

Communication Directors and Public Relations Professionals in Public School Districts: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

A school district's need to satisfy the school community's expectations for current, accurate information and manage a social media presence has increased the necessity for superintendents to employ public relations professionals. As such, these professionals are a recent addition to many school districts' administrative teams. However, few research studies were located that focused on public relations professionals or communication directors in public schools. The purpose of this literature review was to identify empirical studies and professional association resources that provided historical, contextual, and relevant information about communication directors in school districts. Based on the findings, we uncovered three themes related to the history, roles and responsibilities, and standards for public relations professionals. Such information can help practitioners support communication functions and help researchers identify needed lines of inquiry.

Keywords: communication, public relations, public schools, communication planning

Communication departments and public relations professionals have become part of the administrative framework of today's public schools as the superintendency has become more complex and requires the services of professionals to meet superintendents' leadership responsibilities (Moore et al., 2020). At the same time, the demands of school leaders have increased related to fostering internal and external public relationships, educating publics about policy and practice, and maintaining a presence in expanding communication channels. The expectations of school leaders to facilitate collaborative relationships in developing strategic plans for school improvement and student success have prompted public school districts to employ personnel who specialize in analyzing local, social, and political agendas (Kowalski, 2011). Furthermore, with the advancement of social media, public school districts are given unique opportunities to manage their images through various applications. Internet access for most stakeholders allows for quick access to school websites, social media, and up-to-date messaging, connecting the community to district information. As the landscape of the public relations world changes with social media sites such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, school districts are in uncharted positions with powerful branding and messaging opportunities to be taken advantage of along with the employment of public relations professionals. However, little is known about these positions (Moore et al., 2020).

After exhaustive searches, we found limited research available about the role of communication departments and directors in school districts. Although communication departments are not a new concept in the business world, these divisions are recent in today's public schools (Moore et al., 2020). Therefore, more information is needed about the role and functions of school district communication directors to understand the profession and support education. The purpose of this literature review was to identify empirical studies and professional association resources that provide historical, contextual, and relevant information about communication directors in school districts. Such information can help practitioners support communication functions and help researchers identify lines of future inquiry.

METHOD

To conduct the literature search, multiple databases, through a university library portal, were selected for their relevancy to the topic (i.e., Education Source, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES). Key search terms included *communication director*, *public school*, *public relations*, *public relations practitioner*, *communication*, *public relations roles*, and *PR*. Selection criteria included peer-reviewed articles published after the year 2000. An extensive search uncovered a lack of scholarly articles specific to public school districts and communication directors. Therefore, we broadened the scope of our search to include textbooks and professional organization websites. After sources were selected, we used an iterative process to review the articles and assign initial codes to segment the content. From several rounds of analysis, we reviewed the codes and then organized the codes into (a) history of the public relations position in public schools, (b) the roles of the communication director, and (c) standards and ethics for school public relations. The terms *communications director* and *public relations professional* are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS POSITION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 1900, public relations became a profession with the establishment of the Publicity Bureau (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1986). Historians Crabbe and Vibbert (1986) credit Edward Bays as one of the fathers of public relations and the first author of the public relations textbook *Crystallizing Public Opinion* in 1923. Bays also taught the first public relations college course in the 1920s and created the first public relations vocational course in the 1930s (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1986). In the 1920s, three books specific to public relations and public schools were authored: (a) *Newspaper Publicity for the Public Schools*, by Rollo Reynolds, (b) *Publicity and the Public Schools*, by Clyde Miller and Fred Charles, and (c) *Public School Publicity*, by Harlan Hines and Robinson Jones (Bagin et al., 2008). In 1927, Moehlman's *Public School Relations* was the first textbook in educational administration, which defined public school relations as an "organized factual informational service for the purpose of keeping the public informed of its educational program" (as cited in Bagin et al., 2008, p. 12). Eleven years later, Moehlman authored a second text championing two-way communication between the community and schools (Bagin et al., 2008).

Subsequently, various public relations trade associations and organizations originated to provide professional development, standards of excellence, codes of ethics, and networking resources to public relations practitioners. In 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) was established to provide training in communication for school leaders in the United States (NSPRA, 2023a). About 10 years later, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) was established and has been one of the largest organizations of public relations professionals with more than 400 chapters world-wide (PRSA, 2023). Further, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) was founded in 1970 and maintains a global membership of over 300 members (IABC, 2023). The IABC has underwritten many research studies about the public relations profession and provides professional development and career education. In addition, both the PRSA and the IABC administer continuing education programs for professional accreditation of its members who complete exams to earn credentials. A variety of professional journals, newsletters, and trade magazines are also authored by these professional organizations for the benefit of public relations professionals.

In the 1980s, issues such as school choice and site-based decision making brought public relations to the forefront of public schools' communication management plans (Bagin et al., 2008). As parents questioned decision-making by school leaders, school districts looked for means to communicate more effectively with stakeholders. The opposing political and philosophical viewpoints about public school funding and function also increased the need for educational leaders to correspond with and interact successfully with all publics (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2009). More time and effort from districts and school administration organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators recognized the need for stronger skillsets within school leaders to address communication management with internal and external publics (Bagin et al., 2008). General sessions and professional development seminars were offered by the professional organizations to better equip leaders in the public relations arena.

