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The Teacher's Role in School-Community Relations

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THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Delmar D. Cherrington
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THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING THE
PLAN 2 REQUIREMENT FOR THE COMPLETION
OF A RESEARCH PAPER.

Dohn A Miller
FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of this study was (1) to consider the need for effective school-community relations, (2) to determine the role of the classroom teacher in developing and maintaining the program, and (3) to discuss various ideas and activities that may be useful in the school-community program.

Importance of the study. The increasing responsibility the classroom teacher shoulders due to expanding knowledge and changing teaching methods makes it important that he understand the areas of his responsibility. Public relations is becoming an accepted part of the educational program, making it imperative for the classroom teacher to know the various aspects of the program and lend his cooperation. A classroom teacher should be better able to fulfill his responsibility in helping maintain an effective school-community relations program after reviewing the literature on the subject.

Limitations of the study. This study was limited to the teacher's role in school-community relations. It was also limited by the time element involved in preparing this study for Education 576.

The writer's experience as an elementary teacher only, may also be considered a limitation to this study.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

School-community relations. The term "school-community relations" deals with all phases of the relationship between the school and the community it serves.

Public relations. This term will be used interchangeably with school-community relations in this study.

School. The term "school" will denote all public schools grades 1-12.

Community. The term "community" will refer to the area served by the school or a part of a large area served by several schools.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I. THE NEED FOR SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Because our constitution designed the public school system, the schools belong to the people. The community, therefore, has every right to keep in contact with our schools. The schools of a few decades ago were a real community force. The teachers taught subjects the people understood; schools were the community center. Not only was the school vital to the community as a cultural center, but it was very sensitive and easily controlled by public opinion.

A certain aloofness regarding public education developed in the community as the states started taking over more control. State laws began establishing the organization of the program and dealt with personnel. Superintendents and principals with authority to a degree replaced lay people. Academies and high schools, in some instances, replaced the elementary school. Subjects being taught were not understood by the average lay person. All of these things tended to pull the school out of immediate touch with the community. The board of education remained the powerful community force, but it shifted certain responsibilities to supervisors and seemed to withdraw from the people who elected its members (31:104).

The policy of putting the control of certain phases of education under the state's jurisdiction tended to wean the schools away from the community. According to Grinnell and Young, few schools in the U. S. at the turn of the century were following educational programs that had much relationship to the needs of community life. A somewhat mystical respect for school life was created by the school people through a curriculum divorced from community life.

As time went on, the pendulum began to swing; the public showed more interest and concern for their schools. Now there is a shift toward community-oriented and community-related programs (12:Ch. 2).

Throughout the past several years in educational circles, more attention has been given to the problem of creating better school-community relationships. This is being brought about because schools are "huge enterprises" in a complex society and are being met with competing interests. Grinnell and Young conclude:

An educated clear thinking citizenry is vital to the survival of responsible democratic government (12:3).

Albert Ayres lists eight reasons for increased emphasis of the public relations program over the last few years. They are as follows:

1. The general rising cost of government, taxes and salaries has caused people to question public expenditures.

2. Government services have expanded, entering more and more pursuits, (highway systems, public welfare, etc.) which are in competition with the schools for tax money, thus causing resentment against schools.

3. The growth of population, rise of great population centers, and the advent of school attendance by "all the children of all the people" has caused education to become big and expensive business--industrialization and consolidation. The face to face relationship between school personnel and the people whose children are taught can no longer exist to an extent at all comparable to that of a few years back.

4. The rapid technical, mechanical, and material advances of our country have not been matched by advances in our social customs and institutions. This retardation (or cultural lag) has caused people to resist changing the schools in line with the most advanced social theories.

5. The rise of education as a technical profession has caused some doubts, jealousies and misunderstandings. Much professional and technical jargon is misinterpreted.

6. There are still opponents of free education. Some individuals and groups in America still attempt to discredit the public schools. Some of this activity is cloaked in appeals to patriotism.

7. The tendency of many school districts in the past to let a small group do the work, has created a situation on which there is no general public understanding--so necessary to successful action.

8. Educators have not developed a unified positive professionalism. (2:53).

Good schools must have a good public relations program. One does not have to look far to see the results: in a community where the people understand the school program, the quality of education is high. Where schools are not good, the cause may be found in the lack of interest, misinformation, and lack of confidence among the

people. "Public education is not likely to be better than the public's understanding of the schools" (26:3).

The school-community relations program meets three general needs. It (1) interprets the school's program to the community, (2) clarifies the school's role in the community and society, and (3) interprets educational changes as they arise (11:583-585).

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CLASSROOM TEACHER IN DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

It is apparent that the teacher is the key person at the working level of a good school-community relations program. This is brought out by several authors:

Good teaching is good public relations (27:369).

Our own skill as teacher is a valuable tool in school-community relations (9:4).

