A PR Primer for the Aspiring Administrator: Review and Reflection

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If information is the new currency, then disinformation is the practice of commerce. In an age when we communicate through text messages, seven-second videos, and little colorful objects assigned to other, real-life things, communicating with intention is the pinnacle of sharing information. In education, shifting from traditional communication to a more sophisticated, technology-rich, and timely strategy is paramount to a district's success, culture, and reputation. In the article *Public Relations 101: Tips for School Administrators (and other School Administrators)* by Colleen Newquist, the author stresses the importance of school districts having a cohesive, school-wide plan for sharing information with all stakeholders.

Review

The idea of school embracing a PR plan may seem facetious to some, but Newquist explains that all interactions are technically considered public relations. When a school communicates with the public by all district employees, it is public relations (Newquist, 2015). This includes the staff and the faculty, from secretaries to bus drivers to maintenance workers to teachers and board members (Newquist, 2015). Newquist even includes students in the list, which is an interesting idea when considering the proliferation of social media platforms and the gray area of "personas." In a world where students often have "spam" accounts, formerly known as the "Finsta" or fake Instagram, that should technically qualify as a PR nightmare. These accounts are where students post their "real" selves to a few people who have been invited to join. The article does not address how to handle student issues.

Newquist suggests administrators evaluate their everyday communications. Simple things, including how people are treated when they call the school, the voicemail system being easy and straightforward, the frequency of meetings and the accessibility of those meetings to the public,

notification of the public about school events, and the communication between teachers, administrators, and parents are discussed (Newquist, 2015). All of those things are quickly evaluated and adjusted. One of the primary concepts that Newquist includes in the article is allowing time for parents who might attend meetings to have the time to be involved in discussions. This is perhaps one of the most crucial school/community relations principles. With the onslaught of technological means of communication, face-to-face communication is becoming devalued, and that is the number one area where schools are failing.

Newquist's interview with PR specialist William Harms provides the number one best practice that school administrators need to understand: the more parents know what is going on in the district, the more eager they are to support the school's mission (Newquist, 2015). Communication with parents must be meaningful, transparent, and engaging; if not, parents and community members will distrust the school, then communication becomes translated as propaganda. (Newquist, 2015) Harms explains that attention to detail in communication is vital, and information must be timely and relevant. The administrator acting with empathy and asking themselves what content would be most important for a parent to know. (Newquist, 2015) He suggested that a newsletter might be the best avenue for communicating with parents, either a black-and-white one-page or an electronic newsletter. Several platforms on the internet are free for schools to put together a newsletter and send it out electronically. Some outlets are Canva, Lucidpress, Picmonkey, S'More, and Google, all of which are free to use and offer decent graphics.

At the heart of PR is building a brand or an image that the public can rely on; trust is vital to a school district. So, branding becomes critical as well. Daily posts from teachers and other faculty members of students and teachers in action help build trust in the transparency and pride in the

district (Newquist, 2015). It should not be viewed as a task; the public should know that their money is well-spent. Hiring an individual or an agency to cover PR is another option for districts. Harms says hiring a PR professional is especially helpful when the district has a crisis that needs to be handled and for regular positive communication with the public, as teachers do not have time to do that (Newquist, 2015). The district's PR person will understand how to foster relationships with media outlets to have a continuous stream of good press (Newquist, 2015). Tips included from the National Association of Secondary School Principals suggest creating a media contact point list and getting to know the people behind local radio, newspaper, and television stations, taking national content and relating it to the district – for example, the Title IX legislation at the Federal level and the impact it will have on the district – and keeping district statistics updated and ready to report (Newquist, 2015). Specific examples of data would be the ethnic makeup of the district, any high-stakes testing data, and the number of highly qualified teachers in the district.

The worst nightmare of any district is a scandal or a crisis involving students or personnel. Even on a national level, the district should be prepared to field questions and handle them. Harms suggests that districts be ready to tell the facts immediately and not allow things to stew (Newquist, 2015). The article lines out the chain of communication: first, notify the faculty and staff to elicit cooperation, then communicate with parents being clear and explicit about the facts and tell them how the district will respond; give them all the information possible or stakeholders will start filling in the blanks (Newquist, 2015). The article provides a list of things to keep in mind during a crisis when addressing the media: never say anything that might reflect poorly reported, the administrator should speak slowly, redirect if necessary, stop talking when the facts have been shared, don't be guided by emotions (Newquist, 2015).

Also included in the article are additional tips from the National School Public Relations Association on steps to follow within the first 30 minutes of the crisis: understand the circumstances and define the problem, consider the options, and act to ensure the safety and health of students and staff, communicate with staff and keep the news media informed and create a crisis assessment and info sheet to send to the central office or other resource agencies. (Newquist, 2015)

The article offers good points and advice. This could be the beginning of a strong, sustainable public relations policy for small, rural districts. The additional resources are also helpful. Newquist provides the administrator with a strong sense of direction for implementing a public relations plan and a list of best practices that are the foundations of a solid introduction to public relations for a school district. All aspects are addressed, including a list of best practices for dealing with crises.

