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The road is bright and promising

The PR director and the future

By Philip T. West

The traditional role of the educational public relations director is changing. Once viewed predominantly as a school publicist, preoccupied with preparing and disseminating press releases and staff and community newsletters and establishing media contacts,¹ this director now stands on the threshold of choosing from a variety of information-related roles, some of which have become far more imminent than others.

Indeed, in identifying critical tasks for educational public relations directors, participants in a 1977 Delphi study ranked as a top priority for a subsequent 20-year period the development of considerable skill not only in communications, but also in technology, the social sciences, marketing, and politics,² clearly suggesting alternative roles of educational public relations directors. Other top priorities in the study targeted important management and community roles for educational public relations directors,³ who, in the nearby future, may also have an important role to play in collective negotiations, at the bargaining table and in associated activities.

While proffered areas of expertise and desired role expectations might in themselves be vague signals of what is to come, the trends that have recently taken on national significance are not. Foremost among these trends is the emergence of an information society, wrought by advanced technology and a communications revolution sweeping school and community. Another is a renewed interest in grass roots ideologies and lay participation, best mirrored in the growth of the community education movement. Still another is a decline of public confidence in societal institutions, most recently the school where the hue

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and cry is "back to the basics." Financial constraints at local, state, and federal levels have also become a reality with which most school leaders must increasingly contend, as have strikes, shutdowns, and conflict stemming from widespread collective bargaining activities in the public schools.

Taken together, expertise, expectations, and trends point to specific future alternative roles for educational public relations directors in the following areas: Information Management and Techno-Relations; Community Relations; Consumer Relations; Employee Relations; and Governmental Relations.

Information Management and Techno-Relations

The quest of educational public relations directors to achieve administrative status has continued with fervor over the years. For example, administrative team membership, or its equivalent, was, in 1971, 63.5 percent, or about 20 percent more than in 1967.⁴ In 1979 this number was increased to 78 percent, or about an additional 25 percent.⁵ With the advent of increasingly sophisticated information technology in the public schools, this administrative team membership may be expected not only to continue its rise but increase sharply in the complexity of its administrative responsibilities.

Today computers are being used by many schools to conduct much of their daily business, in such areas as attendance keeping, payroll budgeting, and word processing. Mostly to help students understand computer concepts, computers are also being used today in 50 percent and 14 percent, respectively, of all secondary and elementary schools.⁶ Too, personal computers are on the rise, with an estimated 300,000 already in homes⁷ and with expectations that decreasing cost will accelerate this rise.⁸ What is, perhaps, most promising to computer users is the speculation that by the late 1980s a set of books may be stored on a single microchip and an entire library in a space that approximates paperback book size.⁹

Adding to this technological revolution is interactive cable television linking school to other educational institutions, as in Spokane, Washington;¹⁰ school to public library, city hall, university, and home, as in Irvine, California;¹¹ and home subscriber to data bank and television programming, as in Columbus, Ohio.¹² Further technological embellishments include instructional TV-networking, satellites, satellite dishes, video discs, video recorders, televised text, large TV screen projection, and, in the very near future, video phones and electronic mail.¹³ Anticipated sales of large screen three-tube projectors have been set at 300,000 to 500,000 a year from 1983 to 1985.¹⁴ Concurrently, TV screens will become flat and by 1986 assume wall sized proportions.¹⁵

Amidst this technological maze of electronic gadgetry will stand a manager, or director, of information systems,¹⁶ a member of the top management echelon, who will supervise the dissemination, retrieval, and storage of incredible amounts of instructional and decision-making data, who will be responsible for interactively linking by computer, cable, and satellite school to community and community to home, and who may even run the educational facility of tomorrow, when electronics will be the key to education.

