THE SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

TWELFTH EDITION

Edward H. Moore
Donald R. Gallagher
Don Bagin

Twelfth Edition

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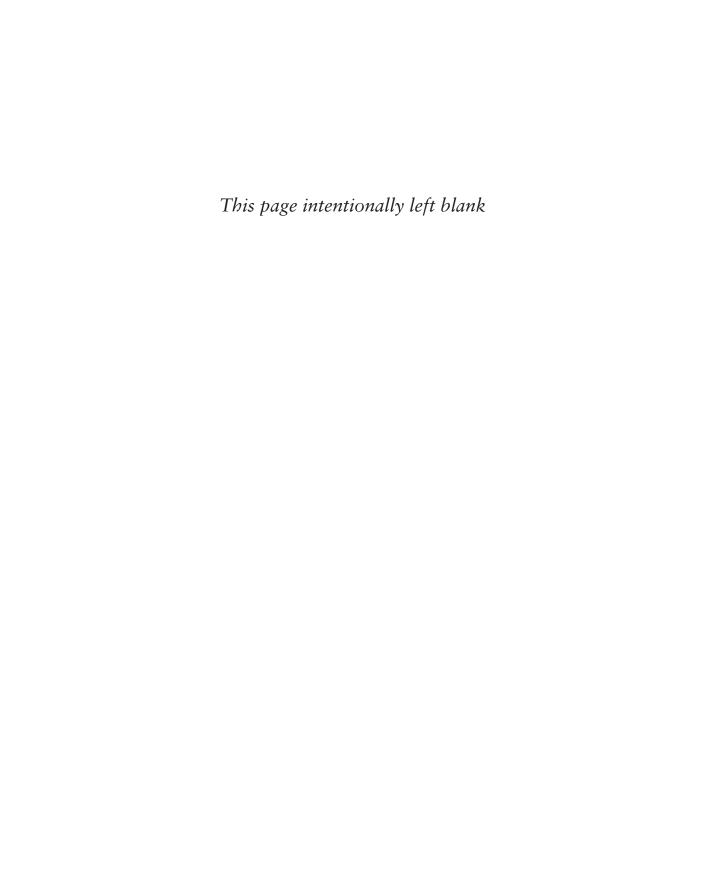**Pearson**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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PREFACE

Rapidly evolving communication technology, tremendous shifts in the way educational services are funded and delivered, and increasing demands in what the public expects from schools continue to challenge school communication professionals and school leaders.

Importantly, most of these evolving issues are adding to and not subtracting from the complexity of school communication programs. New technologies are supplementing communication tactics in the school communicator's arsenal while not supplanting conventional tactics. Traditional school systems now face a constant struggle for students and resources in a tough, new competitive environment. And increasingly segmented publics are making more nuanced and specific demands on school leaders.

But there is a precedent for such shifts in communication demands. Rapid changes in traditional media, public demands, and government involvement in education gave birth to the formal practice of modern school public relations in the 1930s. Education leaders today must seek ways to successfully confront similar struggles in different environments.

School leaders must effectively deal with the ways in which traditional news media now cover and comment on schools in the converged world of print, broadcast, and online reporting; the realities of non-stop, two-way communication and engagement that digital and social media have spawned; the vastly expanded expectations of parents in particular and taxpayers in general for transparency and instant, on-demand access to information and data; and the new realities of ties between effective communication and community involvement and the resulting impact on student and school success.

This revised edition has been updated to reflect the new ways in which school communicators can organize and operate to meet the new demands this changing environment presents. It seeks to offer practical insights and guidance on how schools can build trusting working relationships with their communities to create sound foundations supporting student success.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- Interviews with school communication experts and professionals offer practical insights for current issues in all chapters.
- Key issues identified for all school employees—central administrators, building and program administrators, and teachers, counselors, and staff—in all chapters.
- Links to videos offering examples of how schools are addressing many key communication challenges.
- Updated chapters in the "Essential Considerations" section reflecting the expanding roles for school communication programming in a time of rising demands for accountability and unprecedented competition for resources and students; the rising importance of community engagement in an era of constant change; and the evolving skill sets demanded of communication practitioners.
- The "Relations with Special Publics" section has been updated to address emerging communication challenges, such as the complexities of identifying internal and external audiences in a new-media environment, the growing need for objective-driven planning to inform and influence key audiences, and the growing importance of effective interpersonal communication among school employees to support student success.
- A revised section on "Communication Tools" addressing the new need to fully address the integrated nature of communication through online and traditional media tactics and emerging trends in planning for special communication campaigns and school-finance communication.
- An expanded look at accountability metrics for the evaluation of institutional and personal assessment of communication performance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Importance of Public Relations

This chapter reviews issues …

■ For central administrators: The role public relations plays to offer a two-way link between the organization and its key constituencies. How research and planning aid decision-making by documenting community priorities and how public relations helps school leaders better understand key audiences while helping key audiences better understand and support the school system.

■ For building and program administrators: The role public relations plays to offer a two-way link between school programs and services and the direct audiences they serve. How comprehensive communication planning helps schools and programs devise and disseminate key messages in line with the system's overarching communication objectives.

■ For teachers, counselors and staff: How public relations can offer planning, materials, and support for the vital roles front-line educators play in communication with key constituents. The ways in which communication planning and development efforts can help professionals refine messages and tactics for communication that support student accomplishment and support school initiatives.

After completing this chapter you should be able to …

■ Define the purpose and roles of public relations and communication in the educational organization.

■ Demonstrate the benefits of planned and measured school communication to students, schools and the community.

■ Outline the roles of communication in building parental and community partnerships.

■ Establish the links between communication and the public understanding and support it fosters.

As new challenges continue to confront schools and educators, the importance of school–community relations and overall school public relations has grown rapidly. Consider some trends affecting school leaders daily:

Many states and local school systems today offer a broad array of choices for parents in determining where to send students to school, creating new demands for ongoing communication on program and quality issues between schools and parents, schools and prospective parents, and schools and communities overall. It was only in the 1980s that Minnesota started a school choice program. Today, the majority of states offer some form of charter school alternatives to traditional public-school systems. Many states now give parents options for choosing specific schools either within or outside of their home school systems, and home-schooling options exist in all 50 states.

Safety and security crises—such as violence issues, health concerns, environmental dangers and staff conduct—have challenged the reputations of schools and added new pressures on schools to communicate more effectively before, during, and after crisis situations.

As parents and taxpayers have become better informed and are armed with effective new ways for communicating and connecting with one another, they tend to increase their involvement in local education issues and to openly challenge many of the decisions being made by educational leaders.

For these reasons and more, many superintendents, other administrators, and teachers wish they had learned more about how to communicate effectively and about how to practice public relations when taking their administrative courses.

WHY SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS?

In most communities, taxpayers are letting it be known that they care about the quality of education and its costs. They are demanding to be informed about and involved with key education issues. As a result, more and more of the school administrator's time is spent dealing with people and the administrative functions essential to building strong school communication and community relationships.

An administrator may provide excellent leadership for the school's curriculum or may be a financial wizard, but if an administrator cannot effectively communicate with the school board, parents, taxpayers, staff, and the news media—on a regular basis—his or her days in the district will be few.

News coverage frequently declares one of the following reasons for a superintendent's dismissal: "He couldn't communicate with the board," "Her comments alienated parents," or "He just didn't have a good feel for this community." Knowing the public and being able to keep abreast of the community's thinking are major requirements for today's successful administrator. Suggestions on how to accomplish these tasks are offered in Chapter 3.

Rich Bagin, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), cites the following as the commonly found reasons that school and community relations fail:

1. Too often, educators equate communication with the dissemination of information. They fail to understand that communication is a two-way process that engages parents, taxpayers and communities in meaningful relationships.
2. School communication and engagement often are reactive to events and situations rather than planned efforts targeted at meeting specific objectives.
3. Leaders and front-line employees do not understand their specific communication roles, have little or no accountability for how they communicate, and receive little support to help them fulfill their communication roles.
4. Educators often have little communication training or experience and are not comfortable when issues have the potential to place their actions and decisions in the public or media spotlights.[1]

If school officials aren't convinced that they have a responsibility to communicate because communication helps people learn or because it builds confidence in the schools, they might want to consider another reason: to keep their jobs. More and more school systems now offer parents some opportunity to choose the school or programs their children will attend. This means that images and perceptions

count more than ever for schools. Fair or not, accurate or not, schools that are perceived as being "good" will attract more students than schools that people do not seem to like. The point is that people working in schools that don't attract students will not have jobs. That sounds dramatic, but it probably will be the result because choice options continue to expand.

Why do people choose one school over another? What makes School A seem better than School B? Many people have different theories. Some feel that it is the overall image of the school projected by the school district newsletter and media coverage. Others feel that it is based on the test scores of graduates. Still others think that an aura, evolved over the years, continues, even though in reality the quality of that school has changed.

The reasons why people make school choices become important when considering the growing interest and action on school-choice options. Data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics show that, "In 2012, the parents of 37 percent of all 1st- through 12th-grade students indicated that public school choice was available to them. Also in 2012, 13 percent of the students in traditional public schools were in a school chosen by their parents rather than an assigned school." The data also show that those in chosen public schools "had parents who were very satisfied with some elements of their children's education."[2]

INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

With the increasing competition for students and funding, it's imperative that educational leaders be effective spokespersons for education. With only so many dollars available, the question facing legislators is whether those dollars should go for roads, bridges, health care, welfare, or education. Impressions are made daily by administrators—impressions that influence legislators' decisions about public education. While state and national associations can provide lobbying leadership, much also must be accomplished on a local level by school officials as they communicate in the community. Whether it's speaking in a classroom to explain how public education works (a neglected curriculum item in most

schools) or having breakfast with a local legislator, the school administrator constantly affects the public perception of education. Because administrators lead a fishbowl existence in the community, it's important that they understand and support ways of building confidence in public education.

Still, despite the increasing communication challenges facing schools and their leaders, many school systems continue to display a reluctance to commit dedicated staff and funds to the public relations function. The U.S. Census Bureau reports there are more than 14,000 public school systems in the U.S., but by comparison the National School Public Relations Association has just over 2,000 members in North America.[3]

Perhaps many school leaders feel that "public relations" carries a negative image inappropriate for tax-funded organizations—that it will be perceived as "spin" or "propaganda" to be used to cover up or obscure problems and not as an essential function to build the relationships and understanding vital to public support and student success.

Whether a school system chooses to call the function public relations, public information, community relations, or communications is relatively unimportant. The commitment to better planned, regular, two-way communications with all the audiences served by the schools is, however, important. One of the reasons more of a commitment has not been made may be the fact that so few school officials have been prepared to handle public relations responsibilities. In addition, education has in many cases continued its administrative organization with few changes in titles or responsibilities over the years.

The importance of communication in the overall school operation is being recognized by an increasing number of states, as more are requiring that candidates for administrative certification complete a course in the field of community relations. National organizations, such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), have recognized the growing importance of school–community relations by devoting resources and conference sessions to the topic. The 2017 AASA conference, for example, included a "Social Media Lounge" offering programs such as "Benefits of Utilizing Twitter as a Superintendent," "Using Social Media and Online

Tools for Collegial Cooperation and Personal Professional Development, and "Using Social Media to Effectively Engage Your Community" (https://web .archive.org/web/20170628075551/http://nce.aasa .org/wp-content/uploads/AASA-2017-NCE-Onsite-Guide.pdf). Other regional and state education associations are committing more and more sessions to the topic on a regular basis.

Clearly the commitment to school public relations function is essential. For communication success, however, schools need to commit to some of the basic tenets of public relations practice and its practitioners, including understanding that public relations.

Offers a Leadership Function

The practice of public relations is built on a foundation of two-way communication. Effective communication demands more than simply disseminating news and information. It is not just a mouthpiece communicating only school messages that school systems consider important to share. Effective communication also serves as the school system's eyes and ears—watching and listening to the many communities of the system. Of course, the communication function helps communities better understand the school system and its programs by disseminating information and messages in all manner of media. But the two-way aspect of true public relations also interprets the communities and their interests back to the school system and its leaders. In essence, to be effective the communication function needs to enable efforts by educational leaders to listen to and understand their constituencies in order to facilitate both decision-making and communication that will lead to understanding and support.

Acquiring feedback allows school officials to know how the community or staff will react to a decision. To effectively lead a school district, it is essential that leaders know and appreciate the thoughts, aspirations, and commitments of the community and that the community know and appreciate the thoughts, aspirations, and commitments of school leaders. There is a danger in seeing communication

as only a one-way function with school officials telling others what they think they need to know about schools.

When people are asked their opinion, they feel better about the person who asks for it, especially if it's made clear that the opinion will be considered. Whether it's using the key communicators, conducting surveys, or some other method recommended in Chapter 3, the need for feedback is vital to the leadership function of communication.

