

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN RESHAPING THE IMAGE OF SELECTED
OKLAHOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

By

DONALD L. AMON

Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education
Frostburg State University
Frostburg, Maryland
1987

Master of Arts in Speech
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1989

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Ed Harris

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Katherine Curry

Dr. Tonya Hammer

Dr. Tutaleni Asino

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Name: DON AMON

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Title of Study: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN RESHAPING THE IMAGE
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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to explore the planning and creating of communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster perceptions of public education. To learn about local school systems, the public actively seeks information about these stories from media outlets such as newspapers, television stations, and social media (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013; Trump, 2012). School administrators must prepare effective communications to combat the incorrect information and to champion accurate information as a means to nourish positive perceptions of education. In the absence of the truth, people fill in the gaps and begin to contrive scenarios from which the data emerges (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013). Therefore, it is vital that effective communication exist between public schools and lay publics (Ediger, 2001). School administrators have a variety of tools available to them in order to effectively communicate with their various publics. Using these tools, school administrators can create a path to achieve excellence in communications with their respective publics. The research questions ask what is being done to communicate with the community and how is the communication received. The questions were answered by 29 participants in 4 schools of varying sizes from small (less than 200 students) to large (more than a 1000 students). Using Grunig's Excellence Theory, which shows the importance of public relations to the organization and how the organization relates to their stakeholders (Grunig, 2008), and the four models of public relations: Press Agent, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetrical and Two-Way Symmetrical, the research questions were answered. Findings from this study indicate that schools engage with their publics advocating for both local and broad public education. The messages are perceived positively by the stakeholders. The superintendent's role in creating or managing public relations trickles down to the staff. One-on-one communication is the best form of communication, but using a variety of methods available to the school reaches more stakeholders. Based on the research it is important for schools to engage in accurate, timely, and consistent communication with their stakeholders to create a mutual trust between the school and the stakeholders.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Public education is and should be at the forefront of public issues, but as of late, education has come under attack in all forms of media. From tragic school shootings, catastrophic natural disasters, graphic inappropriate teacher-student relationships, puerile dress code uproars, and the politic school grading systems in combination with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates, it is reasonable to see how the public can formulate a negative view of both public education and educators (Kowalski, 2011).

Three decades ago an NEA (1982) article proposed that the mass media coverage of the decline in public confidence in teachers and the drop in student test scores fostered the decline in teachers' professional self-esteem. Today, information regarding public education received via newsletter, webpage, television, radio, computer streaming, e-mail, cell phones and other devices are instantly available for dissection, discussion, and debate. In addition, images or sounds recorded by individuals are instantaneously available to share with other cell phones and media outlets (Mastrodicasa, 2008).

The emergence and prevalence of modern technologies has changed how the media disseminates information and how consumers receive communication. Trump (2012) notes that local television stations produce coverage on three screens, TV, internet, and mobile devices causing news directors to think in a totally different manner

about how they disseminate information. Since the social media-information revolution has changed the way we communicate, it is practical for school leaders to lock into these varying modes of communication and use them as a tool for effective communication (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009).

This new age of instant information and its almost constant barrage of negativity towards teachers and public education are rapidly changing and possibly permanently distorting the public's view of and opinions about schools and teachers. In this current atmosphere of mistrust, effective communication is more necessary than ever (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009). Parents show little confidence in public education as a whole, yet assign the schools their children attend the highest scores ever, highlights the nation's division in the perception of public schools (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012).

As school leaders formulate ideas for effectively communicating public education advocacy, acknowledging and understanding this perception split is important. School leaders should develop a planned and systematic two-way process of communications between the educational organization and its internal and external publics designed to build morale, goodwill, understanding, and support for that organization (Kowalski, 2011; Epstein 2009). Schools and districts can engage parents and communities by utilizing the internet as the hub of the connected learning community. Moreover, that internet presence can be so much more than a set of web pages with information about the district or school (Becker, 2005).

Problem Statement

Hoggan and Littlemore (2009) acknowledge that we live in a world of sound bites and fragmented stories. To learn about local school systems, the public actively seeks information

about these stories from media outlets such as newspapers, television stations, and social media (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013; Trump, 2012).

