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The High Stakes of School PR

Student Success

***T**he stakes for school public relations are enormous: Children excel in schools when parents are involved and communities are supportive.*

And what ensures the kind of participation and support essential to this student success? Solid, open, and ongoing public relations activities that support communication between schools and the communities they serve. Of course much of this communication can be channeled in the formal ways in which public relations efforts are normally delivered—newsletters, brochures, Web sites, presentations, news coverage, and so on—but these one-way communication tactics, while vital, can do only so much.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

Public relations, as its name implies, is also about relationships. As a result, personal communication, along with such organizational communication as newsletters, Web sites, or other communication tools, is an essential ingredient in the recipe for creating relationships that work for students and schools.

Good school public relations involves much more than a formal communications program. Certainly school public relations efforts will profit from the skillful direction of a public relations administrator and staff, but success results from more than creative brochures, solid publicity, and state-of-the-art Web content. Fundamentally, school public relations efforts that work need everyone. Ultimately, success depends on what others say and do about you and everyone else in your school system.

PERCEPTIONS AND REPUTATIONS MATTER

Fair or not—accurate or not—the words and deeds of everyone involved with schools create perceptions and images that influence what others think and believe about those schools. And these images and beliefs work to promote or to discourage the kind of individual and community support and involvement essential to student and school success.

In short, all individuals involved with a school district office or school building play vital public relations roles that strengthen or damage our reputations daily. Superintendents and other district administrators may see their school districts as a collection of schools and the great programs they offer. Principals and teachers may see their schools as buildings, classrooms, busy hallways, and festive bulletin boards. But to those outside the system, these images can easily be interpreted in very different ways.

- A visitor confronted by doors locked for safety reasons may see a cold and unfriendly facade—rather than a secure learning environment.
- Someone wandering a school hallway lined with classrooms of chattering children may see disorder and chaos—rather than group learning.
- A parent offered a hasty greeting by a busy teacher may see a rude person—rather than a stressed and harried person who, in fact, is quite cordial and eager to partner with parents.

How others see and interpret everything done and said by those in schools fosters the reputations by which schools succeed or fail.

So why do schools seem to have so much trouble when it comes to public relations? The problem seems to have plagued schools and educators for a very long time. Consider the advice offered by the so-called father of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, writing more than 80 years ago:

Education is not securing its proper share of public interest. . . . The public is not cognizant of the real value of education, and does not realize that education as a social force is not receiving the kind of attention it has the right to expect in a democracy.

To explain this dilemma, Bernays continued,

There are a number of reasons for this condition. First of all, there is the fact that the educator has been trained to stimulate the thought of individual students in his classroom, but has not been trained as an educator at large of the public.

In a democracy an educator should, in addition to his academic duties, bear definite and wholesome relation to the general public. This public does not come within the immediate scope of his academic duties. But in a sense he depends upon it for his living.¹

Just as Bernays admonished nearly a century ago, everyone involved in education, in the interest of good public relations, needs also to fulfill a role as an “educator at large to the public.”

SCHOOL PR EFFORTS REFLECT REALITY

All school systems should organize and support formal public relations efforts to plan, implement, and assess communication efforts at the district and school levels, as well as in special campaigns that will need to be addressed from time to time. However, formal public relations efforts alone, while vital, simply can't ensure overall public relations success.

First, there always will be the question of competition for resources in school systems. No matter how great the need, schools will always face challenges when trying to fully fund their formal communication efforts.

Consider the numbers: By some estimates, there are about 16,000 public school systems in the United States. But only about 2,000 of these systems have administrators or others with public relations roles who are members of the National School Public Relations Association.

Does this mean that fewer than 15 percent of the school systems in the United States have formal public relations programs? Probably not. Some districts have programs that are overseen by administrators assigned public relations as one of many collateral duties. Others have some public relations programming that is overseen on a part-time basis by a teacher or perhaps a communication consultant. But the figures do dramatize the lack of formal, dedicated communications programming in many school systems, and they further highlight the importance of all individual educators making the most of their communication roles.

Second, there is the fact that a public relations program can only reflect reality. Long-term success depends on honesty and transparency in communication. Public relations isn't about papering over problems or putting a good “spin” on a bad situation. While hype and promotion might net some short-term gain, it will not create the long-term trust and goodwill essential to school success. This doesn't mean school staff members and others shouldn't tell others about the good things happening in their schools. They most certainly should. But schools shouldn't use public relations tactics to try to

convince others that something is good when it is not. All communication should be honest, authentic, and true.

SCHOOL PR BASICS: DO AND TELL

There is an axiom among public relations practitioners that defines public relations as no more complicated than *doing good and getting credit for it*. Implicit in those words is the fact that public relations plays a role in making sure institutions *do* good things and *tell* others about them.

School systems have public relations—whether or not they have a formal public relations program to guide them. In any school system, day in and day out, with or without formal efforts, there are communications. Information flows. Rumors circulate. Images form. Opinions gel. And friends—or opponents—emerge.

Working together as a public relations team, those involved with schools on a daily basis (including parents, volunteers, business partners, students, school employees, and more) can be potent forces for building a better understanding of local schools and their strengths and needs. Personal communication—coupled with an overarching, institutional public relations effort—creates the ideal mix for long-term public relations success in today's schools.

Questions for Assessing School PR Support for Student Success

1. How do my public relations activities demonstrate a commitment to clear and open communication? Do I (and others) model a commitment to excellence in communication and public relations? Can I (and others) articulate the links between good communication and student and school success?
2. Do others involved with my school or program understand their specific public relations roles? How can performance in their public relations roles be monitored and measured?
3. How are others important to my efforts trained and supported to succeed in their personal public relations roles?
4. How do I help put others at ease when engaging in public relations efforts to support two-way communication? That is, how do my efforts help others to listen and speak—to offer and collect feedback as well as disseminate information and ideas? How do my public relations activities process and report on feedback in ways that show that my school or program is listening and engaged?
5. How do I access the school system's formal communication program to support and enhance my public relations effectiveness?

NOTE

1. Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright Publishing, 1928), 121–122.