

**Paying Attention to  
Public Opinion**

Literature in virtually all disciplines regularly proclaims one inescapable fact: schools have changed just as the world has changed. Educational literature, in particular, is prone to comparisons of what life used to be like, how students used to behave, and how schools used to function. Whether or not the "good old days" were quite as good as people remember them to be, although fodder for debate, is really irrelevant. The inescapable fact once again is that schools have changed. They will continue to change at a rate that many educational leaders simply are not prepared for and do not comprehend.

One way in which our schools have changed is in their relationships with the many publics that they serve. Ask parents, community leaders, teachers, or administrators questions about what the role they perform in our schools is in comparison to what they perceive it to have been in previous generations. Most of them will tell you that it is quite different. From an administrative point of view, strong communication skills are far more significant than they once were. The involvement of stakeholders in school-related decisions is now an expectation. The public owns the public schools, and perhaps for the first time they realize they do.

The trend in recent years has been for school leaders in all capacities to focus increased attention on their relationships with the many publics served by their schools. This focus has come from all levels of school administration, from the school board to the superintendent to building level administrators. As anybody involved in our schools can attest to, the focus has not really stopped at this level either. Teachers and staff are finding themselves paying increased attention to their communication skills and strategies, their relationships with parents and guardians, and their overall image, as perceived by the general public. They, like their colleagues on the administrative team, are concerned with truly understanding the public's opinion of our schools. And, of course, our educational agencies and governmental boards share these concerns.

The question this trend begs is, "Why? Why are educators, particularly those in leadership positions, so concerned with public relations and public opinion?" Answers to this question, although linked to the concept of change, are as numerous as the publics themselves. For one thing, we are finding ourselves spiraling more deeply into the Information Age. This age is characterized by almost instantaneous access to information. The skills

required to receive this information are minimal, and as the days progress a greater number of people discover this. Gone are the days when the general public acquired all of its information about our schools from within the local community. Now, wherever people happen to be, they have information about most of our schools at their fingertips. The technological explosion of the Information Age has armed people with the tools and the technologies to get virtually any and all information they desire.

Along with the disappearance of a bygone era void of much technology, we have also bid farewell to the days when much information, such as one school's standardized test performance in comparison with a neighboring school's performance, was concealed from or unknown to the general public. We have bid farewell to an era in which people concerned themselves more with what was happening in their own communities than in the rest of the world. Today, the public demands information about school performance. John and Jane Q. Public insist that it is their right to know how students in their neighborhood school are performing in comparison with other students anywhere in the world. They insist that budgetary information, salaries, and curricular choices be made known to them and they want a voice in arriving at all school-related decisions. School administrators who missed out on training in the area of school-community relations find John and Jane difficult to deal with. They do not know how to respond to these demands for involvement. The response, however, is really quite simple and rudimentary.

School leaders need to welcome this involvement. Not only must they welcome it, school leaders now have the responsibility to ensure that the public is correctly informed. It is not enough simply to welcome involvement passively. The active role of school administration requires leaders to listen and to inform. While access to information is virtually limitless, so is access to misinformation. School leaders, skilled in all aspects of school-community relations, have the ability to keep misinformation in check. The leaders for these times need to have the skills to work with our publics and to stop working against them or behind their backs. To do otherwise is to create a negative image that will be damaging to our nation's schools.

The smart school leader of the twenty-first century knows how important public involvement is to the future of public education. He or she understands what the community thinks of the school he or she is leading. This leader has two fingers squarely on the pulse of public opinion and utilizes this knowledge to inform the public when information is needed or desired and to confirm or alter its perceptions when they appear to be inaccurate. The leadership skills, the human relations skills, and the communication skills needed to be such a leader are changing rapidly as the way in which the public perceives their role in education is being transformed. The smart school leader understands this and works very hard at improving these skills. Finally, this leader realizes that our schools are just that—*our* schools. Therefore, this leader gives voice to the many publics, understands their concerns, and keeps them well informed.

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Giving these publics a voice that will be heard is an essential component of effective school-community relations. If we really believe that the key to making all schools great is to link them with the real world for which they intend to prepare students, then we will make every effort to involve the real world in our planning, implementation, and assessment efforts. These three words—planning, implementation, and assessment—are key words in developing our school-community relations plans.