Builds Relationships and Seeks Consensus

For schools to serve students well, decisions about how schools function and operate need to enjoy support by those in the communities they serve. However, support is not possible without an understanding of the reasons behind the many decisions and actions school leaders are responsible for.

Communication supports this process by helping schools better understand the wants and needs of their many constituencies, and it also supports the process by helping outsiders better understand the facts and rationales behind decisions and actions.

This is a delicate balance that school leaders need to maintain. Some situations may call for bold leadership with efforts designed to inform the community and seek to change prevailing opinions. But other situations may call for the school system itself to change course—to adapt itself to the community's desires or demands.

Making the right decision on potential communication strategies depends upon careful and ongoing communication research. (For more on communication and community research, see Chapter 3.) Such research first helps school leaders to better understand the community and its prevailing attitudes. Such research also provides the foundation for creating a communication plan for the school system. But before a communication plan can be created the research first needs to be used to counsel school leaders on any changes the school system itself may need to make before attempting to successfully forge a consensus with its community.

Fosters Honesty, Transparency, and Ethical Behaviors

If two-way communication seeks to foster and support relationships between the school and its communities then it also must support the elements essential to establishing the trust relationships need to thrive: honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior.

Emotions often drive action. Getting people to care about school issues often involves helping them to develop an emotional connection to those issues and the schools they affect. But the connection people make and the actions they take as a result can be positive or negative for schools—depending upon the emotional connection they make. Those who trust school leadership and believe they have been dealt with honestly and ethically may be more open to school initiatives and to considering various points of view and recommendations. Those who do not trust the leadership and feel that leadership has been misleading or dishonest and is operating in ways that are less than ethical may not be as open-minded to messages from their schools.

Ironically, new media that have emerged in recent years have made it both easier and more difficult for schools to deal with transparency. New media now offer efficient and effective ways to quickly make tremendous amounts of information readily available to audiences. But at the same time these new media have created expectations among audiences that all information will be readily available, thus making schools who fail to effectively use new media appear to be hiding information.

These same new media have created highly connected communities. In such connected environments, transparency in communication is an essential ingredient in supporting accountability and building the sense of ownership and trust communities must hold before they will trust schools and their leadership.

Supports and Counsels the Total Organization

Along with being honest, transparent, and ethical when dealing with constituents, schools also must employ the same behaviors when dealing internally. Communication, and the research that drives and supports it, needs to counsel the organization when potential plans or programs may not be in the best interests of the communities that the schools seek to serve. Reaching consensus, then, may mean helping the school adapt to its communities as well as helping communities adapt to their schools.

This process is reflected in the evaluation the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) makes when it considers school communication programs for its Gold Medallion Award annually. The organization evaluates programs based on their research, planning/action, communication/implementation, and evaluation.[4] The planning/action phase, which follows research, gives the communication planner the ability to counsel the organization on any changes it may need to make before engaging in communication and seeking consensus with its community.

Seeks Community Partnerships Supporting School and Student Success

There is a significant amount of evidence demonstrating the tremendous positive effect that engaged families and communities have on student success. School communication is responsible for creating the atmosphere in which engagement becomes possible, and NSPRA's Communication Accountability Program (https://www.nspra.org/cap) has been collecting and disseminating this evidence for more than a decade.

Through two-way communication schools can build the kind of environment important to creating collaboration with the community overall and parents in particular—collaboration that will support student and school success.

Engagement between schools and their communities, however, depends on a foundation of understanding and trust, and planned school communication assures that such a foundation is created. Clearly, student and school well-being can be placed at risk when schools fail to effectively communicate and engage in ways that build working partnerships with the community.

Includes a Fiscally Responsible use of Taxpayer Resources and the Public Accountability Function for the School System Overall

As with any school function, school communication and the many activities needed to support it must be funded with public money. Communication investments, as a result, must be planned and evaluated in ways that document an appropriate return. Research helps to document key issues and audiences, and messages and tactics that can effectively be used to address those issues and audiences. Research and planning can establish the benchmarks and metrics by which communication investments ultimately will be judged.

Some metrics may involve communication-based outcomes—the amount of publicity generated, the level of awareness created, the number of subscribers to a social media feed and so on. But other outcomes might be tied to more bottom-line issues for the school system—the number of new student registrations generated, the increase in attendance at public meetings, the value of donations to a school foundation and so on.

Both types of measurements are critical to creating communication programming that is both fiscally responsible and accountable for the school system overall.

A PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN IS ESSENTIAL

A plan must be developed for public relations or little will happen. Board members and administrators can commiserate for a long time about the need for a public relations program, but it won't happen unless someone develops a plan and makes a commitment to on-going communication.

NSPRA recommends that school communication activities be planned and guided by a written communication plan. The organization recommends the following:

- The public relations/communication efforts are planned on a systematic (often annual) basis to support the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives.
- The plan has the approval of the superintendent/chief executive officer.

- The plan focuses on meeting the goals of the organization and ultimately improving education, and, to the extent possible, enhancing student achievement.
- The plan identifies the needs of target publics and uses research data to identify key messages and strategies for delivering those messages.
- Communication plans for specific program changes or initiatives are developed in conjunction with the staff responsible for them.
- Communication plans identify the various publics who will be affected and the strategies for reaching them.
- To the extent possible, communication plans include measurable goals for behavior change or accomplishment, deadlines, responsibilities, resources, and strategies.
- Plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that communication efforts remain relevant and are on schedule, and are adjusted whenever necessary to reach planned goals or to deal with emerging needs and opportunities.[5]

Public Relations Addresses Many Needs

Some public relations activities may focus on addressing specific needs—celebrating a key anniversary, opening a new building, or launching a new fund-raising initiative, for example. But school communications overall should be driven by a comprehensive public relations plan that accommodates the need for over-arching and ongoing communication of a variety of messages in a range of situations to a wide array of audiences.

Communicating with external audiences is perhaps the function most commonly associated with public relations. Working with the news media to generate news coverage and positive publicity is another role that many also associate with the practice of public relations.

But along with these external communication functions, public relations also has a responsibility to communicate to and build working relationships with internal audiences such as employees. Communication efforts can be tied directly to issues of employee morale, productivity, and retention, all issues which can have important financial impacts on an organization. Employees need to be seen as ambassadors of

the school in the community. What they say can make a significant impact on external audiences, and school leaders need to keep mind that workers—teachers and bus drivers, for example—are interacting with people in the community every single day.

Beyond seeking to inform others, public relations also has a role in influencing actions, and its communication efforts therefore also can play critical roles in helping to market schools and school services. From attracting new students to recruiting new employees, public relations plays a role in marketing a school system's many opportunities and options.

Public relations also plays a critically important role when schools are challenged by any of a number of crises that can erupt. Timely, accurate and open communication with internal and external audiences can help a school system effectively manage the many difficult issues a crisis can present. And effective public relations can support school leaders in maintaining their credibility and the community's confidence during times of crisis.

Even before a crisis strikes, however, public relations fulfills a role in helping school leaders identify potential issues and manage them before they grow into controversies or crises that can threaten working relationships between the school and communities. By conducting communication research and collecting feedback from the school system's constituencies, public relations can interpret key audiences and issues to school leaders and support decision-making that aligns the needs of the school system with the needs of the community.

Along with counseling school leaders, public relations needs to play a role in helping all employees understand and fulfill their communication roles. People in all school functions have some level of public interaction and the way in which they handle these roles plays an important role in how others will view the school system and its commitment to serving the community. Public relations programs should offer activities to help all employees better understand the importance of these roles and they should offer training and support to help employees carry out their communication roles.

All of these activities reflect the role public relations should play in helping the school system to build the working relationships that are essential if a school system is to successfully and effectively serve its students and community.

One Expert's Point of View: Understanding the Role of Public Relations in Helping Schools and Students Achieve Their Best

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Why is it so important that school leaders understand the role and importance of public relations?

Misunderstanding what public relations can and can't do for a school system can pose a tremendous threat. Public relations is not a function designed to whitewash problems or sweep bad news under the rug. In fact, using communication to mislead or hide facts will often make a bad situation much worse. But when properly understood and deployed, public relations offers tremendous potential in helping organizations meet their objectives and enjoy success. And

it also helps organizations avoid problems and crises by identifying them and addressing them before they become major issues. And public relations can help organizations navigate troubled waters when bad news does happen.

Communication happens in any organization all the time whether it's planned for or not. It's simply responsible management to plan activities for such an important function and to hold employees responsible for their performance in their communication roles. One might even argue that failing to properly plan and manage an organization's communication function is management malpractice.

Organizations such as the National School Public Relations Association (http://www.nspra.org) have many superintendents, principals and other administrators—as well as communication practitioners—among their members. The organization has developed a number of materials to help school leaders better understand, build, and manage the public relations function in school systems of all sizes and complexities.

Many educators have little if any formal communication training, so how can they be expected to manage public relations functions?

Two issues are important here. First, while many educators may not have formal communication training they do in fact have a great deal of communication experience. Teaching depends on excellent communication with students and colleagues, for example. A successful administrator must be a successful communicator to inspire staff members and motivate them to work towards a shared vision. So an initial step might be to look at where we are communicating now, how these existing communication skills might be expanded, and how they might be applied to wider audiences in the public relations function.

A second step, however, is to trust in the skill and advice of the person leading the public relations function. Most chief school administrators aren't attorneys but they rely on attorneys when they need legal advice. They aren't police officers but they rely on law enforcement officials for security insights. They aren't physicians but they know how to get insights on health issues affecting their schools. The same goes for communication issues. Part of the management function of public relations should be to counsel and support school leaders on communication issues. So the school leadership team needs to have someone leading the communication function who is trusted and respected. This is one reason why we also strongly recommend that the communication function report directly to the superintendent or chief school administrator. The counseling function only works when no filters or obstacles stand between the communication counselor and chief executives.

As part of this counseling role public relations sometimes is called the organization's conscience. What is meant by this?

Like people, organizations can sometimes make decisions or act in ways that are self-serving and harmful to others. It's not always done maliciously. Perhaps a decision maker is focused more on an action's benefit to the organization than on the harm that may be done elsewhere as a result. Or maybe the press of time leads to a decision that simply is made in haste without a careful assessment of all of its implications. But images and ultimately organizations suffer when bad decisions are made.

The public relations leader for an organization has an obligation to be constantly focused on the needs and wants of key constituencies and looking for ways that decisions and actions can be made in the mutual best interests of the organization and its constituencies. Communication flows in two directions. So while the public relations function is charged with interpreting the organization to its audiences the function at the same time should be interpreting those audiences to the organization. Some see this role as being a sort of conscience—an inner voice prepared to speak to the rightness or wrongness of a decision.

This all leads back to the idea that public relations seeks decisions and actions that mutually benefit the organization and its constituencies. In the long-run, one-sided relationships ultimately will fail.[6] ■

Questions

1. Explain what is meant by the two-way communication process and how public relations can use it to help strengthen school and community understanding and relations.
2. Why is it important to have a formal communication plan for a school district overall?
3. Explain the leadership function public relations should fulfill and why communication research is essential to that function.
4. Why is it important that the public relations plan address communication issues with employees as well as those in outside or external audiences?

Readings

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Endnotes

1. Adapted from personal correspondence in October 2013 with Rich Bagin, Executive Director, National School Public Relations Association, Rockville, MD. Used with permission.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Public School Choice Programs." Retrieved August 9, 2017, at https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=6.
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6. Adapted from personal correspondence August 27, 2017 with Suzanne Sparks FitzGerald, Professor and Chair, De-partment of Public Relations and Advertising, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ. Used with permission.

2

Public Character of the School

This chapter reviews issues …

■ For central administrators: Why the public character of the school demands a special obligation to foster engaged leadership. How public opinion, properly informed, can drive behavior offering significant benefits to students and schools. But how improperly informed public opinion can drive behavior harmful to schools.

■ For building and program administrators: How the public character of the school raises the need for understanding community attitudes and beliefs and accommodating them in everyday planning and decision-making. The ways in which opinions and resulting actions of those in the community can have a direct effect on the abilities of schools and programs to operate effectively.

■ For teachers, counselors and staff: How the public character of the school underscores the significance of engaging with parents and others invested in the success of students. The degrees to which opinions and resulting actions of those served by schools can have a direct impact on the ability to successfully serve students.

After completing this chapter you should be able to …

■ Identify the characteristics of schools and educational organizations and how those features affect communication practice in schools.

■ Distinguish the features of attitudes, opinions, and public opinion.

■ Define what is meant by school–community relations.

■ Outline traditional public relations models.

From a communication perspective, the use of research, feedback, media, and messages to foster strong working relationships between the school and community would perhaps seem like little more than common-sense management and leadership mandates. After all, engaged communities grow from informed communities and engaged communities are more likely to understand the issues facing the school system and be more open to forging a consensus with others to work toward common goals supporting school and student success.

