

Public Relations in Schools (5th Edition)

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Public Relations in Schools is a masterly deliberation on the place of effective two-way communication between the school as an organization and its multitudes of stakeholders most notably students and parents. But the book is also about the myriads of non-communication topics including school governance issues that take stock of communication as an ingredient of virtually all school processes, goings-on and program outcomes. School PR encompasses all educational levels: primary, secondary and tertiary.

The book comes in three parts with a total of 13 unevenly spread chapters. The first part of the book is an umbrella that incorporates chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. The contemporary perspectives as addressed in this part include a discussion in chapter one which showcases the new agenda of school public relations in which, among others, divergent perspectives on PR as well the meaning, goals, barriers and importance of the public relations realm are amply discussed. Besides questions and suggested activities, there is a disciplined summary which is followed by case studies that serve to illuminate public relations in school contexts. However, as the curious reader will note, there is an inconsistent format as employed in the different chapters throughout this otherwise engrossing book. Chapter 2 highlights

sociopolitical contexts that affect PR operations in the school system. The sociological facets of family structure, poverty and multicultural students are addressed with a particular focus on the dual impact of social problems on student behavior as well as schools as organizations. There is also a penetrating analysis of what may be called inherent ties between politics and schools. Chapter 3 takes up the legal and ethical aspects of public relations but these can be unfamiliar and undesirable. All the same the issues surrounding political speech, privacy, community values and curriculum and ethics in PR are creditable topics that merit serious perusal. The last chapter of Part I is a discourse on contemporary contexts of school reform within which framework the author deliberates on communicative approaches to policy development, aspects of democracy and school reform, civic engagement and how PR can be situated to sustain school improvement as well as civic engagement.

Part II comes under the theme of conceptualizing and institutionalizing a PR program and the four chapters organized under this section shed light on the central theme. In what is a more focused PR subject, chapter 5 illuminates communication and its role in conflict management as related to school processes. Thus, the chapter addresses communication basics including listening skills which the writer shows must not be taken for granted. Communication competence is elucidated and its role in conflict prevention and management is particularly highlighted. The case studies serve to reveal succinctly how conflicts can be managed, before they disrupt school functioning, by means of appropriate communication strategies. This particular point demonstrates the often taken for granted role of communication in the transformation of crippling conflicts as they relate to schools. Chapter 6 presents an analytic approach to school PR programs. PR as related to schools is re-conceptualized; the responsibility, benefits and structure of a PR scheme are discussed at some length. The involvement of parents and kids as stakeholders in varied school environments is also deliberated upon in some depth. Chapter seven takes stock of planning, implementing and evaluating school PR programs. It identifies the elements

of a PR plan, lays bare the processes, indicates features of an effective plan and shows what interventions can be made. It also delves into important details of implementation, followed by a discussion of evaluation programs and processes. Chapter 8 shows the use of technology in the management of school information and communication programs. Discussed are the importance of the school website, technology as well as information literacy for teachers. This chapter tends to be smaller, simpler, and all the more futuristic.

Part III and its five chapters address focused objectives. Chapter 9 treats community relations and more importantly sees to the inseparable subjects of communication and community. The import of the improvement of community relations is noted and a dissection and discussion of publics is made to help the use of suitable relational strategies. There is unmistakable focus on the value of successfully bonding with parents as significant stakeholders. Chapter 10 shows the importance of working with media to stay ahead. Details of a media relations plan, the employment of PR staff, working with reporters, understanding the nature of media, and dealing with negative schools news before it wrecks havoc are discussed at some length. Chapter 11 is on public opinion which often happens to take the limelight in pr interventions. The chapter discusses the nature of public opinion and its role as civic engagement, and suggests a litany of ways to study and use it as in put in school contexts. Perhaps alien to many countries, the subject of Chapter 12 is funding campaigns. **Discussed are marketing research and referendum campaigns as related to schools.** The American domestic subject includes such topics as taxation, school improvement and taxation, and the claim for more taxpayer money. Clearly these topics would be of limited application elsewhere and may in fact be the least read elements of the book. Far more interesting is chapter 13 and its focus of PR response to crisis. The subject of crisis communication shows the reader the nature, magnitude and impact of school crisis. Helpfully, it also demonstrates the strategies that may be put to use to prevent a crisis and once it happens to control it before the situation turns dysfunctionally overwhelming.