A teacher's contact with parents, with parent-teacher associations, with social groups, with church and club groups, furnish avenues through which information may flow to the public (28:226).

There should be little doubt about the individual importance of the teacher in the over-all school-community relations program. Teachers are on the front line of the program and are often the only basis for community judgment of the schools. Each day the teacher has contact with his students and often with a number of adult citizens from various walks of life, all of whom are forming ideas about the public schools.

The teacher is in a strategic position for bringing about better understanding of the schools. He has opportunity to build the so vitally needed support and confidence in the schools. The direct line of communications the teacher has with the parents and relatives, however, should not be used as a means to propagandize or bring pressure on the people (9:2-3).

As Grinnell states:

Effective school-community relations are not high pressure campaigns similar to those of business-- designed to sell the public on or acquaint the community with the school or administration's objectives (12:16).

High pressure leads to public suspicion and resentment and leaves the school open for attack from the public.

Teachers should be aware that there is no choice as to whether or not they will participate in a school-community relations program. Because they deal with the public, they are an active part of the program. The teacher should keep the following things in mind, according to Ayres:

1. All public relations activity should be directed toward school and community welfare; the motivation should be unselfish.
2. The educational program of a community is the concern of all its citizens.
3. Understanding is built upon sensitivity to public reaction.
4. One first step in effective community relations is the establishment of harmonious relations with the press, radio, and other public information agencies.

5. Truthfulness and consistency should be guides to all activities.

6. Public relations activities should be planned and purposeful, positive, not defensive.

7. The public relations program should be well balanced and representative of the entire system, (don't expect athletic, musical and dramatic appearances, and news to constitute a public relations program).

8. A public relations program should be openly arrived at, participated in by all school personnel and in operation 12 months of the year on a continuing basis. This does not mean that every individual in the system will do specialized public relations work. Most staff members can fulfill their public relations responsibilities best by doing the best possible job of teaching or other regular job assignments. But awareness of public relations responsibilities on the part of each is essential.

9. The public relations program should be judicious. While frankness is essential, there are some things for which publicity would serve no good purpose.

10. Participation of lay citizens in educational planning should be kept as informal and direct as possible, with the understanding that the board of education makes final decisions.

11. All public communications should be in simple, non-technical language (2:55-6).

Several of the above are aimed primarily at the level of the administration; however, since the teacher is so vitally concerned, it is felt that the remarks would be of value in this study.

III. USEFUL IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PROGRAM

The need for an effective school-community relations program and the importance of the teacher in that program

have been briefly discussed--now to review some effective ways and means by which a classroom teacher may fulfill his obligation in such a program.

First is the parent-teacher conference. Parent-teacher conferences have been gaining support over the last several years. This means of communicating can be very effective in building a better understanding between the school and community. Because the conferences are so important, they must be well planned and organized. Many parents who would not ordinarily take the opportunity to visit their child's school or the teacher will take advantage of the parent-teacher conference.

Often parents do not find it easy to approach a teacher, but the conference appointment gives a common reason for their being at school. The teacher who can use this two-way, face to face means of communication will usually be rewarded for the extra time it takes.

It is important that the teacher work closely with the administration while setting up the parent-teacher conference. The parents and school personnel should have an idea as to the procedures and purposes of the conference. Teachers should be careful not to embarrass or irritate the parents; they should build the feeling that both the parents and teacher have a common interest--the pupil. The conference setting should be informal, allowing no barriers between the parent and the teacher.

Parents like to see their child's achievements; therefore, a good way to begin a conference is to discuss some of the child's work. The teacher should be careful not to convey the feeling of disapproval of the child. However, where the child has difficulties, the parent has the right to know and should be informed of the difficulty in a diplomatic and considerate way.

Teachers who allow opportunities for the parent to express themselves find it easier to understand the parent and often gain background information about the child. Since conferences seldom exceed a half-hour in length, it should be kept in mind that only a limited amount can be accomplished in any one conference.

Parents are often timid about discussing their child in the presence of another parent or teacher. This makes it very important to hold the conference so there will be no interruptions to the feeling of privacy.

Not all parent-teacher conference programs will reach all parents, but they can provide a means of reaching many who will in turn convey part of their understanding to others (19:304).

The Parent-Teacher Association is another channel through which the teacher can build school-community relations. Although many schools feel the PTA should be primarily parent-controlled, the teacher can actively cooperate with and support the organization. Often

teachers meet the father of their pupils or parents who would not be able to come to the school on other occasions. While participating in PTA meetings, teachers may build confidence in the school through demonstrations, displays, or other means of presenting the school's activities.

The PTA is, in many schools, a vital aid in helping the teacher arrange transportation for field trips or helping in other areas when needed. Teachers can make members of the PTA feel welcome and urge them to visit the school to get firsthand information on how their schools are functioning (25:152).