But the need for communication to support working relationships arises out of a legal need as well. The public character of the school and the legal framework within which it operates require an open flow of information between the school and the community as well as a consideration by school leaders of community views and interests. This process operates by understanding the role of public opinion in the shaping of educational policies and practices. It reflects an historical fact of the American way of life—a way that is characterized by constant change driven by a decision-making process in which individuals can exercise an influence on the nature and direction of change.

The position can be found in the applied definition of school and community relations that is presented in this chapter. The application of school communication practices should reflect the belief that sound and constructive relationships must be developed and maintained with the community by those who are responsible for public education if the school is to meet all of its many obligations to the cause, continuance, and preservation of democracy.

PUBLIC CHARACTER OF THE SCHOOL

While the fundamental nature of legal and communication issues affecting the management of school systems in the U.S. has remained basically unchanged for decades, tremendous shifts in communication practice and public opinion have ushered in many new challenges and opportunities for school leaders.

Emerging trends such as social media connecting and organizing communities more than ever, charges such as "fake news" chipping away at institutional credibility, and demands for more school-choice options, to name just a few, have placed schools under more and more pressure to meet the diverse demands of their communities.

One basic fact remains unchanged, however: In the face of these emerging trends as well as the continued involvement of the federal government in local and state educational affairs, it is evident in the legal structure of public school systems and in the laws regulating their operation that the power to manage schools still resides with the citizenry. At the state level, the people have the right to support or oppose legislation affecting the education of children, to work for the modification

and repeal of existing laws, and to decide at the polls who shall represent them in the legislature.

This right exists at the local level as well, where citizens are elected or appointed to membership on the board of education and are expected to carry out the popular will when developing policy and practices to guide local schools. To ensure the public character of the board of education, state law typically prescribes that parents and citizens shall have the right to be heard at a regular meeting of the board or to file in writing their ideas regarding educational objectives, policies, and programs. Regular meetings must be open to the public, and no vote on school business can be taken in private by the board. The minutes of the board's meetings and records of transactions are public property and may be inspected at any time on request by a citizen. The failure of a school board and its individual members to abide by these and other regulations set forth in the law may result in dismissal of the board and prosecution of the members for misconduct in office.

In a sense, citizens in the community are part owners in the schools. They own stock, so to speak, in the schools, considering that it is, in fact, their taxes that support the schools. The dividends received from these investments include formal education for themselves and their children. Indirect benefits also accrue, such as a literate and well-prepared population and workforce serving the community, added value to real property in the community, added attractiveness of the community to individuals, businesses, and other organizations seeking a new place to live or work, and so on. The fact that the educational enterprise is built upon the concept of shared ownership further underscores the public character of the school.

Shared ownership, of course, also carries with it a responsibility for both citizens and school leaders. People must be supplied with accurate and adequate information about the school system if they are to form intelligent opinions and share their thinking with school leaders. To meaningfully participate as part-owners, citizens must have access to relevant facts, ideas, and options, and they must be able to evaluate them reasonably.

Citizens' beliefs and opinions can have a tremendous effect on the ability of the school system to function. Since opinions drive actions, community opinion can have a very real bottom-line impact on

the school system, as citizen input and votes can elect board members, fix school-tax rates, pass or reject school funding initiatives, influence curriculum decision-making, and pass judgment on potential new services or other school offerings.

These bottom-line impacts underscore how important it is for school leaders to understand both the role of public attitudes in a democracy and the effects that role, when exercised, can have on schools and students as well as the community.

This issue also applies in situations where the community may be disengaged or apathetic toward local schools and their issues. If citizen engagement is essential to success in a democracy, then school leaders also need to be prepared to energize public interest and shape opinion in cases where it is lagging.

Disengaged communities will lead, over time, to disconnected leadership. The perception of school leaders will fall. The quality of education may suffer. Cries for alternatives and competition in school offerings will rise. And in some severe cases outside agencies might take over or even dissolve the local school system.

Clearly, the school leadership team needs to understand and appreciate the clear benefits of an engaged citizenry, how public attitudes and opinions drive actions, and the roles that school and community relations and communication can play in supporting this process.

THE MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION

Public attitudes may be viewed as predispositions, thoughts, or feelings of persons toward something, such as an issue or a policy question that has not yet come into sharp focus. But prevailing attitudes can swiftly fuse into public opinion and prompt calls for action when emerging issues challenge traditional thinking. For example:

- In the early years of the country much education was private, but as the need for and benefits of universal education came into focus the demand for public education options emerged.
- Until the 1950s the federal role in local education was limited. But when the Soviets launched the first satellite and the nation became alarmed at the prospect of losing the space race, attention focused on the need for more federal aid to education. Demand grew for more foreign language teaching and science offerings in elementary and secondary schools, for example.
- More recently, the historic demands for public education options have been under pressure to reform as a new focus emerged on school and student performance accountability and the perceived benefits of competition in the school marketplace. Support for testing initiatives grew and demands for public funding of charter schools and other alternatives to traditional school systems increased.

Other characteristics are also ascribed to attitudes, the most common being their emotional tone. Attitudes are always accompanied by some positive or negative feeling, and the nature and intensity of this feeling influence an individual's perception of any new situation he or she encounters. For example, a beginning teacher who has had a series of unpleasant experiences with the principal might develop a dislike for principals in general despite the fact that another one under whom he or she is now working is sincere and thoughtful. To the teacher this new principal might have an ulterior motive of personal gain in acting decently. Such an attitude may persist for a long time, depending on the intensity of the negative feeling and the frequency of constructive acts on the part of the second principal. It is known that attitudes are, at least in part, the result of forces in each individual's environment—such as his or her physical needs, social needs, emotions, perceptions, motivations, and experiences—and that these in turn influence the individual's behavior. Interestingly enough, opinions are defined in a similar way.

Social scientists have not arrived at a standard definition of *attitudes* or *opinions*. Therefore, the terms are often used interchangeably. Yet it may be worthwhile to review some of the meanings connected with the term *public opinion*. Occasionally, *public opinion* is defined as any widespread belief or consensus arrived at by members of one or more groups, or as prevailing customs and traditions handed down by previous generations. The term is also frequently associated with the process of developing opinion

instead of opinion itself, with fine distinctions drawn between judgments reached by logical methods of reasoning and judgments growing out of emotional states of mind. Attention may likewise be given to the quality of the opinions expressed or to the intensity of the opinions. No doubt these and other variations in the meaning of the term have a place in a detailed study and analysis of public opinion, but they are hardly suitable to guide the work of laypersons and professional school officials. As a working rule, we should think of public opinion as a collection of individual viewpoints held more or less in common by members of a group regarding some person, condition, or proposal. Generally, these points of view concern matters that are controversial or capable of causing controversy.

SCHOOL–COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In view of its background and status in U.S. society, the school has a definite responsibility to furnish taxpayers and parents with complete and accurate information regarding its needs and activities and to develop educational policies and programs that reflect popular interests and desires. How to implement this responsibility effectively is the problem of school–community relations.

The History

Although the necessity for keeping the public informed is as old as the school itself, nevertheless it was not until the beginning of the 1920s that a formal approach was made. This began with studies of publicity, especially newspaper publicity, and of the value such publicity had in keeping the school before the people and in acquainting them with what it was doing. During this period at least three books were published on the subject of school publicity,[1] as well as a scattering of articles in professional journals.

Within a few years the term *publicity* was replaced with the phrase *school public relations*, for at least two reasons. First, it was felt that the word *publicity* carried both positive and negative connotations. Second, the realization developed that a more inclusive concept than publicity was necessary for telling the story more fully and for reaching a wider audience. In the mid-1920s, Moehlman came out with the

first book in educational administration dealing with school public relations. He defined public school relations as an "organized factual informational service for the purpose of keeping the public informed of its educational program."[2] The book included chapters on public relations policy, the responsibilities of personnel, and the use of such media as newspapers, house organs, annual reports, school newspapers, and oral and written communications with parents. Attention was also given to the importance of social contacts, parent–teacher associations, school buildings, and appraisal of results.

These pioneering efforts were followed 11 years later with another book by Moehlman setting forth the doctrine of *social interpretation*. According to this doctrine, "Social interpretation may be considered as the activity whereby the institution is made aware of community conditions and needs and the factual information service whereby the people are kept continuously informed of the purpose, value, conditions, and needs of their educational program."[3] In other words, it is a two-way system of communication through which the community is translated to the school and the school to the community.

The objectives of a program in social interpretation, as set forth by Moehlman, are as follows: "The ultimate objective is to develop continuing public consciousness of the importance of educational process in a democratic social organization, to establish confidence in the functioning institution, to furnish adequate means to maintain its efficient operation, and to improve the partnership concept through active parental participation."[4]

School public relations at present represents an extension of the interpretive point of view. This extension takes into account a change in basic terminology, increased emphasis on communication, and greater citizen involvement and participation in the educational decision-making process. There is a movement now to eliminate the term *public relations* and to use instead the phrase *school–community relations* because the latter is more in keeping with current concepts concerning the involvement and participation of citizens in the educational decision-making process and is less subject to association with undesirable practices in promotion and persuasion for selfish ends.

It has been increasingly evident that the school in a dynamic, changing social order cannot adapt

itself to change or make the necessary improvements in its program without involving citizens in its affairs. As pointed out by Sumption and Engstrom, "There must be a structured, systematic, and active participation on the part of the people of the community in the educational planning, policy making, problem solving, and evaluation of the school."[5] Through such involvement, citizens come to know the school firsthand. They are able to raise questions, obtain information, express ideas, consider proposals, and take positions on critical issues. They become part of the decision-making process that keeps up with social change and brings about educational change.

Citizen involvement ensures a better understanding of what the community wants for its children now and in the future. It likewise provides better opportunities for closer cooperation with local governmental agencies and community organizations that have an interest in education and public welfare. Generally, it helps to bring about increased use of community resources in the educational program, thereby integrating further the school and community.

Recent Definitions

Before stating what is meant by *school–community relations*, it might be well to examine some definitions of *public relations*.

Rex Harlow, the founder of the organization that eventually became the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), discovered over 500 definitions of *public relations* from many sources. From all these he composed an 86-word definition that Grunig and Hunt reduced to "the management of communication between an organization and its publics."[6]

Cutlip, Center, and Broom later defined *public relations* this way:

> Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.[7]

Wilcox and Cameron cited this definition of *public relations* from the 1978 World Assembly of Public Relations, which was endorsed by 34 national public relations organizations:

> Public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which serve both the organization's and the public's interest.[8]

The PRSA noted "Public relations helps an organization and its publics to adapt mutually to each other."[9]

Many people consider that publicity, public information, promotion, and media relations are each exclusively public relations. Many practitioners, though, believe these activities are part of, but not exclusively, public relations. Being one-way communications, they lack the need of public relations to include two-way communications as an essential activity.

Leaders in school–community relations and the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) use parallel concepts in defining school–community relations.

NSPRA also substituted the word *educational* for *school* in its definition:

> Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.
>
> Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public support and understanding.[10]

Holliday defined school public–community relations as "a systematic function on all levels of a school system, established as a program to improve and maintain optimal levels of student achievement, and to build public support."[11] He contended that the two main purposes of a school–community relations program are to foster student achievement (through the

establishment of a positive school climate, and parent and citizen involvement) and to build citizen knowledge and understanding leading to financial support.

Kindred defined public relations as:

a process of communication between the school and the community for the purpose of increasing citizen understanding of educational needs and practices and encouraging intelligent citizen interest and cooperation in the work of improving the school.[12]

We now include two-way communication in this shorter definition: Educational public relations is management's systematic, continuous, two-way, honest communication between an educational organization and its publics.

Though other definitions might be quoted as a means of bringing out the various shades of meaning associated with the term *public relations*, the position taken here is that sound and constructive relationships between the school and the community are the outcomes of a dynamic process that combines the following ideas and practices:

- A way of life expressed daily by staff members in their personal relations with colleagues, students, parents, and people in the community
- A planned and continuing series of activities for communicating with both internal and external publics concerning the purposes, needs, programs, and accomplishments of the school
- A planned and continuing series of activities for determining what citizens think of the schools and the aspirations they hold for the education of their children
- The active involvement of citizens in the decision-making process of the school and school-initiated community outreach programs so that essential improvements may be made in the educational program and adjustments brought about to meet the climate of social change.

Perhaps another way of expressing the same concepts is to say that sound and constructive relations between the school and community are achieved through a process of exchanging information, ideas, and viewpoints out of which common understandings are developed and decisions are made concerning essential improvements in the educational program and adjustments to the climate of social change.

New on the public relations scene, because of numerous corporate scandals in the beginning of the twenty-first century, is the term *reputation management*. Seitel notes that after the scandals, public relations firms were quick to develop reputation management practices that would enhance corporate credibility. He goes on to define *reputation management* as "the ability to link credibility to business goals to increase advocacy, support, and increase profits."[13]

It should be noted that previous definitions of public relations did not include "honest communications" or "organizational credibility" because the authors assumed these characteristics already existed in the organization.

TRADITIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS MODELS

Grunig and Hunt[14] developed four models of public relations: *press agentry–publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric,* and *two-way symmetric.* Each differs in the purpose and nature of communication. *Press agentry–publicity* is one-way communication with propaganda as its purpose. The purpose of *public information,* also one-way, is the dissemination of truthful information. Scientific persuasion is the purpose of the *two-way asymmetric* model, with mutual understanding being the intent of the *two-way symmetric* model. In the *two-way asymmetric* model, the communicator gets feedback from the public and then applies the latest communication and persuasion theories to persuade the public to accept the organization's point of view. On the other hand, in the *two-way symmetric* model, the communicator is a go-between for the organization and its public, trying through all methods of communication to have each side understand each other's point of view. If persuasion takes place either way, it's because of information flowing both ways between the organization and the public.

Grunig and Hunt estimate that 15 percent of organizations practice press agentry–publicity, 50 percent public information, 20 percent two-way asymmetric, and 15 percent two-way symmetric.[15] It would appear that many school districts use primarily the public information model, all one-way. Instead, they should be practicing the two-way symmetric model that develops mutual understanding with their communities.

On-going Programs and Relationships

Entirely too many school-communication programs are sporadic in nature, improperly conceived, poorly planned, and crudely executed. Often, they arise out a sudden need to spread information or respond to a controversy. Such reactionary programming frequently appears self-serving, enjoys little or no credibility in the community, and generally ends up defeating its own purpose. If a school system wishes to engage in successful school–community relations programming, then it must be willing to commit to a comprehensive and continuing program. Such a program must be given resources to support planning that will determine how the school system's character, needs, and services may be interpreted best to the people, how the community's wishes and aspirations may be interpreted best to the school, and how citizen involvement may be included in the task of educational improvement and institutional and programmatic adjustment to social change.

One Expert's Point of View: Meeting the Demands of the Public Character of the School

Ethan Aronoff started his career as a social studies teacher and he went on to serve in both elected and appointed government positions, all of which required considerable commitment to engaging with multiple diverse constituencies and ongoing community relations activities. He served as Director of Human Services for Cumberland County (N.J.) helping to manage funding and programming for human service providers. He was executive director of the Millville (N.J.) YMCA for five years. He served two elected terms on the Millville (N.J.) City Commission. He has also participated on the planning board and an ad hoc master plan committee. He was a town manager in Maine and Massachusetts. Among his many volunteer board positions are the United Way (vice-chair), Millville Public Library (president), Shade Tree Commission (chair), Maine Audubon–Penobscot Valley Chapter (president), Kiwanis Club, Bayshore Discovery Project, and Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and Its Tributaries.

The idea that informing the public is critical to our success as a democracy seems like a tall order to give to leaders. Is an institution's relationship with its communities really that serious?

It can be argued that it is an important part of how democracy functions. There is a quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson that says "An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people." Not that I want to edit Jefferson but I might tweak that a bit to say "An educated and engaged citizenry is vital… ." How included people feel with the basic institutions serving and supporting society is critical to the health of the democracy. And local school systems are a vital part of that infrastructure. Sure, there is a legal requirement to share information and serve the public interest. But the need to partner with the community and move forward in ways that meet mutually beneficial needs is essential to long-term success. If our expectations are low we cannot expect much from the public or from public officials.

Some might argue that leadership is not about reading polls and bowing to public demands. Leadership, it might be argued, involves creating a vision and inspiring others to follow you on a journey to reach that vision. Are leaders of public institutions vision creators or poll readers?

There is nothing exclusive in either of those two descriptions. Of course, we are poll readers. Feedback is essential. We need to have a detailed understanding of public knowledge and beliefs and desires. This kind of insight provides the foundation for building any communication plan to support sound relationships with our communities. And only through these

relationships can we create the kind of public discourse essential to moving things forward. But we also need to help others see and appreciate the many options out there. We need to help others see what the future can be and excite them about the ways in which, working together, it can become a reality. It's only when we function exclusively in one area or the other that leadership fails. Blindly following community whims may fail to exploit all that is possible. And blindly advancing a vision that few understand or appreciate will not create the kind of support that success demands.

Advances in technology and emerging media seemed to hinder this process in so many ways. Personal relationships have given way to digital partnerships. Specialized media and online communities have put audience segments in their own silos or echo chambers where they hear only things that reinforce their own beliefs. How do public leaders deal with such segmentation in society?

Talk to any communication expert about audience segmentation and he or she will tell you that this is nothing new. Knowing your audience has always been key. Communication researchers and planners have segmented audiences to better tailor messages and better target media long before today's new media came into play. In many ways today's online communication and online communities may have made this process even easier to deal with. The key here is for those leading public organizations to fully commit to the kind of communication research and planning needed to make sure communication investments will pay off. Messages need to be crafted in ways that grab audience attention, align a vision with their interests, point to a clear path for action. These messages need to be delivered through channels and by sources that people respect, find credible, and trust. We can't simply tell people what we think they should know using media that we think will work. Understanding communities is key to communicating in ways that will build relational capital. Committing to this process will kindle the strong sense of belonging and the capacity for cooperation that successful school and community relations need.[16]

Questions

1. List the bottom-line impacts that opinion-driven behavior by citizens in the community can have on schools and the positive and negative impacts this can have on schools and students.

2. Compare the various statements on public relations with those made by the National School Public Relations Association. How does public relations practice in general compare with its practice in schools?

3. Which of Grunig and Hunt's models of public relations should schools employ to be effective at supporting student and school success? Why might some of their models be more effective than others for school public relations planners and educational leaders?

4. What would you say to a person who wants to know the relationship between public opinion and public relations—and how can understanding public opinion contribute to school leadership success?

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3

Understanding the Community

This chapter reviews issues …

■ For central administrators: The importance of using research-driven planning to understand diverse communities and drive overall communication efforts.

■ For building and program administrators: How addressing the information needs of specific audience segments can enhance understanding of and support for schools and programs in the community.

■ For teachers, counselors and staff: The ways in which over-arching communication research and planning can contribute to frontline efforts to communicate with students, clients, and their families and to reinforce the school system's communication efforts.

After completing this chapter you should be able to …

■ Identify key community segments important to school–community relations planning and programming.

■ Distinguish methods for community–audience assessment and identifying influential communicators.

■ Recognize the characteristics of community power structures.

■ Distinguish opinion research techniques commonly deployed in school–community relations programs.

Successful communication depends on having a thorough understanding of the community. To accomplish this, careful communication planning begins with comprehensive communication research. As a result, before investing in any formal communication activities school leaders need to carefully consider and study the audiences important to the school.

School leaders must understand the many segments that make up the school's community and they must appreciate the numerous complexities that diverse audiences can present to a communication effort. Also, while communication planning often is viewed as a systemwide effort, it's important to appreciate that information is shared— and reputations are affected—in school- and program-based community interactions along with systemwide interactions. School-communication planners also need to

recognize that there is no over-arching "general public." Rather, any school's community consists of a diverse set of publics, with each often holding its own information needs, beliefs, and opinions.

To get started, communication research should compile the data and insight needed to help school leaders and communication planners consider:

- The characteristics of formal and informal power structures in the community that can influence how information is trusted and shared and how decisions are made, and the identification of individuals who may be key to influencing thought and action among various publics.
- The documentation of key channels through which individuals in the community seek and share information, ranging from formal channels such as traditional news media to less organized channels such as face-to-face conversations and even grapevine gossip.
- The level of information various audience segments have concerning their schools and school issues and the resulting opinions and expectations they hold concerning education.
- Opportunities for establishing better working relationships with different publics and the state of current relationships with individuals and groups both supportive of and opposed to the various educational efforts in the community.
- The information needs currently existing in the community and the best options to build better understanding and support among all publics.
- Recent economic, social, or other trends that have resulted in changes in the community and potential changes that may affect the community in the future.
- The various groups and organizations with an interest in community and school success.

Communities undergo constant change, so research to help school leaders understand their communities and drive their communication needs has to be ongoing. Communication research should be directed at the community's sociological characteristics, the nature and influence of its power structures, how trusted information flows through the community, and the ways in which people think and act concerning education and the programs provided by schools.

SOCIOLOGICAL INVENTORY

To plan an effective program, the district needs to know about the people who make up the community. The more that is known about them, the better the chances are of designing a program that will achieve its objectives. Therefore, it's recommended that school districts undertake a sociological inventory of their communities. But—and this is a major *but*— those inventories should not be so complex, time-expensive, and costly that by the time they're done people don't want to take the time to implement the findings. Too often some educators get wrapped up in the process and place that completed study on a shelf to do little more than wait for its successor. To conduct such a study and not interpret the findings and use the results would be a waste of time and money.

Choosing which items to include in such a study can help ensure the study's success. Some possible topics to include are the following: customs and traditions, historical background, material and human resources, age and gender distribution, educational achievement, organizations and groups, political structure, leadership, power alignments, religious affiliations, housing, racial and ethnic composition, economic life, transportation, communication, standards of living, health, and recreation. It would be extremely time-consuming and expensive to include all of the topics. To ensure the effectiveness of the study, school officials should choose the most important categories, focus on them, gather the information in a relatively short time, and then implement the study.

Among the topics that should get serious consideration are customs and traditions, population characteristics, existing communication channels, community groups, leadership, economic conditions, political structure, social tensions, and previous community efforts in the area.

Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions are the common ideas, attitudes, and habits of people. They may be referred to as folkways, mores, or lifestyles. Significant in regulating conduct and in predicting behavior, they likewise exert an influence in the shaping of social action and in the determination of services rendered by community agencies.

One challenge in this part of the sociological inventory is identifying and defining the customs of groups in the community. This information is important to the school in guiding its relations with students, parents, and others. Nothing evokes a quicker reaction from parents and citizens than the adoption of policies and practices that run counter to their established attitudes, beliefs, and habits. This has been evident on occasions when, for example, new blocks of subject matter introduced into the curriculum caused students to think or act contrary to the convictions held by parents and relatives. Equally strong reactions are likely, for example, if the school calendar fails to accommodate religious holidays important to the community.

From another point of view, it is valuable to know how change takes place in group patterns of thought and action. What are the circumstances and forces that produce orderly change? Studies indicate that safe and rapid change occurs during periods of emergency when the need to make adjustments is immediate. Alterations in the physical features of a community, such as the construction of new highways, the improvement of housing, or the rezoning of land use, open the way for modifying social habits and customs. Significant changes are also possible when members of different groups are given opportunities to discuss and share in finding solutions to problems that have an effect on their ways of living.

A note of caution is in order here about stereotyping people and groups.

> Stereotyping is the process of assigning fixed labels or categories to things and people you encounter or, in the reverse of this process, placing things and people you encounter into fixed categories you have already established.[1]

It can be easy to do this with community groups such as senior citizens and young professionals, for example. Not all senior citizens are against spending for education or rigid in their thinking when it comes to educational issues. Nor do all young professionals aspire to send their children to private schools. When studying the characteristics of any population, it's important to remember that not all members of a particular demographic group, ethnic group, race, or religion hold the same attitudes, opinions, or voting patterns.

Population Characteristics

Population characteristics concerning educational attainment, age, sex, gainful occupation, race, creed, and nationality are important in developing an understanding of the community. Publications and services from the U.S. Census Bureau can provide useful information on population characteristics.

In looking at the educational attainments of the population, attention is directed to the years of formal education completed by adults. The amount of education may be classified as elementary, secondary, and college, unless the exact number of years is wanted. This information is useful in the preparation of printed materials. Vocabulary, style, and layout are fitted to the educational backgrounds of the audiences for whom they are intended. This information is also useful in estimating the best manner of transmitting ideas and factual information to the community so that attention and interest are generated. Another use of educational attainment information is constructing stratified samples of the population for purposes of opinion polling.

Age data should be broken down into convenient classifications and the implications carefully studied. For example, one community may expect an increase in school enrollments over the next five years, whereas another may just hold its own or suffer a loss. Age distribution may also suggest ideas concerning the future patterns of growth of the community. A fairly young adult population would almost certainly be more demanding of educational services and quality than a population of mostly middle-aged and older people. Similarly, the younger group would most likely support better financing of the school program, whereas the older groups might be more likely to resist an increase in educational expenditures. Thus, it is possible from age distribution to form working estimates of community reaction to various kinds of proposals.

In addition to educational achievement, age distribution and sex distribution are used as control factors in constructing stratified random samples of the

population for purposes of opinion polling. Occupational information on gainfully employed adults may be organized according to the classification scheme[2] used in U.S. census reports. These data are useful in checking population stability, changing occupational opportunities, distribution of occupational classes, and employment outside the community. Findings influence the selection of program activities. The participation of citizens is also considered.