It is no longer acceptable for school administrators to focus their communication efforts solely on public relations. For the idea of public relations implies that school leaders ought to be doing little more than informing, persuading, or selling school success to their constituents. While this may have been enough years ago, such one-way communication is now passé at best. The days of *public relations* plans in schools were characterized by such one-way communications. That is to say that the school communicated information to the community (usually parents) that school leaders felt the community ought to know. There was little if any opportunity for the community members to give meaningful input to the school leaders. Communication in this regard flowed in one direction only, from the school leaders to the community.

The result of efforts like these is an informed public, but not an empowered one. Community members know something about what goes on in a school, but they have no voice. The public schools in America wind up doing a very poor job of either representing the public or preparing young people to impact the public in a system characterized by one-way communication.

What is needed is a school-community relations plan that is built on two-way communication. Information flows from the public to the school and from the school to the public. When plans like this are in place, schools really do become essential parts of the community. In subsequent chapters, specific techniques and ideas for accomplishing two-way communication and designing the essential components of a school-community relations plan will be explored. The emphasis must first be on understanding the public's perception. School leaders absolutely must understand how the public views our schools if they are to begin responding to, enhancing, or altering these views.

## Trends in the Public's Perception

An important first step for school administrators to take involves their understanding of the public's perceptions. The Gallup Organization in tandem with Phi Delta Kappa has been conducting public opinion surveys about the perceptions people have of American educational institutions for more than thirty years. The purpose of these polls is to provide information about the public's feelings and attitudes to those making decisions about American public education. The results, shown annually in *Phi Delta Kappan*,

tell us that the public's opinion of our schools and their effectiveness has changed somewhat over the last quarter century. However, the changes are not as significant or as negative as one might imagine, given the growing skepticism about our schools' effectiveness portrayed in certain social and political settings.

The *Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (Rose & Gallup, 2009), although widely recognized in the educational community, is by no means the only educational poll to which the public has access. Numerous organizations conduct public opinion surveys at the state, regional, and national levels. *Education Week* is one example of a publication that regularly produces surveys about American's attitudes regarding public education. The results shown, as is the case with most educational surveys done on large scales, are typically similar to those shown by PDK/Gallup. What makes these polls interesting, however, is the variation in the content of questions asked throughout *Education Week's* polls. In a 2007 *Education Week* poll, for example, 52% of respondents, a slight majority, stated that the quality of teachers has improved over the past decade. More recently, in 2009, 59% of respondents to a recent *Education Week* poll stated that better teaching was responsible for raising standardized test scores in schools, compared with only 24% who stated that improvements were due to lower standards.

Additional polls and surveys are conducted that pay particular attention to national spending priorities. Every two years, for example, the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center conducts such a survey. One finding that has been consistently shown in this survey is that the public feels that education is one important area for which the country should be spending more money. A study completed by the National Opinion Research Center shortly after the 2008 presidential election demonstrated that voters were more concerned about education than they were about crime or defense. Similar results have been shown in studies published during many election years over the past two decades. These studies all indicate, at minimum, that the public thinks education is vitally important.

With the wide recognition and easy access of the *PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*, all school leaders are prudent to pay attention to its results and to look for trends over time. It is important to note, however, that school leaders also need to have their own methods for ascertaining their community's perceptions of the school they are leading. Specific ways in which this can be done are presented later in the text.

The data in the most recent PDK/Gallup report draws many important conclusions. However, before we move to the specific conclusions from the 2009 PDK/Gallup report, it seems necessary to comment on the important distinction traditionally made by the public between the nation's schools and schools in the community. The PDK/Gallup polls have repeatedly documented that the public has a low opinion of the nation's schools and a high opinion of schools in the local community. Americans make a significant

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distinction between the “nation’s schools” and “schools in the community.” They have a low opinion of the nation’s schools and a relatively high opinion of the schools in the community, an opinion that rises even higher the more closely connected the people in the community are to their local schools. While statements such as this need not drive all of the decisions that school administrators must make, they do provide administrators at all levels with information that ought to be considered and, perhaps, celebrated.

Table 1-1 shows results from 1976 and 2009 as a means by which to compare/contrast public attitudes over a period spanning just over three decades. While the data does not show public responses to many key questions, it does address the public’s perception of the quality of public schools during the particular two years depicted. Note that these results represent the public’s perception of the local schools in their community. The fact that the schools are local is significant, as will be demonstrated shortly.

