Guideline for an Organized Plan of Written Communications Between the Selah School District Number 119 and the Community

Jeanne M. Berryman

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GUIDELINES FOR AN ORGANIZED PLAN OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS
BETWEEN THE SELAH SCHOOL DISTRICT NUMBER 119
AND THE COMMUNITY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

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

by
Jeanne M. Berryman
August, 1966
APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

Clifford Erickson, COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

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M. L. Pettit
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problem of communications between the school and its citizens is always serious, for no public school functions in a vacuum, apart from the society it serves. The public school system in America is based on the tenet that the school is at one and the same time the servant of all the people; that each citizen has worth and value, that he has a right to take from education as much as he can absorb, and contribute proportionately to its support. Reeder (30) indicates the unique position of American schools when he states:

In a democracy such as ours the people are sovereign. All public institutions belong to them and are operated by them through their officials and employees. The school is one of the oldest, and is probably the most cherished, of these public institutions. Since schools belong to the people and are supported by them, it is inevitable that its welfare and progress will be determined largely by them. How citizens regard their schools is determined to a great extent by what they know about it.

Today, the public is being constantly bombarded by many and varied types of media, each vying for a person's time, energy, and support. The sheer mass of information disseminated by newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, motion pictures, advertisements, posters, pictures, cartoons, radio and television is far too great for any person to competently absorb. Educators
have recognized that informing the public of school needs now means competing not only with volume, but also with a high degree of specialization. The use of stereotypes, slogans, catch phrases, and similar devices as a means of influencing opinions by emotional appeal, rather than reliable information and appeals to reason, are the order of the day. A structured program, based on accepted criteria, of well-organized school information is necessary if the school is going to tell its story effectively and efficiently. The community tends to accept information that is presented in relatively simple terms of thoughts, feelings, and language, and when the attention can be held for reading and understanding the messages, then communication has been established. It is, therefore obvious that the schools are both eager, and obligated to evaluate, define, and refine the communications they present to the public.

Hand (13), Reeder (30), and Rice (31) found that the most casual contacts tend to influence the public's attitude toward the schools. Their writings emphasize that every phase of the school program, every remark by a school employee, every communication with the student's home, every subject offered, every service to the community which involves the school in any way - even the personal appearance of the staff - affects the community's image of its school, either favorably or otherwise.
There is little research on the citizen's perception of school personnel. Further study in this area should provide needed guideposts. Jenkins and Lippitt (17) discovered a variety of erroneous impressions which parents and teachers held of one another, and suggested that misperceptions could be minimized by reducing the barrier to communications. While this study deserves mention, it is clear that freedom to communicate does not, of itself, automatically reduce misperceptions or improve attitudes. When communications are effectively presented, either oral or written, the public gives as well as receives ideas, and in turn provides financial support in proportion to its acceptance of the ideas presented. Materials to be presented can, and should be chosen with this objective in mind.

The concern for structured communications appears to have had its beginning in the early 1900's (7). Following World War I, it became generally recognized by educators that a well structured and planned program of communication was necessary for increasing genuine cooperation and understanding by the public of its school program. Recognition of the need for a program of communications based on sound research principles has developed rapidly. Today it is common practice for all but the smallest school districts to employ a staff person to assume responsibility for keeping the community properly informed about the school's programs. The person who assumes this duty should be responsible for planning,
directing and evaluating the over-all public communication program of the school. He should have knowledge of the principles and procedures of communication as it fits into the administrative organization of his school system. To effectively present the school story, he should be familiar with school problems and needs about which the community must be informed (28, 38).

Public confidence in the school, it is believed, depends fundamentally upon the quality of classroom instruction (15); hence, much of our communications should be planned around this particular phase of the educational program. Unless there is planned programming of communications between the school and its citizens, communications are almost certain to be accidental and incidental to the school program, rather than a consistent continuing effort to keep the public informed in terms of educational goals and methods used to reach those goals.