The study of population characteristics should be rounded out with data about race, religion, and nationality. These cultural factors may be important to gain an understanding of the community and some of the underlying causes of social tension and conflict. However, the meaning of the data may not always be clear unless the data are correlated with other information. It is well to treat the data statistically and to prepare summaries of the findings. These summaries should be used in the planning process, and copies of them should be distributed to key personnel within the system. At the same time, as much of the information as possible should be depicted on social base maps, with separate sections being blown up for use in individual attendance areas. Statistical summaries and social base maps often provide leads to the solution of everyday problems that are associated with school and community relations.

Communication Channels

Since the development of public opinion takes place through the exchange of ideas and information, it is necessary to know what communication channels are available in the community, how extensively they are used, and which ones are most effective for reaching different segments of the public. These questions are sometimes difficult to answer, but they can be worked out by persistent inquiry. It may be found that the public at large relies on the Internet, radio, television, and daily newspapers for most of its news and information, making the news media influential in shaping public opinion on some social issues. However, the investigation may reveal that members of special groups in the community receive information from a variety of other sources. These may include publications of clubs and organizations, religious organizations, labor unions, neighborhood publications and newspapers, and foreign-language newspapers and online news sources. On this last source of information, it is reasonable to assume that parents who speak and read a foreign language in the home may experience some difficulty in understanding student progress reports, school notices, and school news reported in traditional news sources. Where these conditions prevail, it would be advantageous for the school district to employ a number of bilingual home and school visitors, offer school materials in more than one language, and prepare news releases for foreign-language periodicals and newspapers.

The Internet, social media, and smartphone apps have added many new channels for information and notably increased the speed of communications. Websites and e-mail, and the proliferation of cell phones and text messaging, also allow immediate, two-way communication.

An unexpected benefit of this new technology is the reduced need for paper and physical files. E-mail and text messages can deliver information to many people with the press of a button. This saves time and the need to make copies to send by regular mail. Messages also can be retained for quick, on-demand access on school websites.

Community Groups

The American community is a composite of groups of people who are organized around special interests. Some of the groups have little or no influence on community affairs, but others have a great deal. Many are highly cooperative with those who hold similar interests, but a number are uncooperative. The variety is tremendous, and the numbers vary considerably from community to community. Informal groups that come into existence because of some common belief or cause may assume many different forms and often blend into a formal type of organization. No sociological inventory is complete without knowing the purposes and programs of these groups and the influence they exert on public opinion.

Although cooperation with community groups having an educational function to perform should be encouraged fully, care must be taken to prevent their possible exploitation of students. To some, cooperation means the right to insist that the school approve

their requests and modify its program to achieve the ends for which they are working. To others, cooperation is nothing more than a guise for the privilege of disseminating self-serving information in the classroom, promoting product sales and services, and conducting contests for the sake of publicity.

On the other hand, some community organizations dominate school politics but are not concerned primarily with educational matters. Composed of small business groups, property and homeowners' associations, and civic improvement leagues for the most part, they take practically no day-to-day interest in such matters as dropout rates, standardized test scores, or the qualifications and selection of professional school personnel. Instead they are concerned about the overall impact of school policies and performance on the community, and they take a strong interest in school costs, especially tax increases and bond proposals.

Other community organizations are those known as special interest groups. Many of these are vehemently opposed to each other; even so, they all converge on schools and pressure them to accept their philosophical positions and to alter educational programs. Often they move, for example, to influence the school curriculum or to censor textbooks and library books or to challenge or support standardized testing programs. In any inventory of the community, school officials should attempt to identify special interest groups, become familiar with their philosophies, and perhaps anticipate and prepare for their contacts with the schools.

The extent to which individuals and families participate in the activities of organized groups, particularly those having to do with civic welfare, should be addressed in the course of the survey. The amount of participation is usually a rather reliable index of community spirit. Research in sociology shows that individuals and families who are active in organized group programs likewise take a strong interest in what happens to their community and that those who are inactive or take part occasionally show only slight interest in needed community improvements.

Leadership

The next aspect of the inventory concerns the status of leadership in the community. Leadership is a relational concept implying two things: the influencing agent and the persons who are influenced. In other words, when persons are influenced to express organizational behavior on a matter of group concern, then leadership has occurred. Even though this concept may seem too simple and may represent a variance from others that could be cited, it nevertheless provides a feasible base for the examination of leadership and the leadership process.

At this point, it might be well to review a few findings from leadership studies without getting involved in too many details. Leadership is not related necessarily to social status or position in the community. An individual usually holds a position of leadership because his or her characteristics approximate the norms or goals of the group. It is equally true that leaders have traits that set them apart from their followers, but these traits may vary from one situation to another. However, all leaders usually have certain characteristics in common, such as special competence in dealing with a particular matter, wide acquaintanceship, easy accessibility, and contact with information sources outside of their immediate circle. Also, they are sometimes members of several community organizations and have more exposure than nonleaders to mass media. These characteristics are acknowledged as important, but they will not necessarily produce leadership. One school of thought sees leadership more as a consequence of an individual's occupying a certain kind of position in the social system, whereas another view holds that leadership is a situational matter requiring a particular issue and the exercise of influence on others.

In any event, the inventory task is that of identifying individuals who are recognized leaders of community groups and organizations and who have an influence on the attitudes and opinions of the members. Information should be obtained about their personal backgrounds, family connections, group affiliations, business interests, fraternal memberships, social and political convictions, special competencies, methods of operation, attitudes toward public education, and power in the community. Knowing their backgrounds is requisite to approaching group leaders on educational community problems and to determining their value in rendering particular services.

In working with leaders, it must be remembered that they are not always free to express their

own ideas or to take independent action. Their behavior is dependent on the nature of their groups and the beliefs and opinions of the members. They may be especially sensitive to questions concerning patriotism, private property, economics, religion, politics, and respected conventions. They realize that any radical departure from the feelings and convictions of their followers on matters like these could quickly undermine their own security. Leadership, however, is a reciprocal arrangement in that group members depend on leaders to initiate ideas and execute plans of action. The leaders sense what members think and want, and so they can direct thought along lines that meet with acceptance. In doing this they play a powerful role in the determination of the attitudes and opinions held by their followers.

The study of leadership should extend to neighborhoods within elementary- and secondary-school attendance areas. Every neighborhood contains a number of men and women who are consulted by neighbors and friends whenever questions come up about the school and its relations with students and parents. Their opinions and judgments are important determinants of grassroots public opinion. It is vital to locate these individuals and to involve them in school activities. They become channels through which the school may be interpreted better on a neighborhood basis, and they can do much to win loyalty and support for institutional policies and practices.

Economic Conditions

An analysis of economic conditions will provide essential data for obtaining a better understanding of the community. Though a great deal of information about the economics of the community is available in governmental and business reports, an overview is needed. The overview should be limited to generalized findings on agricultural, commercial, industrial, and transportation activities and to employment, employment stability, and wage conditions. Related information on land use, property values, and tax rates should be considered. Such information is usually available in the school system's business office, which plays an important part in the planning of

the annual school district budget. If further data are wanted, attention should be directed to such items as production output, retail stores, levels of income, amount of savings, and standard of living. These details are relevant, as economic conditions determine in some measure the financial support available for public education. Moreover, these conditions affect public feelings toward the school and the means used for trying to bring about closer relations between the school and the community.

Political Structure

For generations, the public school has tried to uphold the idea of keeping politics out of education and education out of politics. It has done this on the assumption that the school as a nonpartisan, classless, and social institution should remain apart from the political life of the community. As meritorious as this may seem on the surface, the truth is that the school cannot and should not separate itself from the political scene.

More money is spent for education at state and local levels than for any other single function of government. This fact alone makes education a thoroughly political enterprise. The support received is the product of political struggles for the tax dollar. These struggles involve the interaction of special-interest groups, political leaders, members of legislative bodies, boards and departments of education, opinion leaders, professional educators, and others. Such items as formulas for the distribution of state aid to local districts, the assessment of property tax rates, and the location, size, and cost of school buildings are frequently matters of political conflict and resolution.

If educational leaders are to cope successfully with the problem of getting adequate public support, they need to acquire a sophisticated understanding of political realities. They should seek this understanding through a somewhat detailed study of the political structure and the political process within the local area. It is important that they know who makes political decisions, how these decisions are carried out, and what political instruments are available. In some matters, a similar type of study should be extended to state and even national levels.

Social Tensions

Social tensions and conflicts exist wherever people work and live together. Some are normal expressions of human behavior; others are indications of weakness in the social structure. These tensions are evident in the refusal of neighbors to speak to one another, sectional conflicts over the location of new school buildings, claims that the board of education is favoring the better residential part of the district, interracial confrontations, the formation of cliques within parent–teacher associations, and discrimination against minority groups.

The causes of social tensions may be nothing more than personality clashes, misunderstandings, spite, or petty annoyances, but they may also be associated with economic rivalry, cultural differences, social class competition, racial discrimination, religious conflict, and other major aspects of society. These tensions, no matter what the causes, are disruptive to life in the community and detrimental to the kind of consensus often needed for school success.

In the planning of a school–community relations program, the school must be fully aware of the causes of tension and the number of issues involved. If school leaders are not knowledgeable about these conditions, the program is likely to move in directions that will increase the tensions and deepen the cleavages that exist. Its real job is engagement that leads to consensus building—that is, trying to harmonize differences between individuals and groups in the community when the tensions militate against the operation of the school and the attainment of its objectives.

Previous Community Initiatives

A review of previous community initiatives—say, over the last 10 to 15 years—supplies useful leads for designing the school–community relations program. In this respect, it is important to know what kinds of projects were undertaken, who sponsored them, the degree to which they succeeded or failed, and the probable reasons for the outcome. With this information at hand, it is possible to determine specifics such as groups that offer the promise of working well together, types of projects that have a fairly good chance of succeeding, errors made in the past that should be avoided, the pattern of values held by the community regarding self-improvement, and the steps that must be taken in setting the stage for future school and community undertakings.

Sources of Information

If the superintendent of schools and members of the administrative team will start the survey by listing questions for which data are wanted, they will be pleasantly surprised to discover how much they know about the community. The answers they provide can then be supplemented from other sources of information. A valuable and readily accessible source is school records. The entry forms that children fill out when they first enroll in school contain information on family backgrounds. If used in accordance with the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (also known as the Buckley Amendment), these records can provide important demographics of a specific segment of the community. When an annual or biennial census is taken in the district, the returns may supply similar information and other items not contained in the previous records. If supplemental data are wanted, they can easily be obtained by means of questionnaires administered to students. These sources furnish a good picture of home and family conditions in the community.

Numerous sources of printed materials, covering practically all aspects of the needed survey, also are available. City directories and telephone books contain the names of organized groups in the community. U.S. Census statistics include detailed information on population. If the community is too small for inclusion in the printed tracts, the information can be secured by writing the U.S. Census Bureau or logging onto its website: census.gov. Most social agencies maintain records that are useful on a number of points. Excellent data are available from the local chamber of commerce. City, county, and state historical societies and planning commissions have documentary materials that throw light on the growth of the community. A review of newspaper files tells an interesting story of happenings, traditional observances, community efforts, group tensions and

conflicts, and outstanding leaders. Publications by the U.S. Department of Commerce are helpful in understanding the economic life of the community, and the publications of governmental planning boards often prove to be highly valuable sources of broad information. Online and published research resources may be used for biographical information, religious customs, traditional observances, and related items. The minutes of boards of education meetings are sometimes a rich source of data on leaders, group programs, tensions, sectional conflicts, and relations with the community.

Additional information may be gathered through personal interviews with prominent residents of the community. These individuals know many of the intimate details of social life that are seldom publicized. Although the reliability of their statements may be open to question, they can be cross-checked when a sufficient amount of information has been collected by this method. The success of these interviews will depend on how well they are planned and conducted.

An inventory should be made of what the instructional and noninstructional staff members know. Those who have lived for some years in the community may prove to be valuable sources of information, as these individuals may be asked to fill out questionnaires designed especially for the survey. Comparison of tabulated replies may be used to test the accuracy and completeness of their information.

POWER STRUCTURES

After completing the sociological inventory, attention should be turned to the power structure or structures and decision making in the community. The concern here is understanding the essential characteristics of the power structures, the areas in which they operate, and the effects of power decisions on educational policy and the school program.

In every community certain people exercise considerable control over decisions relating to social, economic, and political matters. They obtain this power for a variety of reasons, such as family background, financial status, political leadership, social influence, property ownership, or labor connections. Mostly, they are members of informal groups that sustain themselves through mutual interests. Because these relationships can be described as a structured way of influencing community decisions, they are identified as power structures.

A *power structure* is an interrelationship among individuals with vested interests who have the ability or authority to control other people, to obtain their conformity, or to command their services. They are accorded this power because of their involvement in the decision-making process and the influence they have on decisional outcomes.

General Characteristics

If the school is to deal intelligently with the power structure or structures in the community, it should have some knowledge of the characteristics peculiar to this form of organization. Power structures are controlled by people of influence who try to shape community decisions in ways that either protect or advance their own interests or both. Those who constitute the power structure may have few if any scruples about getting what they want. They are usually individuals with high intelligence and real leadership ability; otherwise it is doubtful that they would be able to command the status they enjoy.