Reflection

This article is outdated. If it had been written last year, it would be obsolete. School public relations and the means to handle it evolve with every new school year. The COVID-19 shutdown changed everything, and this was written pre-COVID. This is a primer – and the mention of students being public relations agents for the school is now misinformation. As a school teacher, I no longer take cell phones from my students because I don't want their devices to be anywhere near my eyes and ears; students who come into my classroom are asked to place their phones in an organizer hanging on the wall. They are also invited to put earbuds and smartwatches in there as well. I have worked at a district that was a PR nightmare; damage control was the order of the day, and teachers usually received information from students who were texted information from their parents. The district I work in currently is small enough that the principals handle the PR at the building level, and the superintendent steps in if there is a crisis. The article did not touch on the necessity of having a live social media feed on the website updated almost hourly by the district PR person or the principal. The demand for transparency in districts has superseded the highlight reels of social media. I cannot say that the article was not helpful; it offered some excellent advice, but it is outdated. In my experience as a digital marketing content creator, my side gig, school PR, is as sophisticated and explosive as it gets.

Component 5.1 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to understand and collaboratively engage diverse families in strengthening student learning in and out of school (NPBEA, 2018, p. 25).

Concerning Newquist's article, this standard speaks to communication and awareness of the services the school is providing. Districts partner with communities to offer services to all students, regardless of socio-economic status. Getting that information into the right hands is

difficult. This often involves a public relations person or an administrator with strong ties to the community or the ability to reach out to organizations that provide services to diverse families. The district and its schools should always seek to link themselves with organizations that serve various groups. As a teacher, one of the best pieces of marketing I achieved for my broadcasting program was to connect with our county's Emergency Services Council. My students made their instructional videos, and film preparedness drills. They gained higher level skills by understanding that their films would be shown county-wide as guides and safety standards. My principal was pleased with the positive publicity it brought to the district, and my students were recognized for their services and talent. We were featured in the local paper, interviewed on local radio stations, and featured on the district and county websites.

Component 5.2 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to understand, collaboratively engage and cultivate relationships with diverse community members, partners, and other constituencies for the benefit of school improvement and student development. (NPBEA, 2018, p. 25).

Even as a teacher, I feel like this is my responsibility. A strong PR leader will see this as the natural flow of the school in the community. Altrusa, Bright Futures, and the retired teacher's organizations are some of public relations' most supportive and vital components. In my experience, these organizations are prime for being involved and promoting the school and the district. The battle in school PR is perception. If a disgruntled parent takes to social media to bash the school, there is no better counter than a post that shows the good things being done in the community, with the community, and for the community. One way to do this is to invite community members into the schools for lunch or to speak to students. That makes for great photo opportunities and social media posts to follow.

Component 5.3 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to collaboratively engage the larger organizational and policy context to advocate for the needs of their school and community. (NPBEA, 2018, p. 25).

This is advanced public relations – this is moving the district into a position of favorability with the community in such a way that they view themselves as not just supporters but advocates. Our local school district receives half a million dollars in scholarship money from local community members, trusts, organizations, and businesses. However, the district is going to have to fight to keep it. Many donors are getting older and attended the school when it was considered one of the more affluent schools in the state because of the local firebrick industry. Those donors attended the high school and have fond memories of a school that, to be honest, no longer exists. With a nearly 60 percent free and reduced lunch population, it isn't easy to equate the Italian marble floors and the Neogothic façade of the building, all made with local firebrick, with students who come to school in their pajamas, take showers at the school because their parents have not paid the water bill and visit the school's food pantry on Friday afternoon to take home food to cook for themselves and their siblings over the weekend. As businesses are sold off, and organizations die out due to a new generation of graduates who leave for college and don't come back or who are content with perpetuating the generational poverty they were raised in, soon the coffers will be dry. I don't know if that is a problem that good PR can handle.

Conclusion

I used to believe that there was no bad press way back in the day when I was a press member and was in PR/Marketing. The narrative has become much more difficult to control now that newspapers and local radio are things that "old" people do. With Facebook pages dedicated to complaints about the school district and parents who don't feel they have any real stake in the

school their child attends, I look at the district where I once worked, the high school where my grandmother was one of the first graduates to walk on that marble floor. I wonder what could have been done differently to change things. But one of the most important aspects of PR is knowing which battle to pick and which battlefield to abandon before you end up a casualty on that field. And most importantly, you cannot get in front of a narrative you created by not being proactive when things began to look bleak.

References

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