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If nobody knows except parents there won't be public support

The role of the educational public relations director

By Joanie L. Flatt

Do good, and tell about it. That's what public schools in America have to do. It's the answer to many of education's woes. And there is no one better qualified to help us "do good and tell about it" than the public relations professional.

Increasing numbers of educators are learning what business took an equally long time admitting—public relations must be an integral part of the management team in all our institutions if we are to survive, let alone succeed, in public education as we know it today.

The public no longer blindly follows its institutions. Intimate knowledge of the workings of public schools is demanded by those whose tax dollars support education. And the public also demands accountability. "What are you doing with my tax dollars, and how well are you doing it?" taxpayers want to know.

A professional public relations director can work with a school district, state department of education, or education association to meet the public's information needs. It's the role of public relations to anticipate what the public wants from its institutions and then advise

management of appropriate steps to take in order to solicit public support and public involvement.

At a time when public confidence in education remains at a low ebb, critics are pounding on the school-house doors, tuition tax credits and vouchers loom on the horizon, and tax cutting proponents are threatening the very lifeblood of education, the public relations director must be recruited as part of the educational management team.

Public relations—does that mean we need someone who used to be the neighborhood weekly newspaper reporter? Someone who can sit in a former closet, outfitted with a telephone and a typewriter, pounding the keys for hours each day, churning out news releases about the district? Or perhaps the secretary who had such a flair for writing and a nice voice on the telephone. Should we make her the public relations director? She can write the newsletter for us (we know she's good at grammar and punctuation) and calm irate telephone callers with her soothing voice.

Is that what we mean by a public relations director? Let's hope not. What education needs today is trained public relations professionals, as skilled in their area of specialization as superintendents or business managers are in their roles.

Public relations is a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. To do this, the public relations practitioner follows a four-step process: analyze, plan, communicate, and evaluate. The failure to include any one of these four important steps can result in failure for any comprehensive communications program.

Public relations is not a panacea. It's not a cover up. It's not the savior of education. And it can't be 100 percent successful in putting out fires.

It is a planned, systematic program of year-round communications. The use of public relations techniques can help you identify problems when they are mere smoldering coals rather than raging infernos capturing front page headlines and the lead story on the 10 o'clock news.

The Executive Board of the National School Public Relations Association recently adopted a position statement in which the role of public relations in education is clearly outlined:

The practice of public relations is essential to serving the public interest. The public relations function is responsible for developing and maintaining programs of information and involvement which enable the public to understand, support and participate in its institutions. In addition, that function includes assessing and influencing public opinion, providing feedback from the public to decision-makers and helping to shape policies and procedures in the public interest.'

The person hired to manage this function is obviously a member of the cabinet, the executive council, or whatever a district may call the superintendent's management group.

In education there are only two positions in any school system which are "on call" to every segment of the community. These two positions must be concerned with every aspect of the district, including educational and support functions. The people in these positions must be

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sensitive to the wants and needs of all employee groups and all the various publics and sub-publics in the community.

These two positions are the superintendent of schools and the public relations director. And they should function together as well as the intricate, dependent parts that make up a fine Swiss watch. They must be a team. The superintendent must be able to depend on the public relations director for advice, counsel, clear thinking, and quick action. The public relations director must anticipate what the superintendent will need to know and how he or she would express the district's position on various issues.

Superintendents are often expected to be all things to all people. They're also supposed to have a touch of magic about them, enabling them to be several places at one time. The superintendent who works with a professional public relations person can be confident that the district is well-represented on those occasions when the superintendent cannot serve as spokesperson.

America's highest paid superintendent understands the importance of public relations. When Ruth Love accepted the position as superintendent in Chicago, she insisted that she be allowed to bring three of her own people with her from Oakland. One of the three was her public relations director.²

The responsibilities that fall to the public relations department require that the administrator in charge be able to wear several hats. In the course of a year, the public relations director may have to assume several roles.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE—If we're going to compete with private schools for students, and other government-supported institutions for tax dollars, we're going to have to market the public schools much as business and industry market their products and services.

