



1-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Gifford, Beverly (1982) "Communicating needs: School finance campaigns," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 9: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1807>

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School public relations has a vital role to play

Communicating needs: School finance campaigns

By Beverly Gifford

Public schools are in a period of transition. Part of the cause is a breakdown of public confidence in all governmental institutions—a general mood of pessimism throughout America toward anything that smacks of bureaucracy.

Another part stems from an aging public with fewer children in the public schools, together with a declining birthrate that is producing a glut of boarded-up school buildings with "For Rent" and "For Sale" signs. The result is a growing number of people who do not see themselves as having a vested interest in the schools.

Spiraling inflation, high taxes, and fewer educational dollars have also contributed to the instability of the public schools. The dwindling dollar has, in turn, precipitated a considerable demand for educator accountability, thereby exacerbating the original confidence dilemma.

In such a context school public relations has a vital role to play. Nowhere is this more true than in those states where voters have direct control over school budgets. Voters in 22 states must approve tax levies for schools. In five states the school budget comes up for a vote every year. These are the states where the taxpayer revolt against schools reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

To gain badly needed support, an increasing number of school districts are using industry-tested marketing strategies in their budget and finance campaigns. This interest in marketing may be seen in a booklet issued by the

Macomb Intermediate School District in Mount Clemens, Michigan, a service organization offering assistance to 21 school districts. In a 10-step consumer approach the booklet stresses, among other things, user identification, background, importance, opinions, and barriers.¹

Using a similar approach, the Columbus (Ohio) Public School District has followed a long-range, systematic process to identify and communicate school needs. In the fall of 1978, a status report titled "Choices for the 80's" was sent to every household in the district. This status report attempted to outline every issue facing the schools that had been expressed by different segments of the community.

Reactions to the status report were secured through seven community meetings held in senior high schools, a printed response form in the status report, and telephone calls and letters. A total of 1,600 citizens participated in the seven community meetings.

Phase II of the "Choices for the 80's" project featured distribution of 8,000 copies of a workbook to school and community leaders. The workbook included proposed solutions to issues, problems, or concerns in 26 areas of school operation. Each problem had a series of alternative solutions or "Choices," along with cost data so that participants could see how their "Choices" affected the amount of additional millage needed.

It became a kind of educational game as people ranked their choices and tallied the cost of their highest priorities. For example, the choices in the area of reading ranged from "A"—eliminating all 86 reading teachers at an annual savings of \$1.7 million or .55 mills—up to Choice "C"—adding 87 reading teachers at an additional cost of \$3.3 million annually or an increase of 1.07 mills.

Over 4,000 people completed the workbooks. Phase III of "Choices for the 80's" was the compilation of all the responses into an 8.3 mill levy package which was placed before the voters in a special election in March 1979. That levy, like three previous attempts, failed, but the momentum of the communication effort has been kept alive.

An analysis of voter attitudes about the Columbus Public Schools reveals three important clues to levy failures: (1) People who oppose levies tend to feel that schools are not adequately addressing traditional values and basic skills instruction. (2) Levy opponents tend to assume that schools would actually be improved by the defeat of levies, since that would force reduction of waste. (3) More than 70% of the voters do not have children in the public schools. They base their opinions on national media reports, primarily negative, about trends in education.²

The irony of the existence of these attitudes is that most school districts are doing a better job than ever before. The Columbus district has shown gains in tests scores in elementary math and reading, has essentially escaped the kinds of discipline problems faced by many urban school systems, and has managed the district back to a position of solvency through school closings, program cuts, and staff reductions totaling \$28 million.

It is clear that school districts need to do a better job of communicating, not only with that segment of the public which controls the levers in the voting booth, but with many other important publics.

Columbus Superintendent Joseph L. Davis has taken a series of steps to deal with public lack of understanding, one of which was a "See For Yourself" project to involve non-parents of the community. His thinking was that if nearly three-fourths of the voting public had no direct con-

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tact with the Columbus schools, there was no better way to change their negative impressions than to get them inside the schools to see for themselves. Davis set a goal for principals to recruit 50,000 non-parent visitors during the 1980-1981 school year.

Principals and school staff members have found hundreds of ways to bring non-parents into their buildings. For example:

- A health clinic was set up in an empty classroom for conducting blood pressure checks, glaucoma tests, etc. While there, every visitor got a guided tour or visited a classroom.

- Real estate companies brought their agents to school-sponsored breakfasts and tours of the buildings.