One of the strongest of human emotions is that of a parent toward his child. The desire to protect and nurture children motivates people to devote the major part of their lives, interest and energy toward securing fulfillment of their children's needs. The community extends to the school the necessary time, energy and financial support when it identifies the school as a major contributor to the well-being and success of the child. The community identifies itself with the school as an agency it will support, because the school offers the youth vital values which have no counterpart in any other agency.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Systematic educational research has contributed little to the development of guidelines of communications for the school, compared with analytical and motivational research, and its effect on the areas of learning subject matter. The periodical literature, tremendously expanding through the years, is devoted almost exclusively to the exchange of experiences among school personnel and to the reaffirmation of the basic theory of communications. Among the various check lists, rating forms, inventories, and self-evaluation score cards found in the literature, one would expect to find objective devices for evaluating school-community relations. While there are definite evaluation practices established for everything from the school's program as a whole, to the use of the gymnasium by lay groups, few, if any measuring devices are available on the outcome of communications. Most plans suggested in the professional literature rate the school on the communication practices employed rather than on the outcome sought by these practices (26). They provide few guidelines in specifying dimensions of the criteria against which the communication procedures may be evaluated systematically. Several studies (23, 37) have been completed in which panels of educators were asked to judge the effectiveness and suitability of various communication practices. These evaluations by the panelists were subjective, as no criteria was provided.
Baughman (2) asked principals what they used as criteria for their school-community relations, and thus has pointed the way toward an evaluative measure. Charters (5) states:

Certainly it is more difficult to formulate an operational definition of a concept connoting reciprocal interaction between school and community than of a concept implying "one-way" influence. But unless this challenge is met, empirical investigation will continue to use as a measure of the state of good public relations the extent to which activities of school personnel have influenced the public in one direction or another.

It would seem that more emphasis and research on criteria for evaluation of these school-community relationships is indicated.

The first studies found in professional literature on organized efforts to present the school accurately and effectively to the public were in the late 1910's when Alexander, Carter and Theisen (1), borrowing from "tried and true" business practices, organized short and intensive publicity campaigns. These proved to be quite effective in emergency situations. It soon became evident that such intensive campaigns did not tell the whole school story, however. A continuous flow of information about the schools was desirable in order to adequately inform the public about educational practices and interpret new methods.

By 1930, Yeager (39) was writing about the community needs, desires, and ability to communicate and interact with its schools. Other educators (18, 32) of this era began to write in terms of the cooperative endeavor of the community and school for the good of the "whole child", and the "progressive" school movement of the 30's
was its natural spawn. The public needed a great deal of accurate information to understand and accept this new concept, as well as classroom procedures of changing educational theory and practice. Thirty years later, we are still operating from this basic a priori. Education seeks to develop understandings of its objectives and goals by the public and the public interprets the conditions and needs of education as they accept or reject knowledges, opinions, and impressions they have of education (35).

It was not until about the 1950's that we find most colleges of education beginning to offer courses in school-community relations. Comprehensive books were being published covering the basic areas of all types of communications between the school and its citizens. With the current knowledge explosion, the schools philosophical approach to learning has now moved to the development of skills for understandings, concepts, adequacy to reason creatively, and the problem discovery approach. With the current emphasis on these concepts, administrators now feel it is imperative that the school tell its story with maximum effectiveness (4, 6).
The study was undertaken as a service to the Selah School District. Mr. Charles McNurlin, Superintendent of District 119, suggested the study, and listed the following specific reasons why such a study would be helpful to both the school and the community:

1. The need for the public to understand that school patterns are changing; rapid innovation is part of many schools today.

2. That present beliefs held by the community as to the aims and objectives of their schools are often limited and inaccurate.

3. School administration should concern itself only with "our" school and "our" community. Communications should reflect this belief at all times.

4. It is felt that over-communication is a real problem to schools, and guidance in this area is advisable.

5. Much of the school's communication is not understandable to the lay public. Too often, a poor word is used, or one that is understood only by people in the profession.
6. Advance planning of a communications program has sometimes been neglected. In the past, much of the school's communication has been conducted on a basis of persuading for action, rather than telling the complete school story.

7. The need is for specific guidelines for the use of administrators in setting up an objective program of school-community relations which continuously informs the public about its school.

8. Schools should be aware that the development of an effective, informative communications program requires a great deal of time and effort. Staff time, material requirements and the degree of coverage desired should be carefully evaluated.

These reasons closely follow the writings and guidelines listed in the next chapter, and are based on accepted criteria found in the literature. The literature (21, 22) re-enforces Mr. McNurlin's statements by indicating that schools which do not have open-end communications with their citizens have usually failed to ascertain the interests, desires, and needs of the community and relate these in terms of educational programs. Fine (12) found that heavy teaching loads, low salary scales, inadequate plants and equipment could often be alleviated by effective community communications.
The primary goal of all public schools is to improve the quality of education for the students. Improvement can best be assured when information essential for change is fully and freely communicated. Apathy, indifference, or lack of interest in the schools by its citizens, are attitudes which the school often attempts to improve through the information communicated. Many studies (6, 13) have been completed on what citizens want to know, do know, where and how they obtain their information attitudes and opinions about their schools. Each chief administrator of the school district must determine what the particular group of citizens in that particular district wants to know. He also is in a position to determine what they need to know, in order for the school program to be effective. These areas of concern that need to be evaluated by the administrator in determining the scope of his informational program are:

1. Today there is far more to be gained from good education than a mastery of the three R's. The instructions program is undergoing great change and offering expanding opportunities for individual growth and development.