As the communication expectations of public school leaders increased and the intensity of social media interactions continued to rise, district officials, specifically superintendents, depended more heavily on the services of communication directors to meet the demands of their publics (Bagin et al., 2008). The title of *public schools' public relations professional* varied depending on the district's size, but the line authority often established a communication professional reporting directly to the superintendent (Moore et al., 2020). Experts have consistently recommended that the public relations professional occupy a position in the superintendent's cabinet if the public relations person is to "explain, defend, or interpret school district policies properly to the public" (Bagin et al., 2008, p. 60). In addition, the inclusion of the public relations

professional within the superintendent's cabinet can provide group insight about community attitudes and expectations due to the public relations professional's connections and relationships with the public.

As this section summarized the history of the public relations professional, NSPRA (2023b) provides an updated rationale for why this professional is needed: "the scope of successful school public relations has expanded greatly - from what in the past was mostly written communication, to a greatly increased need for face-to-face communication with the many publics" in one's community (para. 3). The position of a public relations professional and communicator in public schools has become a relevant and prominent role in school districts in the 21st century.

THE ROLES OF THE COMMUNICATION DIRECTOR

The second theme uncovered, *the role of the communication director*, is one that continues to evolve in school districts. There was a time when public relations were viewed as an attempt to manipulate public opinion, serving as nothing more than press agency and a synonym for marketing and advertising (Kowalski, 2011). However, as public interest in educational practices and performance continues to increase, the function of a school's communication director has evolved into a relationship-building role whose purpose includes informing stakeholders, persuading publics, and integrating attitudes of the school with the attitudes of the publics served (Cohen, 1987). Wilcox et al. (2021) advocated that public relations professionals concentrate on deliberate and planned actions shaped by policy and practice serving multiple publics within a school's community through two-way communication. Today's communication professionals must be able to multi-task to satisfy a vast array of functions such as engaging in community service; assisting decision-makers; providing current, up-to-date information to all stakeholders; and serving community interests (Kowalski, 2011). A discussion of some of the major roles and responsibilities of school public relations practitioners is divided into the areas of district relations, community relations, and crisis management.

District Relations

Building relationships within the internal publics of a district is a key role served by communication directors (Hughes & Hooper, 2000). Superintendents often include the director of public relations as part of the district's administrative cabinet, and depending on the size of the district, the director reports directly to the superintendent or assistant superintendent (Kowalski, 2011; Moore et al., 2020). Vieira and Grantham (2015) noted that when public relations personnel were provided representation in the senior management cabinet and public relations activities were given credibility and time on agendas, the initiatives were empowered and more successful. Overall, responsibilities of these professionals within the district included managerial and technical responsibilities. Communication directors administered programs, made resource allocation decisions, and provided technical assistance to other district officials who engaged in public relations activities (Kowalski, 2011; Moore et al., 2020). These professionals can assist with budgeting and bond funding programs, conduct research on community attitudes, and train school leaders on how to handle media inquiries (NSPRA, 2023b).

Community Relations

Encouraging open communication about key issues representative of district and community interests was indicative of an effective public relations program (Martinson, 1999). Common processes utilized by school public relations professionals to establish and encourage relationships with the community included (a) encouraging parental involvement, (b) building the public's understanding of education, and (c) collaborating with community on projects to share resources (Holliday, 1988). Johnston et al. (2002) identified the following roles school leaders and public relations personnel play in school-community relationships: (a) understands history and culture of school district, (b) seeks input from multiple community groups for decision-making, (c) participates in a variety of community organizations, (d) develops network of key community advocates and supporters, (e) oversees media relations plan, and (f) performs tasks as the face and contact point of the district in the community. The public relations professional often is a member of local clubs, the chamber of commerce, and realtor organizations (NSPRA, 2023b).

Related to civic engagement, Dodd et al. (2015) examined the extent to which U.S. public relations managers and technicians participated in civic activities. Secondary data were gathered from the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, and participants were identified as public relations professionals through their self-selected occupations. Three distinct community activities were collapsed into the three classifications of (a) political involvement, (b) participation as volunteers, and (c) personal interactions with community. Dodd et al. (2015) discovered public relations managers maintained a significantly greater engagement in political activities and personal interactions with community than did the general

population. The researchers theorized public relations professionals participated in political activities because of the knowledge held about the political environment and its effect on their organizations. Also, personal behaviors and interactions like social media engagement and online networking were identified by the communication professionals due to the nature of their employment. Low participation as volunteers was attributed to lack of time for such activities due to the time-consuming nature of their position. Dodd et al. (2015) suggested similar studies to be completed utilizing the analysis of professional behaviors to make connections to civic engagement roles by public relations managers and technicians.

Crisis Management

Public school communication directors serve a significant role during a time of crisis management. These directors are often the point of contact for school administrators, community, and media and managed a multitude of communication channels and social media platforms during and after the crisis (Bagin et al., 2008). The NSPRA (2016) provides helpful guidance through a comprehensive school crisis communication manual that provides step-by-step procedures and detailed policies for the school communicator. NSPRA's compilation of materials can serve as an invaluable resource when communication directors are thrust into the role of crisis management.