ADVERTISING MANAGER—We will have to advertise our services and successes. We can no longer depend on the news media to assume total responsibility for taking the school story to the public, more than 70 percent of whom do not have children in public schools.

RESEARCH ANALYST—Where are we now? Where are we going? What does the public expect of us?

OMBUDSMAN—It's often easier for staff members and the general public to turn to someone in educational administration who is not an educator, but a professional communicator. The public relations director must be a person who can bring various factions together to work for the common goals and objectives of education.

PUBLICIST—Not the "hiya baby, hiya sweetie" type of Barnum and Bailey days. But someone who knows the best way to get the school story to the public through the print, radio, and television channels of the news media.

NEW PRODUCT CONSULTANT—Thinking of introducing a new reading program? An innovative approach to discipline problems? It's the public relations director who must work with you to introduce these new things to your various publics in order to maximize their acceptance and, hence, their effectiveness.

QUALITY CONTROL TECHNICIAN—Along with the superintendent and the rest of the cabinet, the public relations director needs to be part of the process which determines how well the system is functioning. Evaluation is the final link in the four-step process of public relations.

WRITER—It almost goes without saying that the public relations director must know how to write. That means writing in plain, simple language, not educationese. And it

means the ability to write in several different styles, including hard news style, feature writing, TV or radio news-writing, publications writing for specialized audiences, and speechwriting, to name a few.

EDITOR—As important as the ability to write is the ability to edit. Freelance writers are easy to find, but editors with sharp eyes and pencils are worth their weight in gold.

DISTRICT SPOKESPERSON—Who can speak for the superintendent if he or she is in a meeting, out of town, or busy with another assignment when an irate citizen or a reporter on deadline calls the district office? The public relations director better be prepared to assume this role.

GRAPHICS SPECIALIST—You don't need someone who is a graphic artist sitting in your public relations director's chair. But you better have someone who understands the fundamentals of graphic design if you're going to produce publications that communicate without costing you an arm and a leg.

HUMAN RELATIONS SPECIALIST—This is the role assumed by the public relations director when sitting with the PTA officers or the ringleaders of the local youth street gang as they work together to find acceptable solutions to common community problems.

SOOTHSAYER—This is more than futurism. This is the ability to see things in perspective, projecting into the future and advising the superintendent that if A, B, and C are implemented, D will surely follow.

HISTORIAN—Some office in the district needs to keep track of what goes on and organize it in a logical fashion so there will be a record for those who follow.

COMPLAINT DESK—What number is listed in the telephone book that the general public will instinctively call when they want to tell the schools they blew it? In many cities, it's listed as the public relations, community relations, or communications office. In communities where this is an established part of the district's management, you'll find that those letters regularly sent to board members and the superintendent from irate citizens will include a copy for the director of public relations.

CRISIS MANAGER—A fire erupts on the high school campus. There's a stabbing incident between two students. A little girl is molested on the way home from school. The teachers hit the picket line as they strike for higher salaries. Whose office serves as the crisis center in such incidents? Who communicates the facts to the news media, staff, parents, and general public in such a situation? Who develops an on-the-spot communications plan designed to free the principal to run the school and get things back to normal as quickly as possible while minimizing the amount of misinformation and rumors that circulate? The public relations director.

FUND RAISER—Whether it's the passage of a bond election or the raising of \$20,000 to send your high school band to the Rose Parade, someone in management has to be skilled in fund-raising and election planning techniques. School districts with a public relations professional on board have someone with this knowledge and training.

TEACHER—Most university programs that prepare teachers and administrators for their future roles do not include required training in communications or public relations. The public relations director in your school district must be responsible for training staff in these areas. The training can range from how to conduct a successful parent-teacher conference to producing school

newsletters or the public relations responsibilities of the school bus driver. The school district that truly understands the role of public relations will provide training for all new employees, detailing for these staff members their public relations responsibilities in their new jobs.

