



# Public Relations in Schools, Third Edition

By Theodore J. Kowalski

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This interesting and thoughtful book explains and evaluates schools in relation to modern technology, prevailing social conditions, and political demands, treating public relations as an integral part of school administration. Real-life case studies and the most current thinking in this field provide readers with the issues and challenges at work in the educational sector today. Individual chapters convey the roles of public relations in the educational arena. Topics covered in the readings provided include: contemporary conditions, public relations in districts and schools, and administrator responsibilities. An excellent collection of readings for those involved in education; especially administrators that deal with the community at large.

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## **Editorial Review**

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Although studying the relationship between schools and the communities has long been part of the curriculum completed by aspiring administrators, concerns about this essential association not only persist, they actually have increased. Reasons for the disjunction between theory and practice are many and varied. Some relate to demographic patterns. For example, schools have gotten larger at the same time that the communities they serve have grown more diverse. Other underlying reasons are less discernible and deeply rooted in the organizational culture of districts and schools. For instance, once in practice administrators often must choose between two contradictory dispositions toward community involvement. One, commonly studied in graduate school, posits that broad participation in public education policy and decision making is both morally correct and politically sound. The other, transmitted during socialization to the workplace, posits that external interventions and power sharing cause conflict and subsequently prevent managerial efficiency. Regrettably, the latter outlook remains dominant.

Although traditional management beliefs and values toward community involvement persisted in education for many decades, the debilities of this disposition were not challenged widely until the 1980s and 1990s. America's transition from a manufacturing society to an information-based society provided both an infrastructure for rapid and frequent communication and an expectation that this infrastructure would be employed by administrators to engage the public. At the same time, demands for school improvement intensified. Over these two decades, the school reform agenda evolved, ultimately focusing on restructuring local districts and individual schools—a strategy that clearly favors citizen participation and relies on community acceptance. Given this social and political context, the need for administrators to adopt new values and beliefs toward communication and participation would appear axiomatic. Instead, many school officials continue to cling to outdated notions of efficiency, albeit more covertly than in the past. As a result, their interactions with parents, the media, and community leaders remain limited. For them, communication is a one-way process in which they disseminate information to their chosen audiences as they deem necessary.

Communication behavior has both symbolic and real consequences. One-way approaches have not only hindered necessary organizational adaptations, but they also have reinforced convictions among policy elites that many administrators are either insecure about bringing all segments of the school's community together to engage in reform or philosophically opposed to doing so. Constructing a shared vision and implementing a strategic plan—arguably essential restructuring tasks—require broad-based participation. Therefore, this text focuses heavily on explaining communication alternatives and evaluating them in the context of modern technology, prevailing social conditions, and political demands for change.

Two other noteworthy conditions inhibiting both effective school and community relations and meaningful school reform are given considerable attention in this book. The first is persisting misinterpretations of public relations. Unless administrators and the general public understand the concept of public relations and its vital role in organizational development, they are unlikely to support its core functions. Second, relationships between school officials and media representatives have often been counterproductive. In the aftermath of critical reform reports, administrators and school board members often blamed reporters for sensationalizing public education's shortcomings while purposefully ignoring its accomplishments. Consequently, at the time when image and relationship building are imperative, many education personnel view reporters as the enemy and they anticipate that their contacts with them will be confrontational.

Clearly, the quest for school reform in the context of an information-based society has redefined effective practice in school administration. Today, outstanding principals and superintendents are not only competent managers, they are dynamic leaders. They value democratic processes, respect the professional status of teachers, and see diversity as a potential asset. They understand that schools are most effective when they maintain a symbiotic relationship with the communities they serve. As they seek to lead and facilitate positive change, principals and superintendents utilize modern communication technology to access and disseminate information. They model two-way communication as an effective approach to identifying and solving problems.

## **PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**

The primary objective of this book is to examine the potentialities of educational relations in the context of contemporary societal conditions. More precisely, the process of public relations is examined in relation to (a) life in an information age, (b) practice in social institutions, (c) the use of technology in the practice of school administration, and (d) sustained demands for school improvement. The following features are relevant to this goal:

- A broad perspective of public relations is presented—one that integrates theory and craft knowledge in promoting two-way communication procedures and extended uses of information.
- Public relations is defined as an essential and pervasive administrative function. Consequently, every administrator, regardless of assignment, requires a complete understanding of how communication and community relations affect organizational behavior, and, ultimately, organizational effectiveness.
- The functions embedded in a comprehensive public relations program are deemed especially vital to school reform. Current strategies, such as state deregulation, district decentralization, and school restructuring, depend on schools identifying real needs and making appropriate adaptations based on those needs. Functions nested in public relations are integral to this task.
- The book's content is structured to encourage professional reflection. The case studies, questions and suggested activities, and suggested readings at the end of each chapter are designed to promote critical thinking in problem solving.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Contemporary Conditions," provides a foundation for understanding the applications of public relations in educational institutions. The topics addressed include

- A historical perspective of public relations and modern definitions
- An analysis of contemporary social conditions and their effect on education
- The role of public opinion in prevailing political contexts
- The legal and ethical aspects of communication activities
- An in-depth discussion of verbal and nonverbal communication in the delivery of public relations programs

Part II, "Public Relations in Districts and Schools," focuses more directly on the applications of public relations in schools. The discussion begins with an examination of districts and schools as social institutions—a discussion that magnifies the importance of communication. Then, the development and delivery of public relations programs are examined at the district and individual school levels. The last chapter in this section addresses public relations in private and nontraditional public schools.

Part III, "Administrator Responsibilities," is devoted to specific duties assumed by administrative personnel engaged in public relations activities. These duties include

- Planning
- Media relations

- Crisis management
- Collecting and analyzing data
- Funding campaigns
- Evaluating public relations activities

All 15 chapters conclude with a case study. The cases are purposely not taken to conclusion so that you may place yourself in the role of decision maker. This allows you to integrate chapter content with a contemporary problem faced by a school administrator.

Perspectives presented in this book represent a rich background of practitioner and academic experiences. Whereas many of the chapter authors specialize in educational leadership, others are highly respected scholars in communication, business, and public relations. The collective experiences and knowledge of the contributors result in a unique book—one that integrates theory and practice from multiple disciplines to provide school administrators with emerging perspectives about communication, information, technology, and human relationships.

## NEW TO THIS EDITION

The third edition provides a balance of theory and practice. Special attention is given to prevailing reform strategies, especially state deregulation, district decentralization, teacher professionalization, and parental choice. As an example, the chapter on private schools has been expanded to include discussion of public schools of choice, namely charter schools, alternative schools, vocational schools, and magnet schools.

Diversity is another topic that receives added attention in this edition. Most communities, and hence most schools, have become increasingly diverse. Demographic projections suggest that this trend will continue and result in minority-majorities in many local districts in the next few decades.

Suggested readings and references, and most of the case studies from the second edition, have either been replaced or revamped to reflect changing conditions in education. Last, the topics of technology and public relations theory are infused across the chapters rather than discussed separately. This modification provides a more integrated discussion of contemporary public relations.

Three new authors are contributors to the third edition. Professors Patti Chance (University of Nevada-Las Vegas) and Lars Bjork (University of Kentucky) are coauthors of Chapter 6 on the social di...

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**Lorraine Cox:**

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