Public Relations and the School Superintendent

From Theory to Practice

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ABSTRACT: This article examines public relations in the K–12 school system context. Specifically, the goal of this article is to examine the school superintendent as the chief public relations practitioner of the school system and how he/she would operate as such in the realms of seven public relations theories, as the superintendent works toward meeting the goals and objectives of his/her school district: strategic management function, communitas versus corporitas, persuasion, storytelling and branding, postmodernism, understanding, and sociology.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Schools are organizations that are located in every community in the United States. Stakeholders in, and related to, schools include students, parents, teachers, administrators, school board members, legislators and other government officials, and alumni, among others. Research shows strong communication skills are a must for superintendents of school systems. Unfortunately, the assumption is anyone can be an effective communicator (Kowalski, 2005). Communication is at the heart of an effective public
Public Relations and the School Superintendent

relations program in an organization (Kowalski, 2011). Many superintendents question the relevance of allocating funds and designating time to engage in public relations (2011). Studies have shown that superintendents have received poor performance evaluations and have even been dismissed due to “inconsistent and incompetent communication” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 112). Thus, the chief administrator in the school system has a big problem to overcome, and effective school public relations can help solve that problem.

School public relations consists of applying public relations in organizations that deliver educational services. It is utilized in both private and public K–12 schools, as well as colleges and universities (Kowalski, 2011). This article examines public relations in the K–12 school system context. Specifically, the goal of this article is to examine the school superintendent as the chief public relations practitioner of the school system and how he/she would operate as such in the realms of seven public relations theories, as the superintendent works toward meeting the goals and objectives of his/her school district: strategic management function, communitas versus corporatas, persuasion, storytelling and branding, postmodernism, understanding, and sociology (Burkart, 2007; Grunig, 2006; Heath, 2006; Herskovitz, 2010; Holtzhausen, 2002; Ihlen, 2007; Porter, 2010).

School Superintendents and Publics

School superintendents must be concerned about understanding the publics with whom they must communicate and build relationships to ensure successful attainment of school systems’ missions, including many goals to address current issues superintendents face in K–12 education today, outlined in the next section. Wilcox posits that public relations focuses on dealing with a broad array of audiences or publics (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). To ensure that they improve relationships with the many publics who are served by school systems, the superintendents must define
the systems’ publics (Kowalski, 2011). Such publics include internal publics, such as teachers, students, and parents; external publics, such as taxpayers, community members, and leaders; media publics, such as print and broadcast reporters; and regulatory publics, such as legislators and governmental agencies (2011).

**ISSUES FACING TODAY’S SUPERINTENDENT AND THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Issues facing today’s superintendent as he/she leads the school system include education, in general, being under attack from taxpayers and business groups; polarized communities; issues with technology, including cyber-bullying and faculty members’ use of social media; teacher quality; news media scrutiny; increased competition from private and charter schools; shifts in demographics; the administration–faculty union relationship dynamic; cuts in state funding; and social problems, such as crime, poverty, and violence (Bagin, 2008; Carlsmith & Railsback, 2001; Carr, 2006; “Getting Started,” 2012; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007).

Schools benefit, greatly, from a well-researched and well-written public relations program in the good times as well as the bad (Kowalski, 2011). School superintendents must ensure their districts’ public relations goals are met to improve the quality of education, encourage open political communication, enhance the image of the district, build support for change, manage information, engage in marketing programs, establish goodwill and a sense of ownership, and provide evaluation data (2011). To that effect, school superintendents can look to a number of public relations theorists and theories to guide them as they strive to move to or keep their districts at a status of excellence.

There are a number of theories and theoretical concepts that superintendents can look to that would guide them toward their goal attainment. While Grunig’s theory of public relations as a strategic management function, outlined in the next section of this article, is widely accepted in the
public relations discipline, there are a number of other theories and related concepts that challenge Grunig’s work, including communitas versus corporatas, persuasion, storytelling and branding, postmodernism, understanding, and sociology. While they each offer a different approach toward addressing problems facing school districts, the theories’ common ground is focused on ensuring what is best for the organization and its publics.

**Strategic Management Function**

Grunig (2006) asserted that public relations has a role in strategic management. As such, public relations provides the maximum value to the organizations that incorporate it as a strategic management function, their publics, and society in general (2006). Grunig wrote that public relations should be organized so that it identifies strategic publics to ensure it builds solid relationships with the publics via symmetrical communication (2006). His research findings stress two-way communication that is mutually beneficial to the organization and its publics (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012).