As mentioned earlier, while there are some apparent discrepancies between the public’s perceptions of our schools in 1976 and their perceptions in 2009, there also are some noticeable similarities. Further, the perception of our schools’ effectiveness is not declining, as some skeptics would like us to believe. As the table below illustrates, in 1976, 42% of respondents gave their local schools a grade of A or B. Also in 1976, 16% of respondents gave their local schools a grade of D or F. The figures represented by these ratings are more negative than are their 2009 counterparts. In 2009, the percentage of respondents rating the schools with an A or a B is 51%, while those giving local schools grades of D or F equal 14%. This represents the highest percentage of A and B grades given in the poll’s history. The previous highest percentage, 49%, occurred in 1999. While there does appear to be improvements

**Table 1-1** Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in your community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here—A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

Grade	National Totals	
	2009 %	1976 %
A & B	51	42
A	10	13
B	41	29
C	32	28
D	11	10
FAIL	3	6

in this area over time noted in poll results, the improvement still represents a relatively small change from the percentage replying similarly in 1976.

Educators should celebrate these successes, for the polls indicate clearly some successful perceptions. Educators must also, however, pay attention to the 46% of public school parents who feel that the schools in their communities only deserve grades of C, D, or F. This should not overshadow the celebrations necessitated by the increased satisfaction that the public seems to have with the schools in their communities. However, it must be acknowledged. This recognition can only come about by first acknowledging that the polls exist.

While all of this information might be confusing or even disconcerting to many school administrators, a deeper understanding of these poll results offers some further hopeful news. As the PDK/Gallup polls have consistently shown, the general public always looks more favorably on the schools in their local community than they do on the nation's schools as a whole. To illustrate this point, Table 1-2 compares respondent's opinions regarding the nation's schools as a whole; not just the schools in their community. Here we see that the overall impression of public school quality is declining. Much of this decline has occurred since the enacting of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. As Table 1-2 shows, the percentage of people rating the nation's schools as a whole with a grade of A or B dropped from 24% in 2005 to 19% in 2009. Similarly, 17% of respondents graded the nation's public schools with a D or F in 2005, but that number has risen to 25% in 2009. These differences become even more pronounced when one examines the attitudes of *public* school parents. This group, in particular, is ambivalent about the quality of our nation's public school. Although principals would love to see all of our nation's schools being rated more favorably by the general public, they do find great relief in knowing that at least *their* public thinks that *their* school is better than most others.

The most recent PDK/Gallup Poll also revealed interesting public attitudes regarding the topics of No Child Left Behind and Charter Schools. These results are summarized as follows:

**Table 1-2** How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally—A, B, C, D, or FAIL?

Grade	National Totals	
	2009 %	2005 %
A&B	19	24
A	1	2
B	18	22
C	55	46
D	19	13
FAIL	6	4

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### *No Child Left Behind*

Support for NCLB continues to decline. Only one out of four Americans believe NCLB has helped schools in their community. But, by a two-to-one margin, Americans support annual testing of students in grades three through eight and using a single national test rather than letting each state use its own test.

### *Charter Schools*

Almost two out of three Americans support charter schools. But, they clearly don't understand exactly what they are, showing confusion about whether charter schools are public schools and whether they can charge tuition, teach religion, or select their own students.

Clearly, as polls regularly show, the public has some strong opinions about our nation's schools, but their actual level of understanding regarding some hot-button issues, clearly is lacking.

Furthermore and equally important for school administrators to understand, in virtually all polls, the public indicates that education ought to be a national priority worthy of increased attention and spending. A 2004 poll from *Time Magazine/SRBI* stated that 70% of Americans would rather spend more money in areas such as education and health care in lieu of receiving tax cuts. Only 24% of those polled stated a preference for the tax cuts. This poll provides similar data to a poll conducted 5 years earlier. A June, 1999 *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll, for example, found improving public education outranking such issues as guaranteeing the financial integrity of Social Security, promoting strong moral and family values, and increasing tax cuts. These polls, too, are very important for school leaders to take note of. While the criticisms leveled against the nation's schools may be troubling, the support indicated by the public's ranking of education's importance as a national priority ought to be encouraging. Remember, in addition to the *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll, similar results are consistently shown in the National Opinion Research Center surveys.

