teacher in the life of the community. Many professionals spend their whole careers trying to serve a clientele about whom they might have only a passing knowledge. One very obvious method for the teacher to learn more about the children in his/her classroom is for him/her to visit the home of the child. Not only will a home visit provide important information about the student, it will also enhance the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the parents.

Community Education Programs. Community Education is a process aimed at developing a closer relationship between the school and the community through developing a sense of community. It is a concept that seeks to activate the total educative community. It views education as a cooperative effort between the school and the total community. The concept is not new, but it remains unknown to many educators. In many communities after the dismissal bell rings at the end of the school day or school year, the school buildings often fall

into an unnatural state—doors lock, padlocks go on playground gates, and the life of the school stops. But life goes on in the communities.

The concept of community education has become a strong bridge between the school and the community. This bridge is a two-way street. By involving parents and teachers and administrators and students in the mutual quest for education, the school becomes an integral part of the community and responds to the needs and desires of the community. The schools are opened in the evenings on weekends and during the summer months. Enrichment programs, adult education, recreation programs, remedial activities, and parent involvement activities become a normal part of the educational process. Mutual trust and respect develops between all participants in this process. As community members begin to work cooperatively with the professional educators, they gain a deeper understanding of the problems facing education. As professional educators work with parents, they gain a deeper respect for the many strengths and resources that parents have to contribute to the educational process. The teachers and citizens both begin to see themselves as stockholders in their community and their schools. They each begin to realize that the dividends of success will only come if they both work together.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

Zest for obtaining information from the community must be tempered with knowledge of the community. It is a temptation to feed a variety of information into the community and to design ways to assure that information flows back to the schools from the community. Yet, to do these things in absence of hard data about the community can be harmful to the success of the public relations/communications effort.

A thorough understanding of the community can be obtained by doing a rather complete community profile study. Such studies can be conducted by school personnel or by consultants. There is ample justification for these kinds of studies to be done by the communications officer, especially when he or she is new to a community. It is an excellent means for becoming acquainted quickly and, at the same time, for assembling information vital to the design and success of the overall public relations and communications thrust.

Such initial effort at community understanding should include attention to the following:

1. Demographic characteristics of the population—age distribution, sex, church affiliation, racial/ethnic composition, education level, and occupational classifications.
2. Geographic setting and historical background including observed customs and traditions.
3. Various community groups including social, service, professional, political, and fraternal organizations.
4. Industrial and commercial profile showing types of production, service, distribution outlets.
5. Employment opportunities within the commercial, governmental, or industrial sectors of the community including projected human resource needs and economic conditions.
6. Channels of communication—newspaper, radio, and television.
7. History of social tensions, previous community ef-

forts, such as school building bond referenda and similar activity affecting public attitudes toward schools.

8. It is also important to be mindful of individuals and groups known to hold positions of power and influence within the community.

Once such a community profile is assembled, it should be updated annually in order to keep abreast of any changes which would impact on the school public relations and communications effort.

SUMMARY

In order to maintain the principle of school public relations/communication as a two-way street, it is important, first, to understand the community thoroughly and, then, to maintain continuous effort at obtaining feedback and similar information from the general population. To produce and disseminate information accomplishes only half the communication's responsibility. The other

half is to be aware of community thinking toward school programs and issues and to involve the citizens into the life of the school. This will result in a two-way communications system that leads to a community that is supportive of its schools.

Suggested Reading

For more complete discussion of material contained in the article, four principal sources of information (books) are cited below.

1. Bagin, Don; Grazian, Frank; and Harrison, Charles. **School Communications Ideas That Work**. Communicaid Incorporated. Woodstown, New Jersey 1972.
2. Kindred, Leslie; Bagin, Don; and Gallagher, Donald. **The School And Community Relations**. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1976.
3. Mayer, Frank. **Public Relations For School Personnel**. Penedall Publishing Company. Midland, Michigan. 1874.
4. Shoop, Robert. **The Teacher and the Community: A Case Study Approach**, Collegiate Publishing Company, San Diego, California, 1980.