The role of the information manager also presupposes techno-relations skills in addition to computer and media expertise. Derived from new communication strategies and principles, these skills enable the information

manager to relate to his audience in an optimally contrived human sense. A working knowledge of the effects of structuring, timing, color, sound, and large screen projection, coupled with insights gained from the science of kinesics, all contribute to the creation of this contrived rendition of traditional modes of human relations, as does the implication of flexible space and the absence of distance.¹⁷

Community Relations

Currently educational public relations directors have much contact with their respective communities. In a recent survey that polled male and female educational public relations directors about their duties and responsibilities, 72 percent of the males and 82 percent of the females reported such contact; and 65 percent of both groups reported dealing with citizen complaints. Both were also producers of community publications, with 82 percent of both groups reporting this responsibility.¹⁸ Twenty-two percent of the males and 16 percent of the females indicated the rapport they had with their communities as one of their position strengths. In a listing of over 15 strengths, this item tied for second place with males and was ranked third by females.¹⁹

The literature is also replete with suggestions for educational public relations directors to increase their effectiveness in working with lay advisory groups, presumably on the assumption that it is part of their job to do so. Parallel to this thrust are the efforts of community educators to achieve an even greater rapport with the citizenry, whose support and participation as teachers or students they consider vital to the success of their undertaking. Aside from this emphasis on widespread community involvement, community educators are much akin to educational public relations directors. They conduct surveys, information sessions, and in-service. They cultivate media contacts and prepare press releases, work with PTAs and PTOs and other school groups, and prepare a variety of publications, sometimes hand-in-hand with the educational public relations director. In fact, because of these many similarities, it is quite likely that these positions will someday merge.

Forces are already at work that seem to be precipitating a much larger role for both community educators and educational public relations directors. Dwindling energy resources, inflationary transportation costs, and advanced technology have raised the possibility of taking the job to the home.²⁰ The anticipated result is the strengthening of the family and an increase in community participation.²¹ And with this futuristic shift will also come an increase in community education activity and the appearance of the community relations specialist, who will be a composite of educational public relations and community education director. In the meantime the incursion of community education into the K-12 curriculum and into the home through telecommunications and the intensified involvement of educational public relations in community affairs, electronic polling, and educational programming will begin to meld the two roles into the community relations specialist, an individual whose purpose it is to know best the needs, interests, and aspirations of the community.

Consumer Relations

The decline in the public's confidence in its schools, while reflected in a number of ways, among them de-

mands for increased educational accountability, competency testing of teachers and administrators, taxpayer revolts, and a back-to-basics movement, is, perhaps, best revealed in renewed public interest in the educational voucher and voucher derivatives, such as the Magnet School concept, where educational consumerism prevails.

Attaining varying degrees of intellectual prominence in educational circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s and executed in a limited fashion in California in the Alum Rock Public Schools during the 1970s, the voucher recently captured the public limelight in two states, Michigan in 1978 and California in 1979 and early 1980. While the voucher proponents experienced defeats, Michiganders at the polls and Californians because of a lack of signatures to get the voucher to the ballot box, they have, owing to the tenor of the times, considerable justification for believing that victory is in the not-to-distant future.

Educational accountability, so much a concern of educators and the general public these days, is built in to the voucher, as are administrative, teacher, and pupil performance standards. For in an unregulated voucher system, where public and private schools compete for their clientele, if students do not achieve academically, parental options might dictate the withdrawal of students in numbers sufficient to put administrators and teachers out of jobs and schools out of business. Often criticized as more faddish than useful, innovations, too, will be subjected to consumer standards, with only the most successful enjoying any degree of longevity.

Two-way communication networks, generally viewed as conducive to the establishment of sound school-community relationships, will become critical in a voucher setting. Consumerism will precipitate the need for a continuous flow of information from school to client. In fact, the school that is devoid of a well-organized consumer relations program is unlikely to survive. This information flow will create a new bond between the school and its clientele, thereby accomplishing an unsurpassed level of school-community relations. Parents, as consumers, will need to know and understand each school's offerings and how well these offerings will advance their educational expectations for their children. They will want to know what they can get for their school dollar, and the school that is most receptive to their needs and interests will be among those that enjoy a happy and prosperous educational enterprise.

Today schools are assured continuity by a guaranteed clientele, who have little or no choice as to where they go or as to what they might wish to pursue academically should offerings be limited. By the same token, schools must accept clients that have little desire to be within their portals. In the future, however, with the advent of the voucher, or a proliferation of magnet schools, students and parents will be afforded the opportunity of choosing educational settings, and this choice will be dependent largely upon the counseling of a consumer relations specialist housed in a particular school or school district, in a state or national regulatory office or in a detached and private setting. As educational alternatives multiply, so will the number of consumer relations specialists who market or assess their worth.