Utilizing public relations as a strategic management function, a superintendent would conduct or contract with a company to conduct research to determine public opinion about the organization. One of the main issues on which he/she would focus would be the impact the school system’s actions and policies could have on its publics. Thus, the superintendent would recommend taking certain actions and changing policies. Such actions and changes would be of benefit to both the organization and its publics or stakeholders (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012).

An example of the use of public relations as a strategic management function would be to address the issue of faculty union–administration negotiations for a new union contract. The superintendent must identify and understand all publics who are involved in this scenario. These include teachers; administrators; students; parents; hourly employees, such as cooks, secretaries, and other possibly
unionized staff members; and the media as an intervening public. Research would be conducted to determine public opinion with regard to both sides of the negotiations process. The superintendent’s main responsibility would be to fully understand how the administration’s actions and policies would impact these publics. The superintendent would use meetings in small groups, speeches, and interpersonal communication to engage these publics and talk about the issues and how a mutually beneficial agreement could be reached. The negotiating team members who are in the room discussing the specifics of the contract would utilize the same two-way communication. Again, a mutually beneficial agreement should be the priority. Certainly the administration’s use of social media, a website, and traditional tactics such as news releases, media advisories, and press conferences would target specifically defined publics in terms of demographics and psychographics.

**COMMUNITAS VERSUS CORPORATAS**

Heath (2006) maintained that organizations should reflect communitas versus corporatasa. In terms of communitas, community should be at focus, and organizations must ensure their leaders are engaged in two-way communication, including listening and sharing in a respectful, honest, responsive, and candid fashion. With regard to corporatasa, organizations focus on the use of domination, exploitation, and manipulation. Superintendents must avoid these tactics. Trustworthiness; cooperation; alignment of interests, rewards, and goals; compatible viewpoints and opinions; and commitment are all important factors in communitas (2006).

The school superintendent, using these theoretical concepts, would encourage two-way communication between himself/herself and the organization’s publics, including teachers and parents. He/she would be a good listener and share information with the school system’s publics in a “responsive, respectful, candid, and honest” manner (Heath, 2006, p. 106). The superintendent would build “trust
Public Relations and the School Superintendent

among publics . . . by being reliable, nonexploitative, and dependable” (p. 106). He/she would engage “in collaborative decision making that assures that the needs/wants of the organization and its stakeholders are met” (p. 106). The superintendent would share “interests, rewards, and goals with those of (the school system’s) stakeholders” (p. 106). He/she would foster “mutual understanding and agreement” (p. 106). In addition, the superintendent would support “the community by being involved in it, investing in it, and displaying commitment to it” (p. 107).

For example, applying Heath’s assertions, school superintendents would partner with the school system’s publics to listen, share, and ensure the needs and wants of the organization and its publics are addressed and fulfilled. On the issue of violence in schools, the superintendent is not simply concerned about how the organization looks in related media coverage regarding the violence that is occurring; he/she is equally concerned about the organization’s publics and, first and foremost, their safety. The superintendent would carry out this dual responsibility by responding to, respecting, listening to, and sharing information with the publics in a very honest and open manner. All interactions with regard to the issue of violence in the schools would ensure the publics’ needs and wants are addressed. Therefore, if the publics affected by violence, such as teachers, students, other employees, and parents, communicated that they would feel safer with cameras in the classrooms, metal detectors at the doors, and security officers patrolling the buildings, the superintendent would do whatever he/she could to ensure these needs and wants were met.

**PERSUASION**

Porter (2009) contended that “persuasion . . . [is] an ethically acceptable practice and . . . [is] a legitimate and even critical part of public relations” (p. 127). Those who engage in public relations are advocates of positions on specific topics and “persuasion is inevitable and necessary” (2009,
Organizational leaders who engage in persuasion will do so “to ethically advocate their organization’s perspective” (2009, p. 128). Rhetoric is key to public relations and actually is public relations. Organizational leaders and publics present opinions and counter opinions about issues facing the organization. “Modern public relations practitioners manage relationships and ultimately persuade by maintaining this same public dialogue with numerous stakeholders” (2009, p. 129). Porter further stated that advocacy and persuasion include a concern for the organization’s publics because rhetoric cannot occur without the stakeholders. “The ultimate outcome of public relations efforts will always remain influencing attitudes and ultimately, behavior” (p. 132). Porter also maintained that researchers should study “the most effective and ethical means to persuade” (p. 132).