As PDK/Gallup polls typically illustrate, these feelings of education's importance extend to the treatment and working conditions of teachers as well. More than 50% of poll respondents stated in the most recent poll that economic stimulus money should be used to retain teachers rather than lay them off. Similarly, the 2009 PDK Gallup poll indicated that almost three out of four Americans favor merit pay for teachers, and most Americans estimate that teacher salaries are lower than what they believe teachers should receive.

School leaders need to be aware that the public, as expressed in these polls, does want the nation's schools to get better and does believe that teachers are the vital component in any plans for improvement. Many members of

the public appear willing to spend money in this regard, indicating a stronger level of support than many administrators realize. While the public does question the educational achievements made by our schools nationally, by and large they appear to be more satisfied with the local schools attended by their own children. These findings are important to take note of because their existence may make it difficult for school administrators to take a reactive stance, assuming that the public does not support their schools. This assumption, as poll results indicate, is patently false. It, therefore, will not work for school administrators to throw their hands up in the air and exclaim that the public does not support education. Understanding what these polls have to say about the public's attitudes allows school leaders to take a proactive stance on school-community relations. They inform administrators of what the public feels they are doing well, which in turn gives institutions' school-community relations plans a direction and a focus. It is important to note that school administrators should not base all of their decisions on public opinion. Doing so is hardly proactive. Rather, school leaders must understand that they are very well served to be *aware* of public opinion. This awareness leads to more informed decisions, which in turn creates fewer surprises.

It also must be noted that school principals do not need to wait for the results of these national polls to begin their understanding of public opinion. Instead, successful school leaders ought to conduct some of their own research regarding their public's attitudes and beliefs about their school's effectiveness. This research can come in many forms, as will be illustrated in subsequent chapters. All forms are useful because they accomplish two very significant goals. First, they give the principal important information about public opinion. Secondly, surveying the local school community to ascertain its perceptions causes many people to feel as though they are important to the school. This examination, in itself, often produces desirable results in terms of school-community relations. Many people, be they parents, business leaders, or community neighbors want nothing more than to feel listened to.

Although there are numerous sources for assisting administrators in surveying public opinion, school administrators unfamiliar with conducting their own public opinion research could consider Phi Delta Kappa International to be a valuable resource. The organization offers customized opinion polling services to individual schools or districts. Also, Phi Delta Kappa International makes Polling Attitudes of the Community on Education (PACE) materials available. These materials, geared toward the non-specialist in research methodology, include detailed information on constructing questionnaires, sampling, interviewing, and analyzing data.

Thus far, this chapter has focused primarily on the role of polls that inform school leaders of their *external public's* opinions, that is, the opinions of those individuals who spend most of their time outside of the school's walls. As explained, knowledge of these poll results helps to inform administrators' decisions in terms of their external communication. External communication,

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the focus of Chapter 5, includes all communication between the administrator and the school stakeholders outside of the school facility. Equally important to strong school-community relations is the school administrators' ability to understand and involve their *internal publics*. These people, often taken for granted because of an assumption that their regular role within their schools automatically keeps them informed, cannot be ignored. This concept is the focus of Chapter 6. The best school-community relations plans involve strong, regular, and purposeful communication with both the internal and external communities of our schools. Subsequent chapters are devoted to methods school leaders can use to strengthen communications with both of these groups.

## Misconceptions Regarding Public Opinion

By paying close attention to the public's perception of schools and their effectiveness, leaders are able to deal more effectively with misconceptions when they arise. Although there may be reasons for some to criticize the schools in their community, by and large the criticisms endured by public education have involved serious misconceptions. David Berliner (1993) stated that American schools have been damaged over the years by many unsubstantiated claims. Among these claims are the notions that education spending is wasteful and that American students are lazy and unproductive. These claims, according to Berliner, lead to the greater misconception that America's productivity has fallen as a result of an inadequate system of public education. Consider the words of Phillip Schlechty: "Some would return to a past golden era when all parents were supportive and most children learned what it was intended that they learn. These people do not seem to know that there never was a golden era" (1997, p. 1).

The following examples are just a few that help to counter some of the misconceptions about our nation's schools. They provide some startling information that illustrates the problems existing in "the good old days." Essentially, these statements illustrate what Phillip Schlechty so eloquently stated. Throughout American educational history, there have been problems perceived by the public. This is not a new phenomenon. These are facts that school administrators must understand if they are to provide proper leadership for contemporary school communities.

