



Public Relations Communication Best Practices

Public Relations Defined	2
Public Relations Program Elements	3
Public Relations Planning Process	4
Crisis Communication	6
Sample Communications	8

Public Relations Defined

Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public to whom its success or failure depends.

Public relations looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support, as well as influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

The National School Public Relations Association defines school public relations as the following:

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 (www.nspra.org).

Effective Public Relations Program

A good public relations program can help you gain support for your district initiatives in some key ways.

Taxpayer support

Since schools are funded by revenue from taxpayers, PR is critical to build and maintain public support for education. PR departments must be transparent and aggressively promote the district's schools and programs to instill **public confidence**.

Ensure public engagement

It's imperative that school districts actively engage the public in meaningful dialogue about education and seek input into critical decisions that impact students.

The 24/7 media cycle

School communication needs have increased dramatically and become more complex. A school district needs to develop and execute its communication plans through both print/electronic media and face-to-face communication, and to handle relations with the multitude of media that call school districts weekly.

Education is being scrutinized

From taxpayers, business groups and others. A school district needs to publicize the positive news about student/staff achievement and programs, and to develop a coordinated proactive, rather than reactive, approach that anticipates problems before they develop. If there is no positive communication from the school district, the critics' voices are the only ones that will be heard.

Ethics and conduct

As a District employee, there is likely a code of conduct guiding your role. In a public information or communications position it is critical that your position be guided by at least the following directives:

- Be guided constantly by pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste and fairness.
- Follow good judgment in releasing information and do not intentionally disseminate misinformation or confidential data.
- Be aware of personal influence, avoiding promises or granting of unprofessional advantages to others.
- Refrain from accepting special considerations for influences on organizational decisions.
- Avoid unauthorized use of organizational facilities, resources or professional services for personal gain or for promotion of the candidacy of aspirants to elected offices.

The Public Relations Planning Process

The public relations/communication efforts should be planned on a systematic (often annual) basis to support the achievement of your goals and objectives.

Step #1: Define Your Objectives

Use a variety of assessments. Begin by meeting with the superintendent and school board to discuss their priorities for district public relations objectives. Know the district mission and goals and be prepared to discuss how your program can help achieve those goals.

Sample objectives:

- To grow enrollment numbers
- To increase awareness of the district's achievements
- To achieve support of upcoming bond measure on ballot
- To attract award-winning teachers

Step #2: Evaluation of Current Perceptions

Internal and external research. Before structuring your plan, you must be aware of where the district stands in the eyes of both staff and the community. Base your research on your district mission and goals and use several methods.

Questions to ask:

- Who are our publics?
- What are our publics' overall perceptions of our district?
- What "hot issues" are circulating among staff and community?
- What issues affecting other school districts may soon be coming our way?

Research tactics to consider:

- National studies
- Census data
- Telephone logs – calls to the district
- Media reports/content analysis of media coverage
- Interviews with community opinion leaders
- Focus groups
- Written or telephone surveys

Step #3: Identify Your Target Publics

These "targets" are the groups of people that need to be reached to achieve the goals. Primary publics, which are those most important to achieving set goals, can include the following:

Students

- Parents
- Employees
- District taxpayers
- News media
- Other community stakeholders (civic and business leaders, elected officials)

Step #4: Desired Outcomes

Identify desired behavior of publics. This is a critical step! For the plan to be successful, you must decide what you want the program to do. Do you want to provide information? Or do you want to reinforce or change the behavior of certain publics? These questions must be answered before tactics are created.

Step #5: Identify Strategies and Tactics

Create strategies and tactics for reaching publics. Strategies are overall procedures, like developing a media kit that provides general information about the school district. Tactics are the actions that must be taken to carry out the procedures, for example: writing the press release or printing the folder for the district media kit.

Step #7: Implementation

After management/board approval, put your plan into action. Keep track of your efforts and prepare regular reports of progress. Stay flexible to feedback and prepare to refine along the way because Step #8 is evaluating the effectiveness of your plan.

Crisis Communications

Crisis Management and Public Relations

One of the most visible, and difficult, public relations functions is communicating effectively when a crisis threatens the community's trust in the district. Even more reason you need a solid public relations strategy and program in place before a crisis hits.

If a district has been diligent in its public relations and communications efforts, a crisis' potential negative impact is significantly lessened.

Crises situations are usually handled like fires and emergency crews must go into action. Don't let misinformation and elevated emotions take control of the situation. Here are some imperative steps to controlling information and minimizing the possibility of damaging the district's reputation.

#1: Get your facts straight

Don't rely on speculation. Go to the source and ensure that you have the most accurate and up-to-date facts about the situation and the individuals involved.

#2: Assess the situation

Scan all communication channels (newspapers, blogs, broadcast news, community influencers, parents, etc.) and assess where efforts need to be focused to distribute accurate information to the most appropriate and necessary channels.