Take the issue of the use of social media by teachers and students. A school superintendent, based on sound research data, might recommend the institution implement a new policy regarding the use of social media by teachers and students, on and off campus. Many high-profile cases of teachers who were caught sending inappropriate messages to students, posting inappropriate photographs to their social networking pages, and even going so far as to carry out inappropriate relationships with students would be enough to warrant a superintendent taking a proactive stance in addressing any such situation in his/her district before it happens. Faculty and staff meetings, small-group departmental meetings, one-on-one meetings, and information on the school system’s campus intranet would be some tactics the superintendent would utilize to present research data illustrating the importance of instituting a policy that would prohibit the use of or regulate the use of social media by teachers on and off school property, and students while on school property. Focusing on the protection of teachers’ reputations, ensuring the safety of their careers, and protecting children, backed up by credible data, should be enough to persuade the publics on the need for such policies.
Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) explained that during the organization’s storytelling and branding processes, it should utilize flexibility, honesty, and determination when making decisions. When telling the organization’s story, organizational leaders should do so based on persona. Examples of persona that these researchers presented include rebel, mom, rugged individualist, champion, and underdog. Mostly everyone can relate to such persona (2010). Most people will come to know such persona due to their consistencies and strengths (2010). Loyalty and trust are the result, over time, of how the organization operates (2010). Character traits of persona are determination, honesty, curiosity, courage, work ethic, decisiveness, responsibility, and flexibility (2010). Audience members will show interest in an organization’s brand story and how it operates thanks to persona (2010).

Superintendents can certainly utilize what Herskovitz and Crystal asserted in their research findings. A big part of any educational CEO’s role, including that of university president and school superintendent, should be about telling the story of the educational institution. Everywhere he/she goes, the school superintendent represents the school district as its face. Every action he/she takes and every word he/she speaks and writes reflects back on the school system. On the issue of test scores, a superintendent would make connections with a variety of publics by sharing the district’s story on scores, as they relate to scenarios played out by students and teachers. Without naming children by their actual names, in keeping with federal law, the superintendent can share scenarios in columns he/she writes, speeches he/she gives, interviews he/she gives, and through other public relations tactics by presenting actual students’ data from one year to the next, again, without naming the students by name. Everyone can likely relate to hard work and determination. Sharing instances of this in a very human fashion would resonate with publics. Detailing all of the extra hours a teacher spends educating his/her students, without naming him/her by name, would likely resonate with publics.
who are concerned about the school district’s test scores. Knowing that students, faculty members, administrators, and parents are working hard to address the test-score issue and are making progress would rest the minds of many of the concerned publics.

**Postmodernism**

In contrast to the modernist approach that views public relations as a strategic management function, Hotzhausen (2002) explained that postmodernists do not view managers in an organization as rational beings who can take an objective look at their organizations and move them to the outcome they seek based on strategy. Public relations, in the modernist theoretical framework, is the mere use of language versus sincerely bringing in all relevant and important individuals to the discussion. When all voices are included, as is the case in the postmodern approach, the publics and the organization both benefit. Modernists simply use tactics to influence publics. Postmodernists use two-way dialogue from all key players, externally and internally, who are stakeholders in the organization (2002).

In the postmodern theoretical framework, the school superintendent would hire a public relations practitioner to handle all facets of public relations in the district. This professional would be an unbiased figure in the organization who would conduct research to determine the status of public opinion on specific topics facing the district. For example, on the issue of cyber-bullying, the postmodernist would view the superintendent as incapable of being objective on the topic. The public relations practitioner would bring together the superintendent, principals, teachers, and parents to discuss the situation. He/she would facilitate such discussions and ensure all voices are heard prior to making a decision. The public relations professional would make the final recommendation to the superintendent, based on the professional’s objectivity and what is in the best interest of the organization and its publics. He/she would seek a solution
to the problem that would benefit the school system, its stu-
dents, teachers, parents, and administrators.