- Only 40% of Americans who entered school in 1945 completed 4 years of high school. Fifty years later, that number had risen to 80%.
- In 1889, 335 out of 400 colleges found it necessary to set up special preparatory departments to compensate for the deficiencies in entering freshman.

- In 1941, the Naval Training Corps reported that 62% of college freshman tested failed a test of basic mathematical reasoning.
- When the U.S. Army was testing recruits prior to World War I, they found so many inductees who couldn't read that two intelligence tests were developed—one for those who were literate and another for those who were illiterate. (Schlechty, 1997)

None of this information should be cause for celebration among the devoted members of the educational community. There still is much work to be done in our nation's schools. It must be noted, though, that problems have existed for a long time. The evidence simply does not support the cry that American public education is declining. In fact, in many ways, the nation's public schools have exceeded some of the goals they may have been founded for. They may not have been founded, many argue, for the purpose of creating a society in which virtually all citizens were literate. Yet, the Human Development Report from the United Nations indicates that 99% of Americans are literate (1995). The percentage of functionally literate Americans, defined as those who can read well, is far smaller than virtually any school leader would like. However, the United States is clearly among the world's leaders in terms of the number of adults who can read. This represents a significant educational goal that has been met. Apparently, the good old days were not quite as good as some people remember them to be, and today is not quite as bad either.

## SHOWCASE

### Faculty Meetings Devoted to Discussing Opinion Polls

In many schools throughout the country, administrators share public opinion polls with their faculties. In Virginia, the Commonwealth Education Poll is an annual poll that examines public attitudes toward education. This poll was conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute by the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at the Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Public Policy. Other states have similar agencies conducting similar polls. As school leaders become more aware of the need to recognize and respond to public opinion, school leaders increasingly are devoting entire faculty meetings to discussing the results and developing plans to respond appropriately.

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## The Purpose of a Plan

Being cognizant of public opinion helps school administrators build a foundation upon which they can develop a plan. The knowledge of public opinion, therefore, is not an end. Instead, it is a means by which the administrator begins to formulate the school-community relations plan for his/her particular school. The term *school-community relations plan* has been mentioned rather casually thus far. What is actually meant by this term? How can school-community relations be planned since it involves so many different people? First of all, not only can it be planned, but it also must be planned. Sadly, there are school leaders who consider school-community relations to be something that just happens. These people, believing that it cannot really be planned, lead their schools with a "fly by the seat of your pants" attitude. The best leaders among this group do experience some success, due to an innate or well-developed ability to make decisions. For the most part, they make good decisions and often find support for their ideas.

However, there is a real danger in leading in this way. Planning, so widely talked about in education, is considered by most to be essential to success. With the public having greater access to our schools, there are many more opportunities for interaction between the school leader and the public than there ever were before. One bad decision or ill-timed comment can be far more devastating for the school leader of today than it would have been say a decade or so ago. It stands to reason that as a greater number of people have quick and easy access to information about our schools, skills of judgment and decision making become more critical for school leaders to master.

The application of planning to school-community relations is, therefore, obvious. Failure to plan for school-community relations is an invitation for disaster. Beach and Trent (2000) suggest that the following characteristics of a planning system ought to be present as educational leaders seek to develop their school-community relations plan:

*Simplicity:* Most school systems do not have the resources to establish a full-time planning position. Therefore, time constraints will require a planning system that is straightforward, simple, and easily managed.

*Visibility:* Visibility should be a prime consideration in communicating key elements of the school-community relations program. While educational leaders can communicate a great deal of information without ever being seen by constituents, being visible demonstrates to many a higher level of commitment (Fiore, 1999).

*Accountability:* Outcomes of the school-community relations plan must be tangible and measurable. Planners ought to be sensitive to the need to visibly demonstrate these outcomes.

*Brevity:* An effective school-community relations plan should be succinct and to the point, using language appropriate to a wide audience. (p. 252)

Paying attention to these elements allows the school leader to create a plan that can be implemented and continuously revised. When such elements are part of a school-community relations plan, then leaders do not need always to "think on their toes." Instead, as issues arise, the school leader will be equipped with a structure in which to relate to the larger community.