FINALLY, THE RIGHT HAND OF THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE CONSCIENCE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM—These are roles played by all members of the superintendent's cabinet, but the public relations director has an awesome role to fulfill if he or she diligently adheres to the Code of Ethics of the National School Public Relations Association, which requires that members "be guided constantly by pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste and fairness."³

The job description for someone who is going to handle all these duties needs to be broad enough to allow some flexibility but specific enough to set the parameters for a comprehensive communications office. The responsibilities of the public relations director should be communicated, not just to the person filling the position, but to all members of middle and top management. They, in turn, can help tell other staff members what the public relations department is there to do.

A typical job description for a public relations director might include the following:

- Serves as information liaison between the total school system and the community at large.
- Sets annual objectives for and evaluates the district's community relations program, including budget planning for meeting these objectives.
- Serves as liaison person between the district and the news media and supervises the distribution of all news releases; arranges for news conferences as required.
- Cooperates with district administrators and other staff members, as appropriate, in publicizing and promoting performances, exhibitions, displays, dedications, or special programs sponsored by the schools.
- Provides professional public relations consulting services and assistance when requested by administrators, board of education, schools, parents, student, and staff groups.
- Provides professional assistance in the development of various publications (brochures, newsletters, information bulletins) for schools and departments.
- Prior to final publication, reviews and edits all publications that will be disseminated to the general public.
- Recommends innovative avenues for external and internal communications.
- Provides in-service training as required on various subjects relative to community or public relations.
- Solicits feedback through formal and informal means on activities, products, and purposes of the community relations program and the school district.
- Develops and maintains accurate records regarding the district's public relations program.
- Attends and reports on all pre-meetings, regular, special, and study sessions of the board of education.

- Supervises and maintains activities for the Gold Card Club for senior citizens in the school district.
- Plans and coordinates Education Week and Grandparents Week on an annual basis.
- Provides news items to appropriate administrators, thus assisting them to be well informed on various developments related to their fields.
- Supervises the writing, publishing, and distribution of the monthly community newsletter.
- Expedites responses to all inquiries and complaints received by the department from citizens, news media, and school personnel.
- Serves as the district spokesperson to the news media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.
- Performs other tasks as assigned by the superintendent.

What kind of person has the qualifications to fulfill that job description? Probably not someone without training or experience in the field. Most school districts can ill afford to provide on-the-job training to someone without at least basic public relations skills.

A bachelor's degree in public relations, mass communications, or a related field is a start. But don't ignore those experienced public relations people who may not have a degree in one of these areas.

Experience or training in planning, implementing, evaluating, budgeting, and personnel management are essential. In a large school system, it takes more than one person to run the public relations department. Even in a small district, the public relations director will need a fulltime secretary to help with the workload.

The National School Public Relations Association and the Public Relations Society of America both have accreditation programs which attest to the professional qualifications of those who successfully pass the exams. In both associations the failure rate each year for those seeking accreditation runs between 40 percent and 50 percent. Someone who has earned accreditation must successfully complete a lengthy written exam, as well as an oral exam conducted by accredited colleagues.

"Plastics" might have been the wave of the future for Graduate Dustin Hoffman. But public relations is the key to the future of public education in America. No matter how well our students are doing, if nobody but parents, representing less than 30 percent of the households, knows about it, we will not have the public support we need to survive. So do good. Then tell everyone you can about it, through a planned, on-going program of public relations in your schools.

Footnotes

1. National School Public Relations Association. Executive Board Position Statement on the Value of the School Public Relations' Position, Adopted April 1981.
2. Interview with Dr. Ruth Love, Superintendent, Chicago Public Schools. American Association of School Administrator's Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, February 15, 1981.
3. National School Public Relations Association. **1980-1981 NSPRA Membership Directory**, Arlington, Virginia, p. 51.