However, this information is sometimes accurate and represents the school systems and at other times, it is inaccurate. Incorrect information in the virtual arena often becomes the reality of the receiver (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013). Interaction, therefore, is essential in addressing misinformation and establishing the organization as a credible source (Veil, Buechner, & Palenchar, 2011). School administrators must prepare effective communications to combat the incorrect information and to champion accurate information as a means to nourish positive perceptions of education.

Changing public perception becomes difficult once the school loses control of its message to other sources. In the absence of the truth, people fill in the gaps and begin to contrive scenarios from which the data emerges (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) conducted a public opinion poll on effective advocacy for public education and found that predominating bad news makes people feel worse about public education (2004). Therefore, it is vital that effective communication exists between public schools and lay publics (Ediger, 2001). School administrators have a variety of tools available to them in order to effectively communicate with their various publics. Using these tools, school administrators can create a path to achieve excellence in communications with their respective publics.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the planning and creating of communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of Oklahoma public education.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What is being done to communicate with the community?
 - a. How is communication established?
 - b. How is communication maintained?
 - c. How does the communication advocate for the local educational system(s)?
 - d. How does the communication advocate for broader public education?
2. How is this communication perceived?
3. How does Excellence Theory explain the above?

Theoretical Framework

In the mid 1980's the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) committed itself to a longitudinal study of public relations. In this study, Grunig and Hunt (1992) defined public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its publics, which included planning, execution, and evaluation of communication between both internal and external publics. From this 15-year study of best practices in communication management, Excellence Theory was born. The Excellence Study, as it would be called, showed the importance of public relations to the organization, and how the organization relates to their stakeholders (Grunig, 2008).

The Excellence Study found that effective public relations departments participated in strategic decisions, whereas, less effective public relations departments created messages based on decisions by others outside the public relations department (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The central concept is that top-down management controls the message to and from the stakeholders, thus creating relationships (Grunig, 2011). In the hierarchical system of schools,

managerial decisions are often handed down by the superintendent, who receives his directives from federal and state legislation and the local school board. Depending upon the system in place at individual schools, the principal may also hand down managerial decisions to the person in charge of the public relations duties. All messages are transmitted and received through this public relations designee. Retaining or obtaining relationships and solidifying the reputation of the school and public education are the end goals for this central messenger. It is likely that some issues become crises. In these cases, the public relations designee would communicate directly to the superintendent to effectively get out the correct information. All other communications are two-way communications, between the stakeholders and the public relations designee in order to make correct decisions in achieving the school's goals (Grunig, 2011).

Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) further emphasize the interdependence of the organization with their internal and external environments in systems perspectives. Schools, being both people-oriented and goal-directed, use coordinated efforts for the attainment of goals and interaction with their external environments creating an open system (Lunenberg, 2010; Norlin 2009). Systems Theory calls for the organization and the public to be interrelating parts in which each group's actions affect the other (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2009). Since public relations help establish and maintain relationships within the organization and with its publics, Systems Theory became the lens through which public relations was viewed (Grunig, Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). This open system allows for a two-way flow of resources and information, which the organization can adapt or control (Lattimore et al, 2009). School leaders must master these open systems to gain a two-way flow of communication with their environments in order to obtain credibility and allow for the control of messaging.