2. Parents are interested in their child's achievement comparisons.

3. The exploding pupil population and the migration from rural to suburban living create a need
for adjustments in facilities, staff, supplies, curriculum and textbooks. Parents should be informed of these changes.

4. It is highly important that the public understand how its money is being spent for education; how much money is received from local, state and federal funds. The public should be shown exactly what educational services these monies will buy for their children.

5. Any special problems that face the local district should be honestly and adequately told to the community. Schools should not be expected to produce superior results under conditions not conducive to good results.

6. Citizens should be apprised of the duties and responsibilities performed by both the certified and non-certified staff. This facet becomes increasingly important as duties become more and more specialized.

7. Special services to the schools need to be explained in relation to the total educational picture.

8. The schools need to remain ever cognizant of the fact that they belong to the people, and that the people will assume greater responsibility
for the quality of education when they understand the relationship between instructional practices and the adequacy of finance.

To work effectively in these areas of concern, the schools must use written communications with the utmost skill. Unless a message is read, understood, discussed, accepted and remembered; and results in constructive action, there is little if any value in the communication.

With these principles in mind, the next chapter lists some guidelines that may be followed in preparing more effective written communications between the community and the school.
CHAPTER IV

GUIDELINES

The following criteria have been established by the authorities as meeting the requirements for a defensible program of structured communications between school and community. They may serve as guidelines for reviewing existing practice, or in organizing a comprehensive program of school-community relations. They are:

I. Personal letters and other correspondence (3)

A. Personal letters

1. Letters always should be written on official school letterhead stationery.
   a) The stationery should be of good quality.
   b) The name of the school should be printed in distinctive type.
   c) The letterhead should contain the school's location, mailing address, phone number, title of the office from which the letter is sent, and the names of the board of education.

2. A letter should be mechanically correct in detail.
   a) The initials and spelling of the recipient's name and address should be correct.
   b) Sentence structure should be brief and concise.
c) Much thought should be given to word usage.

d) The salutation of *Dear Mr. Doe*, or *Dear Don* is preferable to a more formal salutation.

e) A less formal closing, *Sincerely yours*, is also preferable.

f) The letter should be centered attractively on the page and in balance with the letterhead.

g) A letter should contain no mispelled or strikeover words.

3. A letter should project a warm, friendly, conversational tone.

4. No letter should ever be mailed until it has been carefully read by the sender for clarity of thought, correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviation, overstrikes, and syllabification.

5. All letters should be signed personally by the person who wrote them, and the author's name typed below the signature.

6. The proper administrative authority should be held responsible for all letters originating from schools of the district.
a) Even though the administrator delegates the authority, the responsibility is his.

7. All letters should be answered promptly.
   a) Where this is not possible, a letter of acknowledgment and explanation, with a promise of a more complete answer in the near future, is indicated.

8. A copy of all correspondence should be kept by the school.

B. The Form Letter

1. All duplicated letters should be prepared as carefully, and by the same guidelines, as personal letters.

2. The duplicating process used should produce a clear, readable letter if it is to gain the attention of the recipient.

3. Form letters sent by first class mail are most likely to gain attention and secure thoughtful reading.

Purdy (29) found the most important written communications from the school to be personal letters to the parents. Letters serve many purposes. Kindred (20) states that in the past, far too many letters have been limited to reports of unsatisfactory work or to problems of discipline. Letters are an effective method
of communicating directly and economically with parents. Letters have the advantage of offering a written record of the exact way ideas are expressed.

II. Word Usage (14)

Educators must be cognizant of the fact that, like any profession, education has developed its own vocabulary of communication. Many words and expressions are likely to be unfamiliar to the public and should be avoided, choosing instead, the simple and more common words.