We must pause to pay particular attention to one of the characteristics mentioned above because of its unquestionable importance, not only to school-community relations planning, but to effective school leadership in its broadest sense—visibility. As numerous studies have confirmed (Fiore, 2000; Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000), school leaders who are visible improve staff morale, communicate better with parents, know more students, and generally improve the climate and culture of their schools. In research conducted in 261 schools, it was found that staff perceptions of a positive school culture were significantly higher in schools in which the principal was considered to be visible often (Fiore, 1999). Just as a lack of visibility will hurt an administrator's ability to relate to members of a school community, so too will it hurt the leader's ability to be seen as an effective leader.

Since the demands of good school-community relations can be somewhat time-consuming, school principals need to realize that there is much to be gained by performing some of their management responsibilities while wandering around. Principals who are visible and practice "Management by Wandering Around" (Frase & Melton, 1992) demonstrate a real commitment to being with people. As the authors state, "MBWA leaders are seldom found in their offices during school hours. MBWA principals are on their feet, wandering with a purpose. They spend their time in classrooms and hallways, with teachers and students." The importance of this visibility cannot be overstated. Critical to any school-community relations plan is the notion that the leader must be both visible and accessible to constituents to the maximum extent possible. It must be noted, however, that this visibility is not a task in and of itself. Rather, there are many tasks that principals can accomplish while wandering around their facilities. Some strong planning skills are required to make such task accomplishment more possible, though.

Planning in school-community relations is really no different from planning in other educational contexts, such as curriculum. It does not, as some would imply, limit possibilities, but it instead creates them. Consider the well-planned teacher. He or she enters the classroom each day with a plan that contains learning objectives, instructional methodology, and evaluation

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of some form. Because of this plan and the teacher's understanding of the long- and short-term goals, he or she is able to deviate from it somewhat if the needs of the learners require. The unplanned teacher, on the other hand, often finds it difficult to let students' needs lead him/her down an unintended path because of a lack of understanding of long- and short-term goals. There is a fear that perhaps the teacher and students will find themselves in an area with which they are unfamiliar, frightened that they will never be able to find their way back. The same logic applies to school-community relations. Having a plan, whether it is for crisis management, the publication of a school newspaper, or ideas for conducting parent-teacher conferences, provides the educator with a framework from which to begin. As long as the objectives of the plan are understood and met, then there is some room for deviation from it. The "fly by the seat of your pants" method of planning virtually guarantees that different people on different days will do drastically different things.

It must also be noted that an effective school-community relations plan bases itself on solid action, not just thoughts, words, or intentions. School-community relations are about things that must be done. As most experienced school leaders can attest to, upward of 90% of school-community relations can be traced to what is actually done in a school. This only leaves 10% to be dependent on listening and verbal and written forms of communication. With this in mind, the best school-community relations plan is most strongly influenced by what is done in school on a regular basis. In other words, it can no longer be assumed that an attractive monthly newsletter alone constitutes strong school-community relations. It may be an important component, but school-community relations, as is the case in all relationships, represents things that are done to build a greater sense of commitment among people.

Here is one final note about school-community relations planning. As is the case with all strategic planning, a yardstick is needed to assist in measuring a plan's effectiveness. As long as the planner understands the goals of the plan, this yardstick can be used to measure the design before it is finalized and put into action. Exhibit 1-1 provides a checklist to be used as such a yardstick.

School administrators who fail to understand the need for a sound school-community relations plan are inviting trouble. Those who build a plan, but fail to ever check up on its effectiveness, are in an equal amount of trouble. Instead, school administrators must have a plan, carry it out as effectively as possible, and periodically audit or check on its effectiveness. Again, these steps are not only true in school-community relations. They are simply the essence of good planning.

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## Exhibit 1-1 Checklist for School-Community Relations Plan

- Does the plan make use of appropriate and varied communication channels for the various audiences involved?
- Do all individuals with responsibility in the school community relations plan know what the goals and objectives are?
- Does the plan contain strategies for involving all stakeholder groups whenever possible?
- Are the goals, objectives, and desired outcomes of the school community relations plan consistent with the school philosophy and the state's laws?
- Are the goals, objectives, and desired outcomes stated in measurable terms to the extent possible?
- Has the design of the plan's strategies and activities considered available human resources, funds, and facilities?
- Does the plan distinguish between long- and short-term goals and objectives?
- Are there provisions in the plan for future audits of its effectiveness and results?
- Is the school community relations plan tailored to the specific needs of the school and its community?
- Does the school community relations plan take into account the need for in-service education of the staff?