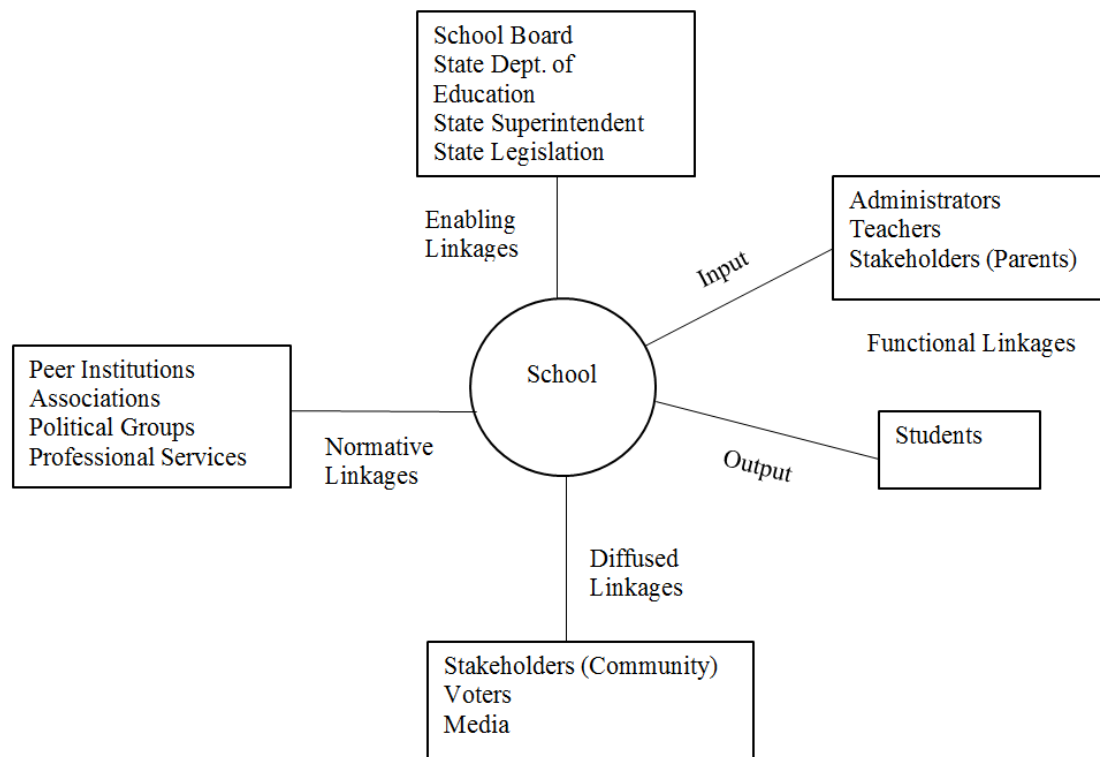


Figure 1. Linkage Model demonstrating how various stakeholders relate to the school. Adapted from “Managing Public relations” by J. Grunig and T. Hunt, 1984, p.41. Copyright 1984 by Harcourt Brace.

The Linkage Model in figure 1 above has been modified to reflect school stakeholders. The Linkage Model is a way to identify the many different stakeholders and their relationships to the school. Administrators utilizing the linkage model may determine the best means to convey their messages to each of the different stakeholders. It uses enabling linkage, functional linkage, diffused linkage and normative linkage to identify the stakeholder relationships (Rawlins, 2006), which are explained as the following:

- Enabling linkages are stakeholders who have some control and authority over the organization (Rawlins, 2006). The local school board, state, and federal departments are examples of those stakeholders who have some control and authority over the school.

Federal and state monies can be withheld if the school does not comply within the parameters created by those organizations. Local school boards create policy to which the schools must adhere.

- Functional linkages are essential to the function of the organization and are divided into input and output (Rawlins, 2006). The functional linkages display the working part of the school, in that input is derived by administrators, teachers, and parents based on what is best for that school and community. The students are the output of the school, which has far reaching effects as students go on to become members of the community and the workforce.
- Normative linkages are stakeholders with similar values and common interests (Rawlins, 2006). The normative linkages come from career tech centers, neighboring schools, political groups, and professional societies, which all have public education as their main focus.
- Diffused linkages are stakeholders who are involved based on the actions of the organization (Rawlins, 2006). Diffused stakeholders are those that have a stake in the school but aren't necessarily involved in the daily function of the school. In some communities, the school is the central figure that binds the community together, and it is important for the school to not only thrive, but survive. It is important, therefore, for administrators to recognize and understand these many different stakeholders and their links in order to achieve excellence in communications and the overall mission and vision of the school district.

The Excellence Study also found four models of public relations in which an organization may convey their message to these stakeholders. They included both one-way and two-way

communications (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Table 1 below displays the four models indicating whether it is a one-way or two-way communication and a brief description emphasizing the characteristics of each of the four models.