- A neighborhood Flea Market was staged in one school gym. The school sold tablets to the sellers and filled the gym several times with buyers.

- Grandparents' Days

- Special Programs for Senior Citizens

One of the best opportunities came on election day. With many precinct polling places located in school buildings, voting booths were moved into libraries, in the heart of the building. Student council members were on hand to offer tours. Display booths were set up and refreshments were offered by PTA members. Thousands of voters took time to look around, to see for themselves.

A log book was kept at each school for visitors to sign. That gave staff members a mailing list for follow-up contacts and names to add to school newsletter mailing lists.

Next, Davis took advantage of the services of Citizens Research, Incorporated—an independent governmental watchdog group—to deal with the district's credibility problems in the area of budgeting and money management. Findings by CRI study teams—that the schools were very well managed, that they had cut as much as was possible, and that there were no surplus funds—were widely publicized.

Perhaps the most frequently held misconception about school money management relates to declining enrollment. The one question heard most often—from politicians, business leaders and taxpayers: "If you have fewer pupils to educate and fewer teachers to pay and less buildings to operate, why do you need more money?" This is a question that absolutely must be addressed.

At the same time that immediate steps were being taken to communicate school needs, Davis persuaded the local Chamber of Commerce to convene a team of public relations experts from the private sector to develop a long-range communications plan for the Columbus schools. Working with staff members from the district's communications department, the team proposed a three-year plan that placed heavy emphasis on internal communications.

The three-year communications plan established four goals and corresponding objectives for each. In summary form the plan is as follows:

GOAL 1: To improve employee morale and attitudes about working for the Columbus Public Schools.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess employee attitudes and opinions of their work climate.
2. To increase the awareness of the importance of communications planning to the organization.
3. To develop a communications plan for each building and unit.

4. To provide district-level help for building and unit staff members to carry out their plans.
5. To improve the interpersonal management skills of principals and supervisors.
6. To make staff more knowledgeable about existing policies and practices as well as current developments and future plans.
7. To provide district-level channels for obtaining ideas, comments, and criticisms.

GOAL 2: To strengthen student and parent support of the schools.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the information needs of parents.
2. To incorporate into the building or unit communication plan programs for improving student morale and school pride.
3. To incorporate into the building or unit communication plan programs for improving communications between the school and parents.
4. To develop special strategies for communicating with discontinuous areas. (The district is operating under a court-ordered desegregation plan.)
5. To provide district-level help for building and unit staff members to carry out their plans.
6. To expand volunteerism by parents.
7. To develop district-level channels for communicating existing programs and policies to parents, as well as news about the district.
8. To provide district-level channels for obtaining accurate parent feedback.

GOAL 3: To strengthen the support of schools by business, civic, legislative, labor and religious groups.

OBJECTIVES

1. To maintain the existing methods and develop new ones for gaining business and labor involvement in vocational education programs.
2. To increase the involvement of businesses in the programs of individual school buildings or specific programs.
3. To develop channels for communicating to organizations information about existing policies and practices, as well as current developments and future plans.
4. To seek advice and periodic reviews of the district's financial and management practices by independent, business-oriented agencies.
5. To work with city, county, and state officials to produce the most accurate financial facts possible.

GOAL 4: To strengthen general public support of the schools.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess community needs and concerns.
2. To develop district- and building-level marketing strategies and projects promoting the Columbus Public Schools, with special emphasis on the district's success in teaching reading, writing and mathematics.
3. To develop programs to make non-parents more informed about the schools.

4. To develop methods of keeping community opinion leaders accurately informed.
5. To establish district-level channels for gaining input from the general public.
6. To emphasize adult education.
7. To seek ways of gaining state and national recognition for the Columbus Public Schools.
8. To expand volunteerism by non-parents.

If school finance campaigns are to succeed, they must be integrated with a carefully planned, on-going communication effort. People want hard evidence that schools are cutting back—just as individuals are being forced to do in their household budgets. Once people are

convinced that schools are doing a good job as stewards of their hard-earned tax dollars, there is growing evidence that voters are ready to support increases needed for basic programs.

Footnotes

1. Macomb Intermediate School District, The Idea Series, **The Marketing of Education** (Mt. Clemens, Michigan: Macomb Intermediate School District, Department of Communication Services, 1979).
2. Hugh Clark. "Analysis of Voting Trends in School Levies" (Columbus, Ohio: Decision Research Corporation, 1978), p. 66.