Some educational public relations directors are already looking to marketing as a way of combating declining public confidence in the schools, believing that public ownership of schools is by no means an indication

of either public support or satisfaction. Should this interest in marketing principles and practices spread and crystalize, it is quite likely that the advent of the consumer relations specialist may well precede voucher implementation, with the voucher serving merely as a reinforcing agent.

Employee Relations

Educational public relations, often viewed as an application of communications and human relations principles and strategies, has much in common with employee relations, where both concepts are also of considerable importance. In recent years collective bargaining has become a major concern of many school personnel specialists, who sometimes work in close relationship with educational public relations directors because of their mutual interest in the flow of information from the school to its internal and external publics.

Collective bargaining requires a steady flow of communications; more important, however, community support and teacher and student morale demand it. Bilateralism that maximizes cooperation and minimizes adversarial relationships is dependent upon ease of information access. But bargaining characterized by conflict and impasse feeds and flourishes on a lack of information, rumor, and misinformation. Information is also critical during and after a strike, the former, to keep parents informed about instructional continuity or school closings, and the latter, to repair the breach caused by administrative and staff contractual conflicts.

Currently there are arguments for and against including the educational public relations director at the bargaining table, the strongest of which, coming from both superintendents and educational public relations directors involved in a recent study, is that educational public relations directors lack both the necessary preparation and experience.²⁷ Both superintendents and educational public relations directors do, however, see somewhat of a role for educational public relations directors in support of the chief negotiator during collective negotiations, with superintendents and educational public relations directors ranking in importance such support, ninth and seventeenth, respectively, on a list of 22 statements. Where both groups were in most agreement was on the statement that educational public relations directors were to establish credibility with the media during the negotiating process.²⁸

Of rather obvious importance is that educational public relations directors holding membership on administrative teams saw for themselves a stronger role in collective negotiations than those who did not hold administrative team membership. Finally, while superintendents appear reluctant to earmark a role for educational public relations directors on the negotiating team, they do seem to see an important role in communications for them while negotiations are ongoing and upon conclusion of a strike.²⁹

As collective negotiations continue to develop within the public school sector, educational public relations directors may be expected to assume additional responsibilities in the total negotiating process. In time these responsibilities will coalesce to form an employee relations role for them. But only those with adequate preparation and experience will be the ones who are identified with this new specialization.

Governmental Relations

According to the previously cited Delphi study, another top priority task for information specialists during the next 20 years is the development of communication strategies to secure community legislative support for financial funding.³⁰ In view of recent trends the identification of this task, and its anticipated criticality, is hardly surprising. Escalating school costs, rising property taxes, inflationary prices, and an incredibly shrinking dollar have prompted both school staff and program cutbacks. Declining enrollments have contributed no less to this awesome dilemma, as enrollments and programmatic needs rarely coincide. In the ensuing years institutions of all kinds that seek local, state, or federal support will find themselves competing for funding, the school being only one of many competitors for fewer and fewer dollars.

California's Proposition 13 and Massachusetts' Proposition 2½ merely signal a future educators will soon face nationwide. This bleak future of limited financial resources and heavy competition will prompt the rise of the governmental relations specialist. Well-grounded in the politics of education and school financing and adept in communicating school financial needs to a variety of groups, chiefly among them state and national legislators, this person will be, first and foremost, a professional lobbyist, contracted by a single school or a consortium of schools. For example, lobbyist activity may be expected to intensify at the state level with the establishment of block grants at the federal level for state funding to local education agencies.

In addition, this person would be expected to have competency in writing proposals for governmental grants, along with a knowledge of alternative sources, such as private foundations, from which grants may also be secured. In brief, the role of governmental relations specialist will be to translate school needs through oral and written communication into financial funding.

Conclusion

The future that awaits the educational public relations director is bright and promising. Technology, life-long education, choice, collective negotiations, and limited school funding are acting as determinants in shaping five distinct specializations: Information management and techno-relations, community relations, consumer relations, employee relations, and governmental relations. Each of these specializations requires both preparation and commitment, and all have the potential to transform the traditional school publicist into a member of top management within the educational sector.

Footnotes

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