UNDERSTANDING

Burkart (2007) noted that “there have been several attempts
to employ the Habermasian communication theory for public
relations” (p. 250). In this application of Habermas’s Theory
of Communicative Action, publics are viewed as partners in
the process of communicating. They must speak and write
using correct grammar (intelligibility), engage in dialogue that
is viewed as truthful to both or all parties in the discussion
(truth), remain honest and never mislead others (trustworthi-
ness), and act in a manner that utilizes mutually accepted
values and rules (2007). Understanding is key, and the intent
is the application of this theory in conflict scenarios.

Kowalski (2011) wrote that single-parent families increased
dramatically between 1970 and 1995. The statistics are
even greater for African American and Hispanic children.
Research also shows that the number of children living in
dysfunctional families has increased substantially. Many of
these children experience family members who engage in
domestic violence on a regular basis, have mental illnesses,
drug addictions, physical illnesses, and alcoholism. These
children are not provided structure and their behavior could
be impacted by what they witness in their home (2011).
Superintendents who focus on ensuring that understand-
ing occurs while communicating with the school system’s
publics would communicate with publics as partners in this
situation. They would focus on clear, concise communication
(written and spoken) in a context based on truth. They would
always remain honest and operate within a set of values and
rules that are shared with parents, teachers, and students.

SOCIOLOGY

Ihlen (2007) concluded that the concept of field, from soci-
ology and Bourdieu, could be utilized when describing
organizations and how they work to position themselves in society. Organizational actors’ main goals are to discuss, define, and settle their issues. Public relations in this theoretical application is used to assist actors in the organization in a variety of fields while pursuing their goals and objectives (2007). First, organizational leaders will engage in institutionalization, to ensure stability to the organization and the activities going on in it. Second, economic capital will be used to purchase items to be used in a variety of public relations tactics. Third, knowledge capital is important to ensure organizational leaders understand the political process and its use of lobbying. Fourth, social capital is used to tap into social networks, such as person-to-person, small-group, and so on. Symbolic capital is used in relation to an organization’s and organizational leader’s reputation, competence, respectability, and honorability, according to Bourdieu (2007).

A school superintendent could utilize what Ihlen (2007) presented in a situation in which school funding has been cut by the state. The superintendent would discuss, define, and settle the issues by engaging in dialogue with the system’s publics. The goal would be to minimize or eliminate the state funding cut. Economic capital would be used to communicate to the appropriate actors who could help the district in reaching this goal. Therefore, time would be spent meeting with legislators, the governor, state groups that represent a cohort of K–12 institutions, and representatives from state governmental agencies. Such tactics would include meetings; testimony by administrators, students, teachers, and parents on the House and Senate floors; and electronic and hard-copy publications designed by school system personnel to better educate legislators as to what, in as human a manner as possible, the state funding goes toward, specifically. The use of knowledge capital would be important, as the superintendent and other district leaders should know how best to lobby, legally and ethically, to ensure the funding cuts are minimized or eliminated. Finally, the superintendent’s entire focus should always remain on the organization’s reputation,
competence, respectability, and honorability, as stated by Bourdieu.

**SUMMARY**

In conclusion, this article has presented seven theories and theoretical concepts and illustrated how, by examples of timely issues facing school systems, superintendents could approach and deal with the situations in an effective manner by using public relations strategies and tactics. The theories and examples provide a guide to school superintendents for use when they are addressing problems, working toward attaining organizational goals, and meeting time-based and measurable objectives that feed into the overall goals. Based on the theories presented in this article and the examples provided for each, there is no one cookie-cutter approach to solving problems and addressing their related issues in school systems today. Each school district is unique; therefore, sound research data are important in determining what theoretical approaches to take when addressing problems and goals that are bound by a unique, local context. It is this author’s assertion that a school superintendent should thoroughly assess each issue facing his/her school system, conduct or contract with a researcher to conduct research to provide him/her with sound data for effective decision making, and then utilize any one or a combination of these theories and theoretical concepts, based on the situation, to ensure success and benefit for both the organization and its publics. If he/she does this, the superintendent will leave a positive mark on the organization and impact its publics in a positive manner.

**REFERENCES**


Terry L. Hapney, Jr., PhD, is an associate professor of public relations at Marshall University. He has worked for nearly three decades in public relations and other facets of communications including time as a public relations administrator. Hapney was named “Educator of the Year” by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)—West Virginia Chapter in 2013. As part of a group of public relations scholars and practitioners, Hapney founded and served as the first president of the PRSA—River Cities Chapter, serving public relations professionals and scholars in the southern Ohio, northeastern Kentucky, and western West Virginia Tri-State region.