Members of power structures are drawn from a wide cross-section of community life. They may be professional people, business executives, bankers, labor leaders, land speculators, newspaper publishers, or industrialists. Many of them make it a point to be associated with influential clubs and organizations, where they have numerous contacts with others of their kind and where they can use the membership to spread their propaganda and to mobilize popular support for policies and projects they favor. They do this very quietly and without thrusting themselves into the limelight. Typically, they use a secondary corps of influential individuals to handle matters for them and to report on the nature of public sentiment toward their proposals and the effectiveness of the strategies being employed.

Interestingly enough, power structure members are sincerely concerned with the well-being of the community, especially from an economic point of view. They know that they stand to gain as well if the community moves ahead and enjoys prosperity. It is not unusual for them to assist in bringing

new industries into the community, to put pressure on politicians for modifications in the local tax structure, or to secure public funds for such items as urban redevelopment, a new highway, or a recreational area. However, when the public welfare on an issue does not coincide with their interests, they may take steps to swing the decision in their own favor.

Members of power structures find it advantageous to align themselves with political parties and holders of public offices. This allegiance gives them not only an opportunity to know what issues are under consideration but also an opportunity to influence the decisions that are made. For example, knowing some months in advance of the public announcement that a superhighway will be constructed around the borders of the community enables them to purchase land at reasonable prices and to locate motels, stores, gas stations, and other businesses from which large profits can be reaped.

Power structures influence decision making through a system of rewards and punishments. Rewards are given for going along with the wishes of the power group. These rewards may take the form of advancements to positions of higher social or economic status in the community, such as chairing of prestigious committees, and membership in socially prominent clubs and organizations. On the other side, punishment is meted out to those who do not comply with the wishes of the power group, and this may take the form of a loss of social position, occupational status, and economic welfare. Punitive measures include such examples as the failure to renew a business contract, refusal of membership in a prominent club, transfer to a position of lesser importance, or the reduction in purchase of goods and services.

Due to the lack of social responsibility on the part of power structure members, the community and its citizens pay a price for such individuals' influence on decision making. Instances are legion of sound social proposals that have been defeated because they ran contrary to the interests of the power structure, whereas socially undesirable proposals were adopted because they represented the wishes of this group. However, since power structures are an integral part of the American scene and influence decisions affecting public education, the school must learn to live with them and to neutralize some of their actions when necessary.

Many researchers have studied community power structures, and some have studied their relationships with schools. Smith studied community power structures, school board types, and superintendent leadership styles in North Carolina. She found that compatible relationships occur between school board types and community power structures and between school board types and superintendent styles. In contrast, she found that a compatible relationship did not exist between community power structures and superintendent styles.[3]

The Schools and Power Structures

How can a board of education and its professional leaders handle incursions of power structures into school matters? As suggested, an assessment must first be made of the structures existing in the community with reference to actions of participants in decision making and issue resolution.

Many opportunities are available for acquiring the necessary information to assess the current state of understanding and support a school system holds among its key audiences. Among them are continual scrutiny of stories carried in local newspapers, simplified content analysis of public documents, informal conversations with friends and colleagues, utilization of informative contacts through involvement in civic organizations and social activities, attendance at meetings where proposals are under consideration, and long-term observation of selected individuals connected with the power structure. Consistent collection and study of such information enable the board and its professional leaders to understand what they are dealing with and to note shifts taking place in the district's power picture. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), for example, includes such analyses as part of its research and assessment efforts when conducting school–communication audits for school systems.[4]

Power structure members often take a direct interest in some phase of school operation. On occasion they will try to block proposed changes in curricular policies and programs when these represent a possible departure from the established way of doing things. They will profess a concern for school welfare

and progress and will support a millage increase or a bond issue, but usually their interest centers on the financial side of the school, where decisions about the spending of money can result in a profit to them. They may try to influence the selection of school building sites or the placement of contracts for new and remodeled construction, for transportation of students, and for insurance. They likewise want a share in the thousands of dollars that are spent annually for supplies, equipment, and textual materials.

Perhaps the best protection the school has against power structure pressures on financial and other decisions is a well-planned and carefully implemented program in school and community relations. By taking parents and other citizens into complete confidence about the institution, its policies, its needs, its operating procedures, its problems, and its accomplishments, the school can develop sufficiently intelligent and supportive public opinion to offset the influence of the power wielders.

It has been apparent that properly organized citizen and advisory committees and groups of concerned parents have had a constructive effect on power groups. They have forced them to support needed school improvements in some instances and to withdraw power plays in others. They have demonstrated clearly that an enlightened public can become a force in society.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

Measuring attitudes and opinions of taxpayers, parents, teachers, and students regarding education and the local school system is a third avenue through which community cooperation is accomplished. Sociological inventory and power structure analysis provide an informational framework within which the community relations program will be carried out. On the other hand, measurement of attitudes and opinions tells how people think and feel about the school system. It also tells what should be done to increase public understanding, support, and participation in the schools.

Opinion Research Techniques

Opinion research started in the field of marketing and soon spread to other walks of life. Its reliability has been demonstrated over and over again in predicting election results, ascertaining consumer wants, determining audience reactions, modifying products, and forecasting trends in public thought and action. Schools have been somewhat slow to employ opinion research, despite its proven worth, in the planning and evaluating of their community relations programs. However, a noticeable gain has been observed in the number of school systems either undertaking their own studies of public opinion or hiring commercial firms to do this work for them. Increasingly, they are coming to realize the value of having precise knowledge of the opinions held by a specific group of people or those held by a representative cross-section of the population.

Opinion research is indispensable in planning, conducting, and evaluating the school–community relations program. It may be used to determine how people get their information about the schools, to learn how citizens judge the quality of their schools and the criteria they employ, to ascertain whether a proposed change will arouse controversy, to discover if a shift is taking place in public opinion, to find out how well the public understands the education program, to locate points of popular satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the school system, to identify problems that must be solved before increased cooperation and support can be expected, and to know the educational goals and aspirations of parents and citizens.

Opinion research can likewise reveal areas of improvement desired by citizens, their relative willingness to support financially the educational program, the nature of misinformation they possess, the motivations behind their defeat of a tax levy or a bond proposal, and the kind of information they want and how they want to get it.

As an extra dividend, opinion research actually stimulates the individuals who are contacted to form opinions about the subject being investigated. Individuals who have not thought seriously about the schools and school programs for some years are forced to do some thinking about them when their opinions are being sought in a research study. Moreover, they feel important for being asked their opinions.

When applied to staff members and students, opinion research discloses their attitudes toward the institution and the values they place on its policies and practices. The capable administrator uses this information to improve internal relationships and to make appropriate changes in the management of the school.

Types of Opinion Research

Opinion research comes under many names, scientific and unscientific, formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative, and probability and nonprobability. The name is determined by the manner in which the research is carried out. The results of unscientific, informal, or nonprobability opinion research cannot be projected with any statistical assurance onto the total group from which the sample is taken. On the other hand, the results from scientific, formal, or probability opinion research can be. The reason lies in how the respondents are selected to participate in the research. Only in the scientific, formal, or probability method is everybody in a population given an equal chance of being selected, that being the criterion used to determine if the results of a sample represent the thinking of a larger group.

Examples of unscientific opinion research methods are forums and conferences; advisory committees; some consumer panels; key communicators; mail surveys; newspaper, radio, TV, and magazine surveys; and some online surveys. Among the scientific methods are simple, systematic, stratified, and area or cluster surveys.

The following descriptions of selected opinion research methods—forums and conferences, advisory committees, consumer panels, key communicator programs, and public opinion surveys—are designed to acquaint school personnel with some of their options.

FORUMS AND CONFERENCES

Open forums are a method of soliciting frank discussion among a selected group of persons on some educational topic of current interest to taxpayers, parents, teachers, or students. The discussants are asked to state their views on topics, such as the construction of a middle school as a new unit in the structural arrangement of the school system, and the reasons for their views. After a specific period of time, people in the audience are invited to direct questions to the speakers or to express their own opinions. An attempt is then made to summarize the entire discussion and to estimate how those present stand on the question. Sometimes this estimate represents the judgment of the chairperson or the collective judgment of an evaluation committee. Sometimes it is based on a show of hands in response to specific questions asked by the chairperson or on the oral and written comments received shortly after the close of the meeting.

Open forums lend themselves well to audio or video presentations disseminated online or through traditional broadcast media. Such forums evoke wide interest if the issue under discussion is one of community concern and sufficient publicity is built up in advance. Interest is added when participants are known and carefully chosen. Open forums are used commonly in parent–teacher association meetings and in high school assemblies with students in charge. Open forums are difficult to defend on the basis of scientific appraisal of public opinion. They do, however, enable school officials to obtain rough but significant measures of how people think and to discover areas of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These forums have the added advantage at times of releasing tensions and enabling those who are interested to express themselves freely.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The advisory committee concept centers on the idea that a selected group of laypersons, representing a balanced cross-section of interest groups, can express the needs and reflect the opinions of the community. Meeting with school officials on a systemwide or individual-school basis, the members of the advisory committee are asked to suggest what should be done to solve the educational problems that are presented to them. Their recommendations are in no way binding and can be accepted or rejected. This method affords educators a practical method for evaluating group attitudes. Although it is always a danger to assume that the personal opinions of committee members are those of the group they represent, the danger lessens as experience is gained in using the method and as the personalities of participants are better understood. Moreover, this system familiarizes people with school problems and brings out their reactions before decisions are made. See Chapter 8 for more details.

CONSUMER PANELS

Consumer panels, also referred to as focus panels, are another approach to the measurement of public opinion. This procedure calls for the selection of a panel or jury of laypersons who are interviewed by trained members of the school staff. Usually, panel members are either selected to include representatives

from organized interest groups, chosen in accordance with criteria for a stratified sample of the community, or tapped for expertise in a related field.

Two types of panels have a place in the measurement of opinion on matters involving public schools. One type is highly transitory and may be regarded as a one-shot affair. It is used for observing changes in opinions or behavior caused by a particular action or experiment entered into by the local district. As an example, let us say the system increases class size, or eliminates some extracurricular activities, or establishes experimentally a year-round school. An initial set of interviews is held before any of these changes occurs in order to record attitudes and opinions on the subject at the time. The interviews are held either individually or collectively with panel members. Then, after the change occurs, a second set of interviews is carried out to determine the effect of the change on members' opinions and behavior. Once this is done, the panel members are dismissed.

In the second type of panel, the members serve on a continuing basis. Interviews are held with them individually in order to elicit their opinions on a scheduled series of open-ended questions and to estimate the intensity of their attitudes and feelings. Interviews are conducted informally without reference to any printed set of questions, and the length of the interview is left to the discretion of the parties. When the interview is over, conversational highlights are recorded in private by the interviewer on prepared forms.

Research on the continuing type of panel indicates that such interviews reveal emotional tones in opinions; the nature and amount of information, as well as misinformation, about topics under discussion; the qualifications attached to stated opinions; the contradictions in expressions of beliefs; and some of the reasons underlying favorable and unfavorable points of view. It has been found that repeated interviews with properly selected panel members not only give a statistically reliable measure of opinion but also bring out causes for shifts in opinion. However, repeated interviews with the same individuals over a long time may produce mental sets that consciously or unconsciously bias their replies. To meet this problem, continuing panel operations can provide for the rotation of panel members, with a limit placed on the length of time to be served by any one person.

KEY COMMUNICATOR PROGRAM

Another method of getting opinion feedback from a community is through the key communicator program. It calls for identifying those people in a community who sit on top of a hypothetical pyramid of communications and asking them to pass along information from the schools to the community. Conversely, they are asked to relay information about the community to the school officials. They are usually invited to a luncheon or a get-together to talk informally about the schools. The program can be very effective in identifying and squelching rumors in a community. It can also provide a quick pulse of community thinking on major educational issues. Chapter 8 details the program.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

This method of opinion research can provide the most precise results of all of the preceding techniques if conducted properly. For this reason, schools and organizations are developing solid databases of community opinions through public opinion polls. Valid results will often silence vocal critics or vehement pressure groups, provide the basis for school officials to make a major decision that will be accepted by the community, and identify community values and priorities for educational programs.

Before surveying a community, a school should give some thought to the issues, the method of getting the information on a survey, the sampling technique, the construction and the wording of the questions, interview techniques, the design of the questionnaire, the use of data processing, and the handling of the results.

Methods of Getting the Information   The commonly used methods include the personal interview, the telephone interview, the mailed questionnaire, the automated telephone interview, online surveying, and the drop-off/pick-up questionnaire. In the last method, the survey instrument is delivered to a respondent's home or place of work and picked up a day or so later. Of all these methods, the best for comprehensive and usually valid results is the personal interview. The telephone interview is widely used, and the mail questionnaire provides proportionally the lowest returns. Table 3.1 shows the advantages and limitations of the methods.