Words are used to arouse negative or positive responses. The importance of using the right word can not be over-emphasized. Kindred (19) has compiled the following list of positive words that may be substituted for negative words of common usage:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Expressions</th>
<th>More Positive Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Must</td>
<td>Should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Can do more when he tries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble maker</td>
<td>Disturbs class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncooperative</td>
<td>Should learn to work with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheats</td>
<td>Depends on others to do his work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid</td>
<td>Can do better work with help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never does the right thing</td>
<td>Can learn to do the right thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>Working at his own level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truant</td>
<td>Absent without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impertinent</td>
<td>Discourteous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steal</td>
<td>Without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclean</td>
<td>Poor habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumbbell</td>
<td>Capable of doing better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Handicapped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calamity</td>
<td>Lost opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disinterested</td>
<td>Complacent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expense</td>
<td>Investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to</td>
<td>Invest in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stubborn</td>
<td>Extremely self-confident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Insolent
Liar
Wastes time
Sloppy
Incurred failure
Nasty
Time and again
Dubious
Poor grade of work
Clumsy
Profane
Selfish
Rude
Bashful
Show-off
Will fail him
Outspoken
Tendency to stretch the truth
Could make better use of time
Could do neater work
Failed to meet requirements
Difficulty in getting along with others
Usually
Uncertain
Below his usual standard
Awkward in movements
Uses unbecoming language
Seldom shares with others
Inconsiderate of others
Reserved
Tries to get attention
Has a chance of passing, if

III. News Media (8, 25)

A. Effectively telling the school story through news media

1. Most news media have assigned a staff person
to write educational news.
   a) Staff who are assigned are usually
      interested in science, society news
      or special features.

2. Channeling all school news through one
   person or central office tends to promote
   efficiency and success in working with news
   media.
   a) At the beginning of the school year, the
      school should provide each media outlet
      with a detailed annual publicity calendar.

B. The press makes every effort to base its opinions
   upon fair and accurate information.
1. The school can and should provide accurate information at all times. This does not mean that the school volunteers information to the press about anything detrimental to the school. It does mean that the news is given honestly and factually when the press gets its information from another source and asks for a statement.

2. The total staff and facilities of the school should be available to the press, but only when permission has been obtained from the proper school authority.

C. School news should be as complete as possible when submitted to the press.

1. Photographs to accompany a story are always appreciated, even though not always used.

D. The school should know the type of media, and the news that media is most likely to use.

1. Daily papers are usually more interested in such things as curriculum matters, board of education policies, personnel changes, human interest stories, etc.

2. Local papers are interested in day-by-day news, meetings, new assignments, one-picture features, election campaigns, school bonds, etc.
3. Radio and television are interested in messages that carry a maximum of news with a minimum of words. The news should be of general interest for a large listening area (16).

E. What to expect from the news media.

1. Many stories will be rewritten to fit space available.

2. Rejections may occur for many reasons. The media has every right to accept or reject any information for publication.

3. School employees should understand that, like every one else, media employees are not infallible. Errors, omissions, misleading headlines sometimes occur.

While there are many sources available to aid schools in working with news media, an excellent pamphlet of suggestions published by the National School Public Relations Association is timely and current (27).

IV. Graphics

A. Charts and Graphs

1. Each may be used singly or in combination, in most types of written communications.

2. They should be simple in construction, presenting one main fact. Complex designs
quickly lose effectiveness, for as the number of lines increase, the number of people who will take the time, or effort, to think through the graphic, rapidly decreases.

3. Graphics should be clean, uncluttered, with bold lines or figures which stress one central idea.

4. Careful wording of captions to facilitate understanding of the message of all graphics is vital.

B. Photographs (11)

1. Photographs stand out alone as a graphic method of transmitting realism.

2. Photographs should be chosen to represent the area of education to be stressed.

3. Action pictures which suggest meaningful purposes are more effective than static pictures.

4. Pictures should not be posed.

5. Emphasis should be placed on the hands and face, for these are symbolic of emotion and action.

6. Limit photographs to one or two subjects or objects.
V. Report Cards (9, 28)

Most authorities agree there are gross inadequacies in the average report card. This is not a new problem. In 1927, Eugene R. Smith (36) stated: "Of all the unethical treatment to which we subject children, marking them is the worst."

Apart from the need to improve and standardize the instrument for reporting student progress to the parents, many educators and parents would agree with Yeager (40) when he states the school's emphasis should be from the standpoint of the parent, and all report cards should:

1. Promote understanding and good will,
2. State simply and clearly the school's philosophy and objectives,
3. Assist in adjusting home and community living with school subjects,
4. Provide adequate understandings of standards of work accomplished for its own sake, rather than for marks or rewards,
5. Be understandable to the child himself and promote understanding with his parents, and
6. Indicate measures of individual and social growth and development. Such principles as these in home reporting are necessary if education is to be conceived in its cooperative relationship.