### Three Kinds of Plans

Although the actual design of a school's community relations plan contains characteristics unique to the needs of the particular community served by the school, a point that will be further elaborated upon in subsequent chapters, the organizational framework under which it was created will fall into one of three categories. These three categories form the basis for understanding who in the organization is responsible for the design, coordination, and implementation of the school-community relations plan. Described below, they are coordinated, centralized, and decentralized plans.

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## SHOWCASE

### Inviting Community Leaders to Read to Your Students

Inviting community leaders into the school to assist with special projects is a proactive way of improving feelings of support. It is, therefore, advisable for school administrators to engage in events such as Readers Are Leaders Week, a project Dr. Sondra Estep led with her school staff. Every day for one week, every classroom in her school had a community leader come and read to the students. The readers included a realtor, banker, photographer, lawyer, stockbroker, engineer, land developer, and some hospital personnel. The principal further understood that she could maximize media coverage of the event if she included government leaders. State and U.S. representatives and senators, local politicians, and the State Superintendent of Schools all participated or sent a representative. The result was a tremendous feeling of community involvement in education and an improvement in the perception stakeholders had of the school.

### The Coordinated Plan

A school-community relations plan that is coordinated involves a strong degree of cooperation between central office administrators and administrators at the school building level. The roles and responsibilities of these administrative positions complement one another and are neatly fit into a clearly articulated plan. At the central office level, there is often somebody employed as the director or coordinator of school-community relations. This person serves as a valuable resource person to the principal, reinforcing the work being accomplished at the building level. Additionally, the director of school-community relations at the central office level may assume responsibility for establishing media contacts on behalf of the school, resolving complaints from parents or other community members in cooperation with the principal, and assisting the principal in assessing the effectiveness of the individual school's school-community efforts.

A coordinated school-community relations plan that is organized and carried out effectively offers an excellent opportunity for cooperation and consistency within a school system. The building principals in such plans have great discretionary power, which they usually appreciate. However, they operate within a structural framework that is established cooperatively between the central office and the school. This collaboration leads to an increased likelihood that goals will be the same and that viewpoints in regard to school-community relations will be common. Such a framework

also, in many cases, increases the likelihood of support from the central office administration. Confluence of goals and viewpoints causes the increased likelihood of such support.

### **The Centralized Plan**

When a school-community relations plan is centralized, then the responsibility for the program belongs solely to the superintendent and his/her designee. At the school building level the principal has little, if anything, to do with the overall plan. While the principal obviously must interact with members of the community on a regular basis, this interaction takes place independent of the school system's goals and intents. As such, the formal school-community relations plan is far less personal than it is in the coordinated model. The emphasis in a centralized school-community relations plan is on relations with groups of people, not with individuals.

Supporters of a centralized plan base their support primarily on the fact that the superintendent is almost always the best-known public figure in a school system. It is typically the superintendent who belongs to key civic organizations and is seen by the public as the chief representative of the schools. Because the superintendent does not have a school building to lead throughout the school day, the nature of the job, it is argued, allows for greater opportunities for community involvement to take place. In many ways, the superintendent has the most accurate finger on the pulse of the community.

Those who disagree with the effectiveness of a centralized school-community relations plan do so because it ignores individual needs. The centralized plan assumes that people's needs throughout a community are similar. In many school systems, particularly larger ones, the demographics vary greatly from one school to the next making the similarity of needs among school communities rare. Also of concern is the possibly flawed notion that the superintendent knows the community best. Many argue that while the superintendent may know the larger community well, the building level administrators best understand the populations served by each individual school.

### **The Decentralized Plan**

A school-community relations plan that is considered to be decentralized places most of the responsibility on the shoulders of the building principal. There is little, if any, formal involvement in the school-community relations plan on the part of central office administration. The result is a more personal relationship between the school and the community it serves. Principals, understanding much more about their local community than those at the central office do, base decisions on the understandings they have of their population's needs and interests.

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The decentralized plan is very common in schools today. Most people believe that it is logical to assume that the building principal has the best understanding of their community of all those on the administrative team. The common belief is that the principal is in the best position to develop a school-community relations plan that will be of the most benefit to his or her own particular school.