#3: Lock down your key messages

Draft concise, accurate and effective messages relating to the crisis. Messages during crises should ALWAYS be guided by an empathetic and compassionate tone. Here are the basic questions you'll need to answer:

- What is the problem?
- When did it start?
- Was it resolved? If so when? If not, when will it be and what is the solution?
- Where can people go to get answers?
- How can this be avoided in the future?

#4: Identify your district representatives

During a crisis, the media will likely exhaust all avenues possible to get to a source within the district for information. Identify who will be approved for comment to the media – sometimes this will be the office of communications and/or the superintendent. These lines of communications should be established prior to a crisis, during the PR general planning process.

Ensure that the representative is armed with key messages and full knowledge of the situation. Instruct all other faculty and staff of the district to direct inquiries to the approved source.

Send out district-wide email with explanation of crisis and instructions on lines of communication.

#5: Evaluate and respond appropriately

Evaluate the effectiveness of the communication efforts. Did the discussion wane or grow? Adjust messaging accordingly.

Keep in mind that not ALL comments warrant a district-sponsored response, but be aware of blog comments, social media discussions, news threads, etc. and stay abreast of where the discussion is and where it may be headed. For high-level, mass-public responses, an op/ed or press conference may be appropriate

Sample Communications

Sample 1- An open letter to the parents and students of [name of school here]

It is with deeply mixed emotions that I wanted to send my heart-felt thanks to all the parents and students of [name of District here]. These emotions are topped with deep anger and sadness that our district was leveled with not only an unspeakable injustice to three innocent victims, but to an entire community. At the same time, I was deeply impacted by the pride and commitment you demonstrated as parents, and that you came together to provide input and help find solutions.

I extend a warm thank you to each student, parent, and community member who attended our parent information meeting [Monday evening]. Not only did you show up, but many of you stood up to demand answers, to give feedback, or just to give comments that came from the heart. We were truly amazed at your strength, your passion, your compassion, and the support you gave to each other.

It is also with heart-felt thanks that I would like to again acknowledge the outstanding faculty and staff of [name of school here]. They too faced the violation of trust by a colleague many of them called “friend”, and whom many shared daily work life experiences, camaraderie, challenges, opportunities – and, above-all – a commitment to providing nothing but an exceptional education for the students of [name school here]. The collective efforts of the teachers have earned them great respect from not only me, but from the students and parents of our District.

We again would like to encourage any member of our District family to swiftly report any wrongdoing of any kind that affect your children to our administration, or authorities. We will exhaust every effort to ensure that you have the resources you need to assist you.

Thank you again to all who attended the parent information meeting Monday evening. We are entirely committed to transparency and to providing our parents with the information they need to keep them updated on important events and, of course, this incident especially.

Sincerely,
Superintendent [name here]

Sample 2 – Message to District Faculty and Staff

The district was informed today that on [date here], [school name here] Elementary teacher [name here] was arrested on suspicion of distributing pornographic material to minors. When the allegations of misconduct became known, the District acted immediately by contacting the [name here] Police Department, and an investigation ensued. Once the District cleared the necessary protocols, the teacher was placed on administrative leave and was prohibited from any classroom.

This is an unfortunate, isolated incident, and not reflective of the high ethical standards of the staff at [school name here]. In fact, our students and parents will be looking to each one of you for your outstanding leadership and reassurance that all of our schools are safe.

The District continues to work closely with the Police Department as the case develops over time. Please avoid conjecture and innuendo by not discussing this matter with your colleagues, students or parents. If you have questions or concerns surrounding this matter, please contact [name here] at [number here]. Also, we will continue providing counseling services on campus for any student who chooses to utilize that resource.

A district-wide memo has been sent to all District parents informing them of the situation and giving them contact information if they have any questions. We will continue to give updates to you and to the community as warranted. In the meantime, thank you for your support and leadership.

Sincerely,
Superintendent [name here]

Sample 3 - An open letter to the faculty and staff

It is with heart-felt thanks that I write to the outstanding faculty and staff of [school name here] Together, you have faced an unprecedented, unfortunate situation of the violation of trust by a colleague many of you called “friend”, and whom many of you shared daily work life experiences, camaraderie, challenges, opportunities – and, above-all – a commitment to providing nothing but an exceptional education for the students of [school name here].

Your collective efforts and commitment have earned you great respect from not only me, as Superintendent, but more importantly from the students, parents and community-at-large of our District family.

This achievement was clearly demonstrated on [Monday] during the parent meeting, where we heard repeatedly great accolades from parents and students alike of their appreciation for your professionalism, your dedication, and the positive impact that you continue to make every day to the students of [name of school here].

I am reminded of a great quote that is so fitting for all the teachers and staff of [name of school here]: “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires”, by Arthur M. Ward. All of you are an inspiration, and role models of how to face adversity through leadership. You are to be commended for being an inspiration as clearly recognized by your community at our parent meeting.

Please know that we, too, feel the impact of your experience, and are here to support you as colleagues, and friends. Not only at the District office, but by all teachers, faculty and staff of [name of District here] who want to express their support to you during this time.

My door is open to each one of you, and – again, please accept my personal gratitude for your commitment to the students of [school name here].

Sincerely,
Superintendent [name here]