TABLE 3.1	Advantages and Limitations of Six Methods of Surveying	
	Advantages	**Limitations**
Personal Interview	1. High percentage of returns 2. Information more likely to be correct than that obtained through other methods 3. Possibility of obtaining additional information 4. Clarification of respondent misunderstanding	1. Greater costs in transportation and personnel 2. Trained personnel required 3. Great amount of time needed 4. Guarded access apartments and communities 5. Safety of interviewers
Telephone Interview	1. Inexpensive 2. Short period of time needed to complete survey 3. No cost for transportation 4. Minimal training of personnel	1. Unlisted phones 2. Some families do not have phones 3. Easy for respondent to hang up 4. Answering machines 5. Caller identification devices
Drop-Off/Pick-Up Questionnaire	1. High returns in a short period of time 2. Clarification of respondent misunderstanding 3. Minimal training of personnel	1. Transportation cost 2. Need many volunteers or workers 3. Safety of interviewers
Mailed Questionnaire	1. Mailing costs cheaper than transportation costs 2. Possibility of reaching groups protected from solicitors and investigators 3. Increased candor among respondents	1. Low number of returns 2. Possibility of an irate citizen collecting many questionnaires from neighbors and answering all of them 3. Total population not represented by responses
Automated Telephone Questionnaire	1. Covers a wide area 2. Interviewers not needed 3. No mail or distribution costs	1. Expertise needed to format and record questionnaire 2. Representative sample difficult to obtain 3. Clarification of wording and meaning difficult to provide to respondents
Online Surveying (Web and E-mail)	1. Can be less expensive 2. Can be faster 3. Broad area reached 4. Automated tabulation 5. E-mail best for internal surveys or surveys among populations with defined e-mail addresses	1. Representative sample difficult to obtain 2. Response rates possibly influenced by familiarity with and trust in online initiatives 3. Creating and maintaining Web expertise needed 4. Internet access usually not universal among all households in a community 5. Population with Web and e-mail access possibly less common among some demographic groups

The Sampling Technique   If findings of a survey are to be used to make decisions on budgets, personnel, buildings, and programs, the results should be projectable to the entire community or population from which the sample was taken. This can be done if the sample is selected at random, but random sampling doesn't mean a haphazard selection of respondents. Standing outside a supermarket and selecting every tenth customer won't give you a random sample that will represent the thinking of the entire community.

A sample must represent a larger population if it is to be statistically valid. A sample is to a pollster what a model is to an architect. Each represents a larger entity within a certain degree of accuracy. A sample will represent a larger population if all the people in the population have an equal chance of being selected.

A properly selected sample of 400 respondents will give you answers that can be projected to a larger population within a predictable 5 percent error. This is true if the population is 4,000 people, 40,000, or 100,000 or more. *The size of the population generally does not determine the size of the sample.* Instead it depends on how closely you want the sample to represent the total population and how much time and money are available to do the survey. Table 3.2 gives the percentage of error regardless of the population size at the 95-times-out-of-100 and the 99-times-out-of-100 confidence levels. If you don't have to be sure 95 percent or 99 percent of the time that your tolerance or margin of error is plus or minus a given percentage, you can lower the confidence level. Table 3.3 provides sample sizes at various levels of confidence. If the population you want to survey is fewer than 400 or 500 people, it would be wise to survey everyone rather than take a sample. Attempt to get at least an 80 percent return in order to have the results represent the thinking of all 400 or 500 people.

TABLE 3.2	Sample Size for Two Levels of Confidence with Varying Degrees of Tolerance	
Tolerance of Error in Percentages (1 or 2)	**95 times in 100**	**99 times in 100**
0.5	38,400	66,000
0.7	19,592	33,673
1.0	9,600	16,500
1.5	4,267	7,333
2.0	2,400	4,125
2.5	1,536	2,640
3.0	1,067	1,833
3.5	784	1,347
4.0	600	1,031
4.5	474	815
5.0	384	660
6.0	267	458
7.0	196	337
8.0	150	288
9.0	119	204
10.0	96	165
15.0	45	74

TABLE 3.3	Sample Size Required to Achieve Desired Levels of Confidence and Tolerance of Error

	LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE						
Tolerance of Error (In Percentages)	**50%**	**75%**	**80%**	**85%**	**90%**	**95%**	**99%**
1.0	1,140	3,307	4,096	5,184	6,766	9,600	16,500
2.0	285	827	1,024	1,296	1,692	2,400	4,125
3.0	127	358	456	576	752	1,067	1,833
4.0	72	207	256	324	423	600	1,031
5.0	46	133	164	208	271	385	664
7.5	21	59	73	93	121	171	296
10.0	12	34	41	52	68	96	165

Note: For example, if you wish to be 85% confident that your findings reflect the attitudes of your total population within ±5%, you must survey 208 people.

Simple probability sampling survey is basically the lottery system. It's like putting all the names of a population into a bowl and picking them out one at a time until the sample size is reached.

In a more practical way, let's say you want to pick a sample of 400 from a roster of 7,500 employees. Using a table of random numbers,[5] you would choose 400 numbers between 1 and 7,500, and they would be your respondents. Some computer programs will generate lists of random numbers. However, the program generally asks for a starting number, which must be chosen by chance. From a deck of cards, shuffle the ace through 10 and select a card. That's the first number of a four-digit starting number. Return that card to the ace-through-10 deck. Shuffle, and pick a second card. Do this four times, because 7,500 is a four-digit number. Give that four-digit number as the starting number to the computer to generate the remaining numbers of your sample.

Random digit dialing (RDD), a simple sampling technique, is used widely in telephone surveys. Using the table of random numbers, choose a four-digit number, combine it with the local three-digit exchange number and three-digit area code, and that's the first phone call made in a survey. For example, suppose you select the number 1816 from the table of random numbers, and the area code is 856 and the local exchange is 555. The first telephone number called would be 856-555-1816. The advantage of random digit dialing is that you can easily uncover unlisted numbers. One disadvantage is that not all the numbers you generate will be dwelling units. In addition, growing numbers of cell phone users, who often resist such unsolicited calls, can create issues for those using this technique. In addition, the overlapping of area codes and local exchange prefixes, now common in many areas, has made it more difficult to target specific communities or geographic areas.

By this method of sampling, the thinking of those interviewed will represent, with reasonable accuracy, the thinking of a larger population. This is a scientific probability: a (random) sample that can be defended statistically. Usually much criticism of a local survey is leveled at this sampling method.

To get a representative sample in a *systematic probability sampling survey*, you must work from a list of names (e.g., parents, students, employees, graduates, registered voters, or taxpayers). First, divide the number of people you wish to survey (400 gives you about a 5 percent error) into the total number of names on your list. Usually, this interval will be 10 or less unless your list is very large. Second, select a starting number by random from 1 to 10 because the interval is 10. This can be done by taking ten 3-by-5-inch cards and placing one number from 1 to 10 on each. Select one card. Using that as the starting number, select every tenth name after it as a person to be surveyed.

In *stratified probability surveying*, people are selected so that the sample in certain aspects is a small-scale model of the population it is designed to represent. For example, you may be interested in surveying registered voters. As in the systematic method, stratified sampling requires a list from which to work. In reviewing the list, you find that 75 percent of the registered voters did not vote in the last school election and 25 percent did. To stratify a sample of any size, you would choose 75 percent of it from among the nonvoters and 25 percent from the voters by using the interval method just described, thus giving every voter and nonvoter an equal chance of being selected. Assume that a sample of 400 respondents is sought. To stratify it as the total list of voters is divided, you would choose 300 respondents from the nonvoters (75 percent) and 100 from the voters (25 percent).

Area or *cluster probability surveying* is based on a previous subdivision of the population into areas, the selection of certain of these areas by using a random sampling technique, and the restriction of sampling units to these areas only. For example, the school district is divided into neighborhoods, and a random selection is made among neighborhoods. After sample neighborhoods have been chosen, households would be listed in each of them, and the required number of households would be selected, again using a random probability method. Details of this method can be found in several excellent textbooks and reference manuals on opinion research.

Of course, an unscientific or nonprobability sampling method is used in many cases. Thus, you must be careful what you do with the results. In this type of sampling, you cannot project the results to the entire population. For example, a school district sends a mailed questionnaire to all 11,000 households in a community, and 2,000 are returned. It would be unwise for the board or superintendent to make major decisions based on the answers on the 2,000 returned questionnaires. There is no way of knowing whether they represent the thinking of the entire 11,000 homes in the community. For the results to be valid, more than 8,000 questionnaires must have been returned. Such a large response to a mailed questionnaire is highly unlikely. Another unscientific sampling method is to have someone stand on a busy street corner and interview any 100 people passing by. The only thing you can do with the results is to say that this is what 100 people thought. Again, you have no way of knowing whether the sample represents the thinking of the entire community.

Some school districts may use the unscientific sampling method to start citizens thinking about the schools and to give them a way of voicing their thoughts about the schools. As a result, some citizens may become more interested and involved in the schools and may help solve some educational problems. For these reasons, unscientific sampling may be justified.

Construction and Wording of Questions   Open-ended and structured questions are the types used in surveying. The difference is that the structured or closed-ended questions have answers to choose from, and the open-ended questions do not. Structured questions are easier to tabulate; open-ended ones can provide information not anticipated.

A survey can be ruined not only by invalid sampling but also by the wording of the questions themselves. Here are some suggestions on how to word questions properly:

- *Be as concise as possible.*
- Use words and language that respondents understand. For example, a question such as "What is your attitude toward year-round schools?" is likely to be misunderstood. The phrase "year-round" may have different meanings to different people. Does it mean 45 weeks of school and 15 days off? Or does it mean two semesters of classes and a semester off? Or does it mean school every week of the year? Most citizens would be unable to answer this question with a valid response.
- Structure questions to provide you with the exact information, not the answers you desire. For example, in the question "How long have you lived here?" you may get answers such as "A long time," "Not too long," or "A good while." These answers are of little value. In such a question, list alternative answers, such as "Less than 1 year; 1 to 5 years; 6 to 10 years; More than 10 years."

- Avoid leading questions. An example of a leading question is "If your taxes were reduced, would you favor light industry locating in the school district?" The phrase "If your taxes were reduced" is leading. Many people will answer yes to any question that will indicate their taxes will be reduced.
- Avoid double-barreled questions. For example: "Do you work full- or part-time? Yes__ No__." If the respondents work full-time, how do they answer it?
- Avoid ambiguous questions. The question "Don't you think reading should be emphasized in high school?" is impossible to answer. What does a yes answer mean? "Yes, I don't think …" or "Yes, I do think… ."
- Pretest all questions on a small group similar to the one to be surveyed. (See Table 3.4 for examples of wording used in a Gallup poll.)

Interview Techniques   In cases in which you choose to conduct personal interviews either at the front door or over the phone, interviewers must be recruited and trained. Where can you get volunteer interviewers who will do a good job? One district used parents with children not yet in school to do a telephone survey. These parents were enthusiastic about doing something that extended their contacts beyond the home. Senior citizens, parent groups, college students, or community groups can also be helpful if they have proper training.

Each survey situation differs and dictates some variations, but some general rules of interviewing should be followed whether the personal interview or the telephone interview is used. Whatever the method, interviewers must strive for neutrality, avoiding any possibility of influencing the answers.

The following are major suggestions for interviewers:

- In face-to-face interviews, interviewers should dress similarly to those people being interviewed to foster better cooperation.
- Interviewers should become thoroughly familiar with the questionnaire, but should not memorize the questions.

- Interviewers should follow the wording of the questions exactly.
- Responses to open-ended questions should be recorded exactly as given.
- Interviewers should be friendly and show a genuine interest in the respondent without appearing to be meddling.

At least one training session is necessary for volunteer interviewers. In addition to some practice interviewing with each other, the volunteers should be briefed on the purpose of the survey, how the questionnaire was designed, why each question was included, how the interviewees were chosen, and how the data will be processed and analyzed.

Design of the Questionnaire   The design of the questionnaire helps respondents cooperate without feeling they are being exploited. First, they want to know how long the questionnaire is. If there are too many questions, respondents become frustrated and will not complete the questionnaire. If the copy is crowded and difficult to read, the respondent will give up quickly. If respondents have to work to find the place to check an answer, they will lose enthusiasm. A good rule to follow is to put all possible answers on the right side of the page near the end of the question. (This also will make the job of tabulating the results much easier.)

Whether it is a telephone interview, a mailed questionnaire, or a personal interview, the structure of the questionnaire is basically the same. Each should have an introduction, main section, and conclusion. The sections should include the following:

Introduction

- A brief description of the purpose of the survey
- The sponsor of the survey
- Instructions on how the questions are to be completed and returned if a written questionnaire is used
- Non-threatening questions

Main Section

- Opinion questions that deal with the basic problems the school is attempting to learn about
- Questions in a sequence to provide the respondent with a logical thought process

TABLE 3.4	Example of Wording in a Survey Question from the 45th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll

What do you think are the biggest problems that the public schools of your community must deal with?