Moore (2009) addressed how quickly information can be conveyed to the school community due to the use of cell phones, text messages, and social media. Eyewitnesses communicate information before administrators in the school system ever know the details; therefore, a well-developed crisis management plan is necessary to for collecting information from a variety of sources and communicating as quickly as possible through all media channels. A systematic reaction in a crisis by public relation practitioners brings a sense of control during a crisis (Kowalski, 2011). The communication director's role of overseeing and enacting a well-developed crisis management plan helps in the perception of school district competence, credibility, and trustworthiness so that continued goodwill is maintained (Bagin et al., 2008).

Managing the communication of a school district can include a variety of roles and responsibilities (i.e., planning for crises and responding to media). Communication with various publics and building relationships with stakeholders represents the most common roles of the public relations professional (Vieira & Grantham, 2015). As such, Norris (1984) explained that public relations would be better understood if public relations were referred to as *public relationships*.

STANDARDS AND ETHICS FOR SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Related to the third theme of standards and ethics, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) convened to update standards for educational leaders in many arenas, including communication among all publics. The NPBEA adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), formerly known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, to assist district and school leaders with improvement in student achievement. National collaborations among educational organizations, foundations, and state officials recast the 2008 ISLLC standards "with a stronger, clearer emphasis on students and student learning, outlining foundational principles of leadership to help ensure that each child is well-educated and prepared for the 21st century" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 2). What did not change in the newly composed standards was the inclusion of the verbiage "to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 33). This phrase appears in eight of the ten standards. The skill of promotion when defined as actively supporting and encouraging is often connected to one's ability "to promote." The skill of promotion often lies in the ability to communicate effectively, and the NPBEA acknowledged this distinction.

While the PSEL addresses educational leaders, specific standards were developed for the public relations professional. In 2002, the NSPRA recommended characteristics for school districts when hiring public relations professionals. At a minimum, NSPRA recommended these professionals possess a bachelor's degree from an accredited university and have public relations field experience (Chappelow, 2015). In addition, the Association suggests these professionals should display "a mastery of communication skills" and "an ability to provide expertise and advice to top management" (Chappelow, 2015, p. 423). The standards also call for the public relations professional to continue professional development and belong to a variety of professional associations. These standards have helped leaders develop job postings and descriptions (Chappelow, 2015).

Codes of ethics were authored by many of the professional organizations in public relations, partly due to the influential nature of the responsibilities woven into public relations roles (Toledano & Avidar, 2016). Kowalski (2011) provided a working definition of professional ethics for education professionals to include moral action; human character; and a duty to fairness, equality, and a sense of right in professional conduct. Subsequently, additional ethical considerations were

determined as social media sites became a mainstay of communication channels and digital conversations became more prevalent for public relations professionals (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2015).

In July 1988, NSPRA adopted 14 ethical guidelines based on those from the North American Public Relations Council. These guidelines call upon the professional to “[e]xemplify high standards of honesty and integrity” (Texas School Public Relation Association [TSPRA], 2020, para 4). The professional should be fair in dealings with the public and value others’ rights to participate and share opinions. Specifically, the guidelines encourage professionals to be accurate and avoid “extravagant claims or unfair comparisons,” to refrain from sharing “false or misleading information,” and to “act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he/she is responsible” (TSPRA, 2020, para 4). Further, communication professionals should avoid situations where there might be a conflict of interest and avoid accepting gifts.

In summary, public relations and communication aspects are a growing component of public school leadership. A variety of standards exist and can provide guidance for the selection and supervision of public relations professionals. Many resources are available to assist leaders with the implementation, development, and evaluation of the communication plan of a public school district.

DISCUSSION

In this literature review, we identified empirical studies and professional association resources to highlight the historical background, roles and responsibilities, and ethical standards relevant to communication directors in school districts. The position of the communications director has developed in response to the demands for the superintendent to communicate and manage multiple platforms (e.g., media and social media). National organizations and textbook authors have provided much of the information (e.g., standards, ethics, and selection criteria) to support these emerging roles in school districts. We recommend practitioners to seek out these resources when adding these public relations professionals to their teams. Although many resources exist for these professionals, the ever-changing dynamics in society (e.g., pandemics) necessitate even more resources. The roles and responsibilities vary depending on local needs, and these roles can be organized into categories of community relations, district relations, and crisis management. In the context of public education, more information is needed as current literature is lacking in its up-to-date portrayal of practices and current policies.

After reviewing the literature regarding communication directors and public relations professionals, we note several recommendations for future research. Researchers can explore the roles, responsibilities, and needed competencies of this emerging position in public schools. As emergencies and catastrophic events in schools continue to occur, more information is needed about effective planning and responding. Another area to explore is that of social media. Within the last 10 years, school administrators have managed social media accounts to promote their schools and have responded to novel situations related to social media. The speed of social media introduces challenges for district leaders. The immediacy of social media platforms produces challenges and provides unlimited opportunities for the communication professional to highlight successes. Considering these challenges, more information is needed about the training and development needs of these professionals working in education.

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