Business Industrial Education Day can be a valuable opportunity for the teacher to build good school-community relations. The teacher visiting industry and business and, in turn, industrial and business leaders visiting the schools provide a better understanding between the teacher and the lay public (7:166).

The teacher has the firsthand opportunity to mingle with the public as a teacher being shown something. They are meeting the public on the public's own ground, not as one who is teaching. Teachers who have the occasion to visit different businesses should bear in mind they are representing the school and act accordingly.

Another area in which teachers are involved in community relations is in community activities. This gives teachers the opportunity to be of service to the community

and build good public relations as well. The following list of five general areas of community service in which teachers often participate is mentioned by Yeager:

(1) religious, involving church activities, YMCA and YWCA; (2) professional, which includes alumni, PTA and clubs; (3) relief or welfare, such as Red Cross, UGN; (4) leisure activities, such as social clubs; and (5) civic organizations, such as grange, service clubs and community efforts (31:163).

Teachers often are urged to become active in community organizations and called upon to become active as leaders because of their abilities to work with people. The teacher who allows himself to become so involved in outside activities that he is burdened by them should realize he reduces his effectiveness as a teacher. "The welfare of the pupil should be most important" (31:155). Through working in community activities, teachers can better determine the philosophy and needs of the community. The teacher can also serve as a liaison to interpret the school to the community. Regardless of the teacher's feelings, he should be careful not to irritate the public in community affairs, thereby reducing his effectiveness as a teacher.

Using the various means of publicity can also be an effective tool in a community relations program. The teacher who is doing a good job in some particular area may have a story to tell that would make good newspaper,

radio, or TV material if presented properly. The news media often are willing for teachers to present material to them, but they have to weigh such in comparison to stories that will interest the public. Material presented will have to be of interest to a number of people to make the paper. Brownell lists several criteria for determining newsworthy items:

(1) Is the information timely and true? (2) Will the story appeal to many people? (3) Will the facts be accepted as interesting? (4) Does it have significance for many people? (5) Can more significance and interest be created without exaggeration or alteration of facts? (6) If the item itself is not newsworthy, can some angle of it be developed or some point be brought out to qualify it as news? (4:99).

These criteria may be valuable to teachers who are preparing material to present to the news media. Although some teachers are reluctant to turn in material to the news media, doing so can help build good will with the news services and also aid in school-community relations.

The use of community resources is another way the teacher can build good community relations. Human resources can be of great value in the classroom if proper selection and preparation is made. Most communities have a number of qualified persons able to contribute their knowledge and experience to the school. The teacher should prepare his class for such a resource person to insure the best learning experience and to avoid any adverse reactions to the resource person (3:70,71).

Human resources are only a part of the total. Material resources are often available for use by teachers. Museums, travel agencies, weather station, radio or TV stations, and others may have materials to loan or give for classroom use.

Many school districts provide opportunities for teachers to participate in putting on special events or programs for the public. Such events as music festivals, athletic events, and science displays can be a valuable means of relating the school and its functions to the community. Although most of these events are organized by the administrations, much of the work and degree of success is up to the teacher. Parents enjoy seeing their children participate in school activities. The performance or activity should be such that it will create a feeling of respect for and confidence in their children's school and teacher.

This means of contact with the public should not always be mere entertainment. It can be used in showing the community the changes or trends in the school's program. Some parents of children in the secondary schools have little contact with the teacher or school, little actual knowledge of what schools are doing. If enough students can be involved in these special school activities, such can serve as an effective means of school-community relations.

Another area on which a teacher can capitalize is the publicity given such special events as American Education Week and Teacher's Career Week. Often radio, TV, and newspapers are anxious to have teachers prepare material for presentation. Students should be the focal point in these events, but the teacher can also reap benefits from using every opportunity afforded him.

Many store personnel and businessmen are happy to display work done by children. This can be motivation for the children and also help relate the school to the community.

During these special weeks, teachers may have an opportunity to speak to some group. This may be a threat to the teacher, but it can be a direct means of dealing with the public on educational matters. Brownell states "Every teacher with a sound program should have convictions which clamor for expression" (4:187). If we have something worth talking about, as educators, we should not be afraid to say it. Care should be given in presenting ideas to the public so as to convey their intended meaning. It would be worthwhile for most teachers to consider carefully what they are going to say and how they are going to say it.

The foregoing are some of the tools teachers can use to bring the school and community closer together.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The need for an active and effective school-community relations program is evidenced by our rapid population growth, modern trends in curriculum, the need for more financial support, and the increasing need of education in our society.

The teacher is a key person in building an effective school-community relations program. Further, the program is misused if its intended goals are not for the benefit of the pupils and community the school serves.

The school-community relations program should be a cooperative and continuous program constantly evaluated by the community and the school. School-community relations should be a two-way communication--from school to community and from community to school.

The school-community relations program is not a cure-all for all school problems, but it is one effective means of striving for a more adequate educational program.

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