	NATIONAL TOTALS		PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS
	'13	'03	'13
	%	%	%
Lack of financial support	35	25	36
Lack of discipline	8	16	3
Overcrowded schools	7	14	11
Lack of parental support	5	3	8
Testing/regulations	4	1	4
Fighting	3	4	1
Difficulty getting good teachers	3	5	3
Use of drugs	3	9	3

Source: Retrieved from the Internet October 25, 2013, http://pdkintl.org/programs-resources/poll. Reprinted with permission of Phi Delta Kappa International, www.pdkintl.org, all rights reserved.

Conclusion

- Open-ended questions to get unanticipated information, such as "Are there any other thoughts you have on the East Bank School District?"
- Demographic questions (for example, age, gender, parent or nonparent, length of residency)
- A note of thanks

Use of Computers   Tabulating results by hand takes an inordinate amount of time and is prone to numerous mistakes. With the availability of computers, it is recommended that computers be used to process data from the results of a survey. This will provide a quick and accurate process for transferring information from numerous questionnaires to a report with total results. Also, computer data processing can quickly break out information by various demographics, such as the thinking of parents or nonparents, voting or nonvoting taxpayers, males or females, or any other demographic in the survey.

Handling the Results   If a decision is made to survey a community, a public announcement should be made through radio, TV, newspapers, and the school newsletter. The local citizens and staff need to

be informed of the purpose of the survey, the approximate time when it will be conducted, the size of the sample, and that the results will be made public. In these ways, citizens are alerted to the possibility that an interviewer may call on them.

When the results are tabulated, they should be published. Otherwise, people will feel that something is being hidden. One of the surest ways of reducing credibility with the public is to hide the results of the survey.

A definite procedure should be followed in revealing the results of the survey. The sponsors (usually the board of education) of the survey should know the results first, followed by those who worked on the survey, employees, and students. Once the internal public is informed, release the results to the media in the form of a news release or news conference. Finally, the detailed answers to each question in the survey should be highlighted in a school newsletter or other external publications.

Provided that school officials construct and conduct surveys carefully, results will provide valuable information about the concerns and attitudes of citizens, and, in the long term, help schools continue to bridge the school–community gap.

Planning for Opinion Studies

Before detailed plans for making opinion studies are developed, the administrator should answer certain questions to his or her own satisfaction and that of the board of education. The questions that must be answered are the following:

EXACTLY WHAT IS THE PROBLEM TO BE STUDIED?

Too often individuals are carried away by their enthusiasm for something they believe is important without taking the time to consider just what the problem is and what kinds of facts are needed to solve it. This is evident in some of the questionnaires that school systems have devised for appraising the attitudes and opinions of parents and taxpayers.

The school administrator will strengthen his or her case and gain board support more readily if he or she has defined the problem and has outlined the exact points to be studied. This is illustrated in the work done by one superintendent who was faced with a steady barrage of criticism about the schools. An investigation of the problem brought out the fact that several individuals were openly declaring that the public had lost confidence in the educational program. With the permission of the board, the superintendent undertook a series of interviews with all persons known to be skeptical and antagonistic toward the schools. From these interviews he was able to determine the exact points around which most of the criticism revolved. He then formulated a statement of the problem and the points needing investigation. The board approved his statement in short order and then voted to approve the money for conducting an opinion survey. The administrator and board members wished to find out whether confidence in the schools had been destroyed and, specifically, what practices were under strongest protest. The results of the survey showed conclusively that the large majority of people believed in the worth of the instructional program and had faith in the competency of the administration. The results showed further that most of the opposition stemmed from a small but articulate minority who misunderstood many of the practices they were complaining about.

Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the advisability of formulating the problem for study in writing and attaching to this statement the reason why this information is required to solve the problem. This becomes not only a matter of record, when approved by the board of education, but also a guide to those who are charged with responsibility for making the study.

WHAT METHOD IS BEST TO OBTAIN THE DESIRED INFORMATION?

The choice of method depends on the problem and the information needed. Leaving financial consideration aside for the moment, the point is that one method or combination of methods may be more effective than another for obtaining certain types of data. For example, it would be wasteful to conduct an interview poll if the problem were one of trying to get a broad, general picture of how opinion was developing around a given issue. For this purpose, sufficient information could be collected economically and quickly through the open forum, the advisory committee, or the panel methods of measuring opinion. By the same token, none of these methods would suffice for obtaining an accurate measure of public understanding—say, concerning guidance services in the school. Actually, the methods brought into play do not have to be costly and complicated when all that is wanted is a general estimate of opinion.

HOW MUCH MONEY IS REQUIRED TO CONDUCT OPINION STUDIES?

The answer to this question varies with the nature of the studies made. Large citywide surveys can be expensive, costing thousands of dollars, and because of costs many administrators shy away from opinion studies without realizing that limited surveys can be conducted on restricted budgets. However, a preliminary or pilot study of opinion often yields satisfactory results and costs very little. Some survey organizations regularly make pilot studies before deciding whether or not it is necessary to engage in a large survey project. The argument on cost falls apart once administrators and school boards understand the need and value of knowing what the public thinks.

HOW MUCH TIME IS NEEDED TO COMPLETE A STUDY OF PUBLIC OPINION?

The amount of time will vary with the method employed. The time required is short for the open forum and advisory committee methods, somewhat longer for the panel method, and considerably longer for questionnaires and direct interviews. The last two methods, starting with a definition of the problem and ending with the publication of results, may consume several weeks. This length of time can be reduced with experience in polling procedure. One national polling organization is now able to conduct a nationwide survey and report the findings in less than a day. The significant thing is not how much time is required, but rather learning how to make opinion studies and putting the findings to work in building stronger relations with the community.

WHO SHOULD DO THE RESEARCH IN PUBLIC OPINION MEASUREMENT?

Typical school administrators do not have the background or training and experience for this research. They can familiarize themselves with the procedures involved and can learn to apply the more simple ones in their own communities, but they may not be competent to undertake direction of scientific polls. If they wish to undertake scientific polls, they should either employ outside experts or else subsidize the training of staff personnel. Although the more convenient alternative is to hire outside experts, this is difficult to sell to boards of education because of the cost involved. The better choice in the long run is to subsidize the training of staff personnel who are then available to conduct studies whenever they are needed. Staff personnel who take over this responsibility should be assisted at the beginning by an expert consultant who can show them shortcuts in procedures, eliminate confusion, and prevent serious errors.

HOW SHOULD THE FINDINGS BE USED?

The answers to this question will be governed by the nature of the findings. The findings may show that the superintendent should act at once to solve a pressing problem or that action by the board of education is necessary before anything can be done to clear up an unfavorable situation. They may confirm the soundness of present public relations procedures and the effectiveness of the program or point up the need for studying further a practice that is causing trouble. They may reflect a shift in public opinion calling for follow-up studies to chart direction. They may reveal problems for which immediate provision should be made in the public relations program. They may reveal many other things that are important in guiding relations with the community.

In general, the findings should be published in booklet form for distribution to staff personnel and citizens in the community. Such a publication serves to increase interest in and understanding of the educational program.

EVOLVING TECHNOLOGIES

The Internet and emerging computer technology have created new methods of surveying, other than the traditional personal, telephone, and mail surveys. These surveying techniques can include telephone and Internet-based surveys through websites, smartphone apps, and e-mail.

> *Telephone*—Two methods are used in this type of polling: in-call account and out-call account. In the first method, community members are contacted and asked to call a special number to respond to a recorded questionnaire. In the out-call account, a system initiates the poll by calling a predetermined set of phone numbers. The automatic system then asks each survey question, and the respondents press a number or speak to register their answers. Specialized companies can provide school districts with technical assistance and software to conduct these polls.
>
> *Online surveys*—Online surveys have become increasingly accepted options for school communication research. *The School PR Research Primer,* published by the National School Public Relations Association, notes:
>
>> E-mail and online surveys continue to grow in both popularity and acceptance among researchers. Although they have been used for some time, they were at first

considered suspect by some researchers—who perhaps lumped e-mail and online surveys in with the many informal polls and other unscientific "question-of-the-day" data collection efforts common on web sites. But properly designed and implemented, e-mail and online surveys can offer reliability and validity comparable to other survey methods.[6]

Most Web development programs now contain an option for creating, conducting, and tabulating these types of polls. A school district can compose a survey and post it on the Web or send e-mails and ask (by phone, e-mail, mail, etc.) a select universe to visit a certain Web address or reply to an e-mail to complete the questionnaire. Or the district can post the survey on a public page—their home page, for example—and just ask all visitors to fill it out. This latter type, though unscientific, is typical of the polls often promoted by TV news shows ("Visit our website to give us your opinion on the question of the day"). When respondents select themselves, the results are always unscientific.

The options of school communicators seeking to use online survey techniques continue to grow. A number of vendors, such as SurveyMonkey and Constant Contact, offer online surveying services and support. Online survey options are available in online storage and sharing services, such as Google Drive. Some vendors, such as K12 Insight, offer online survey services and support specifically for school systems.

Sampling in online polling can be both scientific and unscientific. Results are sometimes representative of the population from which the sample was taken. In the out-call, website, and e-mail methods, a representative sample is difficult but possible to get. This can be done by a panel of respondents preselected by chance. Lists of individual e-mail addresses for large populations, such as all taxpayers living within a school district, generally do not exist. As a result, e-mail surveys often are best used to query distinct populations easily reached by e-mail, such as staff members, parent groups, community organizations, business associations, and so on.

One Expert's Point of View: Understanding the Community

William J. Banach, Ed.D., is CEO of Banach, Banach & Cassidy, and is nationally recognized for his issues management and social forecasting programs. Dr. Banach has served as a local district, regional agency, and community college administrator.

He authored *The ABC Series,* four books focused on educational planning and marketing, the *Survey Research Primer,* and *The ABCs of Teacher-Parent Communication.* Dr. Banach's articles have appeared in more than 100 journals and magazines. He specializes in survey research, finance campaign planning, and marketing strategy.

With school budgets tight it would seem to make sense to invest limited funding directly into communication activities rather than communication research. Is this a good idea?

It is easy to forget that investing in communication research is, in fact, investing in communication. School leaders wouldn't commit to building a new school without research on population trends and community needs. They would not think about starting a new instructional program without investigating needs and assessing the

success rate of the program. So why would schools even consider investing in communication programming before conducting the research essential to understanding what publics to address and which tools and messages to use to assure success? Jumping into communication activities without appropriate planning is like heading on a trip without a map. Spending public resources without proper research and planning guarantees less than optimal outcomes. Communication research is an integral part of the communication process. In fact, it is the first and most important step in the communication process.

Sometimes people may feel as if they've worked and lived in a community for many years and that planning research may simply turn up insights they already have. This would seem to make sense. So, what is the value in studying a community that we already know so much about?

There's little doubt that people who have lived and worked in a community for a long time can be a valuable resource. But they shouldn't be the only resource. Here's why: things change. And changes can only be effectively assessed when you analyze data and insights from a variety of sources and perspectives. This helps assure that you see the total picture, not just a small part of it, and underlines why a comprehensive study of the community and communication issues is essential.

Current school election research provides an example of how things change: 1. Parent turnout in school finance elections is down dramatically, often as low as 25 percent. 2. Absentee and early voting is increasing, so the outcome of the election may be decided long before the actual election date. 3. Older voters are an increasingly significant force in school finance elections, whether elections are successful or not. These changes clearly signal the need for a change in traditional, "proven" strategies and plans.

Everyone in the school system has a communication role. How can communication research be used to help employees at all levels succeed in their communication roles?

Everyone does have a communication role and almost everyone will need training and support to successfully address that role. Research can help identify the kinds of support that will be most effective. And, when shared with employees, the research can also help to build an understanding of informational needs in the community and how individual communication roles are essential in supporting school and student success. Just think of all the employees who are interacting with community members every single day. The teacher, the school-bus driver, the security worker at the front door, the secretary—all these people and more—may be the only point of contact many people in the community have with schools. They are important ambassadors for your school, and what they say and do positively or negatively affects public understanding and a school's reputation *every day.*[7]

Questions

1. As a school administrator or a school public relations director, you need to know the power structure of the community. What three types would you try to identify? How would you do that?
2. Suppose you need a quick study of public opinion in your community on an emerging school issue. What would be the pros and cons of conducting an online survey (where people are encouraged to visit your website to participate), an e-mail survey (where you e-mail your survey to local residents), or a traditional mail survey (where you mail your survey to selected households in the community)?
3. At a school board meeting, some citizens present the results of a public opinion poll and say that this is what the public thinks about a school issue. What questions would you ask to determine if the results of their survey are valid and represent the thinking of the community?
4. List the benefits that developments in online surveying options offer school communicators. How do these benefits compare to the limitations of online surveying methods?

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