On a closer and more summative look, it is lucidly clear that the book offers very good conceptual bedrock for public relations and details numerous areas for correction to help reap greater benefits that stem from action guided by correct conceptualization. The writer makes the valid point that despite its huge importance PR is one of the most misunderstood dimensions of organizational (and that includes) school administration. The writer may not be first to note that PR is no propaganda but the erroneous idea that PR is merely communication is widespread even among academic circles. On taking a focused view, one notes that PR pervades all school processes of planning and decision making. It certainly does influence school leadership values as well as behaviors. Of course it is and can be more. In an era of schooling crisis, competition, and stakeholder dissatisfaction one sees a better role for school PR than old conceptualizations would warrant. In a manner applicable to school governance, the writer presents a model of PR operations with five linkages that sustain a school in what may be a turbulent competitive environment. The author also discusses the recurrent themes in extant PR practice namely

- purposefulness
- Planning
- Performance
- Public interest
- Two-way communication
- Management function

As applied to instructional ecosystems, PR has been variously referred to as “Educational PR” and “School PR”. The writer shows that the best PR practice is one that produces and maintains positive relationships, constructs a positive school image, promotes collaboration between school employees and other stakeholders and in due course leads to highly marketable school effectiveness. In the past superintendents treated some stakeholders with suspicion and would attempt to keep them in the dark. As the author

observes, “today most superintendents realize schools function more effectively when they maintain a symbiotic relationship with the communities they serve.” (p. 103). In deed one learns that the normative approach to school PR is two-way symmetrical, where the bilateral parties value and practice relational equality as well as mutual-respect. Yet one cannot fail to see the presupposition of the normative model in terms of appropriate sociopolitical contexts.

The writer upholds the view that in the face of criticism schools should “communicate openly and honestly” (p.18). In deed ignoring critics or taking a defensive line would not contribute to schools becoming publicly treasured assets. Schools must talk when they must. “Remaining silent in the face of criticism”, the author counsels, is “precarious” (p.17). There is another reason schools must communicate: they are accountable to the taxpaying public which is entitled to know about what goes on in schools run with public money. There is another advantage schools must involve stakeholders and develop strong ties with parents in particular as a major stakeholder. The author presents empirical evidence that “students whose parents were involved with schools usually had higher grades, higher test scores, greater self-esteem, higher levels of motivation, and better attendance recorder” (P. 158).

As one recognizes the book’s relevance to school spheres, one too realizes the book’s conceptual limits as it adds little to extant theoretical models. The author too seems to miss the weighty point that the classroom teacher’s significant role in school image promotion is all too important to ignore, yet privileges the relational-promotional role as an exclusive management function. In this regard, other educational PR texts do a better job of presenting the teaching force as an image building or shattering army of great potential.

The author enumerates what he considers to be essential goals pf educational PR, most imperative of which are the need to bring about educational quality improvement, school image enhancement, mobilizing

support for school improvement, achievement of the competitive edge and forging goodwill and a sense of ownership by all stakeholders. Much goes on in schools including violence that may threaten a school's normal functioning and long-term survival. In a relevant section the writer shows that the portrayal of a particular school as an environment where children are sheltered and safe can enhance a school's relative standing in a competitive school market environment in addition to the provision of first rate educational experiences. The writer is also open in recognizing what he calls "persistent barriers" to school public relations programs becoming effective which include inadequate "level of understanding", "level of accepting" and "level of acting" (P. 17).

Despite the apparent American context that the book addresses, there is nonetheless considerable relevance to cross-cultural contexts. Schools are indeed globalizing environments and incidentally many relevant internationalization trends are noted today in Ethiopia's metropolis; it is therefore interesting that the ideas presented and practices suggested by the author can help immensely in efforts to create effectively communicating and efficiently run schools, in an environment that is otherwise likely to continue to present pressures of all description and to have to brace itself to meet numerous unforeseen challenges. The trajectory is quite conspicuous and the book has much to offer in terms of offsetting the present as well as looming pressures facing schools and school administrators. To be sure this is a book every school principal must read.