However, this type of plan also has some critics. Some argue that a plan that is too decentralized usually involves a neglect of school-community relations on the part of central office administrators. If plans are all developed locally, then the superintendent and his or her administrative team do not really have a significant role to play. This exclusion often leads to a lack of support from the top, which is harmful to the school in a time of dissension. Furthermore, in school systems already replete with dissension or conflict between teachers and administrators, the plan may be further weakened by the lack of central office involvement. Finally, some principals simply falter in their school-community relations without some guidance, direction, or support coming from the central office.

There are pros and cons to all three of these types of plans. The effectiveness of one type over another is probably less a function of the plan's framework and more a function of the principal's ability to be a leader. It is important for building level administrators to understand that regardless of the label they can affix to their school district's school-community relations efforts, it is the principal's responsibility to develop and maintain positive relationships with the school community—both internally and externally.

	PRO	CON
<b>Coordinated Plan</b>	Increased likelihood of consistency and confluence of values. Little room for misinformation between central office and school building leadership.	Difficult to accomplish in larger school systems.
<b>Centralized Plan</b>	Superintendent is in the best position to coordinate school-community relations efforts. Schools usually receive similar treatment because one person is responsible for communication.	Deals only with groups of people. Individual needs of each school are ignored.
<b>Decentralized Plan</b>	The principal understands their school's individual needs best and is in the best position to readily communicate with their community.	Leads to inconsistency within a school system and lack of involvement from central office.

## Chapter Summary

- It is of paramount importance that school leaders understand what the public really thinks of our schools.
- The public has a tendency to rate their local schools much higher than they rate our nation's schools as a whole.
- Many people want an increased say in decisions made at the local school level.
- When asked to rank order our nation's priorities, a high percentage of Americans do believe that education ought to be considered priority number one or two.
- Misconceptions about public school effectiveness abound. Increased awareness of these misconceptions helps school leaders to correct them.
- It is very important for school leaders to have a clearly articulated plan for school-community relations.
- The school leaders visibility ought to be an important component of this plan.
- School leaders need a yardstick of some kind to measure their school-community relations plan's effectiveness.
- There are essentially three types of school-community relations plans, coordinated, centralized, and decentralized.

### CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

#### A Tale of Two Cities

Joe Thompson had been a teacher in the Sunnyvale Community Schools for 12 years. During that time, he became highly respected in the affluent community served by the school and was a favorite teacher among parents and students. When he accepted a job as principal of Westview Elementary School, located in a blue-collar community some 30 miles down the river, the entire Sunnyvale Community mourned the loss of their favorite teacher. However, all were convinced that Joe's no-nonsense approach would make him as successful in the principalship as he was as a teacher.

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At the Westview Open House meeting the following September, Joe addressed the parents in attendance for the first time. "First of all, I want to inform you of how excited I am to be the new principal here at Westview," he began. "However, I'd be lying if I didn't say that I am disappointed by the lack of attendance at tonight's meeting. Now I realize you are not the parents who need to hear this, as you obviously care about your children's education. I am concerned, however, that so many Westview parents appear not to care, as shown in our low turnout this evening. As research shows, children will not be successful in school without parental involvement."

Although the rest of Joe's address went very well, as he highlighted some ambitious goals for his new school, there were some parents in attendance who had been offended by Joe's opening comments. These parents knew how badly their neighbors wanted to be in attendance. Many of them, it was commonly understood, simply couldn't be, as the community's chief employer, Northwire Industrial, required employees to do shift work. Within a few days, word of Joe's Open House speech had gotten around the community and his office telephone began a constant ringing.

"How dare you imply that I don't care about my children," one mother exclaimed.

"Who are you to come into this town and judge our lifestyle," screamed a father.

"Maybe if you held Open House at a convenient time for parents, we would have been there," yelled another parent.

Joe closed his office door, sat back in his chair, and wondered where he had gone wrong.

### Questions for Analysis

1. How has Joe Thompson's lack of understanding of his community hurt his early tenure at Sunnyvale?
2. What are some steps Joe could have taken to prevent the current situation he's faced with from developing?
3. Does Joe suffer from any misconceptions about his new community? If so, what are they?
4. If you were Joe, what would you do next?

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