SIRS (33), in their study revealed that report cards were fairly uniform in the areas of achievement, attendance and attitudes. The study also pointed out that in other report items there was a variance. This indicates that each district in Washington State is using much the same basic reporting system but with differences in other items, depending on the philosophy of the particular community and school district.
Important criteria or guidelines are:

A. Report cards should be clear and understandable.
   1. A district terminology list which explains and defines the meanings of the marks would help to avoid misinterpretations.

B. Report cards should be submitted to the parents, on a regular and scheduled basis.

VI. Official and other reports (34)

A. Official reports
   1. Annual report
      a) This report has legal status, as it is required by statute and issued annually by the board of education. It is designed to report to the taxpayers on school finances.
      b) The annual report's value to the school as a method of communication.
         (1) Offers the chief administrator of the district the opportunity to state in a clear, concise, convincing, and interesting manner the reasons for improvement of the school's program. This is a ready-made opportunity to say what the administrator wants to say, in a way he wants to say it.
B. Other reports (9)

1. Reports are issued whenever the need arises and it is important that current information be relayed to the citizens.

2. Word choices should be simple and easily understood.
   a) McClosky (24) suggests the more technically worded items often found in reports are best avoided, and lists substitute statements that would gain greater reader interest and acceptance. Excerpts from the list include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical items</th>
<th>More appropriate terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>enrollment trends</td>
<td>Each year more boys and girls come to Livingtown to live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recent improvements</td>
<td>Livingtown has been improving its children's schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>additional services, facilities,</td>
<td>Our children's present and near future needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>funds needed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The reports should be readable in length.

4. The format should be carefully chosen.
   a) Expensive appearing publications should be avoided.
   b) The format should be eye-catching and attractive.
   c) The printing should be clear, bold, and of high contrast for easy readability.
5. Reports are most effective when they give a complete story about one single segment of the school's program, rather than a potpourri of several segments.

6. Some reports may be issued on a regular basis, such as monthly newsletters, poor work slips, etc.

7. Each district's needs will vary, there is no "best" method of timing for submitting reports to the community.

VII. Miscellaneous ideas used by some schools as written communications

A. Children attending school for the first time, or parents new to the district, are sent maps indicating the safest route to travel to school (or the bus stop nearest them, and the approximate time the bus will both pick up and discharge students at that stop).

B. The school nurse sends a small chart of common childhood diseases, which describes the symptoms of the diseases and offers suggestions to the parents for coping with them. The chart is sent to all primary students, with a note explaining the nurse's function in the school program.
C. The school nurse, when necessary, sends personalized letters to parents, suggesting medical care or correction, instead of the usual formalized ones common in many schools.

D. When the November report cards were issued, one school district included as stuffers, a list of new and interesting books for each grade level, with the suggestion that they would make good Christmas gifts. A sentence or two gave a brief resume of the book. (Ninety per cent of the children in the grades covered by the stuffers, received a book for Christmas, as compared to thirty per cent of the children in grades where the stuffers were not enclosed.) The local library was pleased to aid in compiling the list.

E. New parents moving into the community received a letter from the school with information about the schools, such as the grading system, discipline policy, pertinent rules and procedures, persons to contact, appropriate phone numbers and so forth. The letter invited the parents to PTA and other school events and listed the dates and meeting times. The letter closed with a statement to the effect that success in life
is closely related to the amount of education
the individual has acquired, and how vital is
the parents' role in a student's education.
F. "What is Expected of a Pupil at the End of
   _______ Grade" is the title of a series of
booklets designed to inform parents of students
from grade one through six. The booklets are
mimeographed and concise, listing knowledges
and skills a child should gain during the
specific year, and urging the parents to
contact the teachers if further information
is desired.
G. One school writes filler items of short,
timeless bits of information about education,
and submits these to the news media. The
items are from one to ten lines in length
and cover all areas of education. Surveys
show that filler items are widely read.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to list some defensible guidelines that may be used by the schools in formulating a structured program of communication with the community. The study was undertaken at the suggestion of the Superintendent of the Selah School District in an effort to help identify areas where communications might be improved in that district. Authorities in the area of communications have been surveyed and their opinions and beliefs are brought together in this paper. It is recognized that problems and concerns differ in every school, and therefore all guidelines must be adapted to local situations.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