Table 1: The Four Models of Public Relations

Model Name	Type of Communication	Characteristics
Press agent/publicity	One-way communication	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as the organization desires.
Public information model	One-way communication	Uses press releases and other one-way communication techniques to distribute organizational information. The public relations practitioner is often referred to as the in-house journalist.
Two-way asymmetrical model	Two-way communication(imbalanced)	Uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences to behave as organization desires. Does not use research to find out how stakeholders feel about the organization.
Two-way symmetrical model	Two-way communication	Uses communication to negotiate with the public, resolve conflict and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its stakeholders.

Note. Adapted from Waddington, S. (2014, September 14). “Grunig Revisited: Digital Communication and the Four Models of Public Relations,” by S. Waddington.

The four models of public relations are Press Agent/Publicity, Public Information, Two-way Asymmetric, and Two-way Symmetric. Each one of the four models may be used across the linkage model singularly or altogether. The Press Agent model is a good fit for the enabling linkage as mandates are passed down from the federal, state, and local levels. The Public Information model can be found in the functional and diffused linkages as information regarding upcoming programs, school lunches, and sports events offered by the school. The Two-way Asymmetrical model can be found in the enabling linkage and functional linkage as schools

receive messages from the legislature to students understanding new policies at their school. The Two-way Symmetrical model is found in the functional and in diffused models as communications with the public and other stakeholders attribute to the success of the school. Further explanations on the four models will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

The Excellence Study concluded that all organizations use all of the models of public relations eventually; however, the Two-way Symmetrical is considered the standard of the four models. It is the model that creates excellence in communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Waterman, 2012).

Methodology

This multi-site case study on selected schools in Oklahoma explored the planning and creating of communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of public education.

Participants in this study came from four different schools of varying sizes based upon the Average Daily Membership (ADM) listed on the Oklahoma Secondary Activities Association (OSSAA) website for the years 2014-2016. The schools were broken down into four categories:

1. A district with less than 200 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
2. A district with 300-550 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
3. A district with 600-950 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
4. A district with more than 1000 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.

The participants chosen from each of the schools consisted of a public relations person or superintendent designee, a secondary teacher, an elementary teacher, a secondary parent, an elementary parent, a school secretary, and an at-large community member. This method of

purposeful sampling was used as a means of getting information from schools of different sizes and populations. This strategy allowed for multiple perspectives on the cases (Creswell, 2007). Interviews were a form of data collection: others included observations both inside and outside the facilities, documents, websites, and social media.

The data were collected, coded and examined for emerging themes. In confirming trustworthiness of the data, the study used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Assumptions

Some assumptions were that the participants would have some type of plans already in place that dealt with public relations and their school. The perception of level of communication was another assumption, meaning the participants may have believed they were using the Two-way Symmetrical form of communication with their stakeholders, but were using the Press-agent model. The reciprocal of that was also true; some schools may have believed they were using the Press-agent model when they had actually created Two-way Symmetrical communication with their publics.

Definition of Terms

AASA: The American Association of School Administrators, also referred to as The School Superintendents Association. Founded in 1865, this professional organization has more than 13,000 educational leaders worldwide. They advocate for the highest quality public education for all students, and develop and support school system leaders (The School Superintendents Association, n.d.).

Diffused Linkages: They are stakeholders involved based on the actions of the organization (Rawlins, 2006). Stakeholders who have a stake in the school, but are not involved in the daily

function of the school. Community members, voters in the district, and the local media are examples of diffused linkages.

Enabling Linkages: Stakeholders who have control and authority over the organization are the enabling linkages (Rawlins, 2006). This includes local school boards, state and federal departments of education who have control and authority over the school and can withhold funding if the school does not comply with the parameters created by those organizations.

Functional Linkages: They are stakeholders essential to the function of the organization, divided into input and output (Rawlins, 2006). This includes teachers, administrators, and parents developing what is best for the school. Students are the outputs, which have far reaching effects on the workforce and communities.

Normative Linkages: They are stakeholders with similar values and common interests (Rawlins, 2006). They include career tech centers, neighboring schools, service organizations, and professional societies.

Facebook: Facebook is a popular free social-networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. The site, which is available in 37 different languages, has no limitation on quantity; however, staff can remove inappropriate material. A key feature is the status update that allows members to write short announcements for their friends and followers to see (Dean, 2014).

NEA: The National Education Association, the nation's largest professional employee organization, is committed to advancing the cause of public education. They have three million members and are in 14,000 communities throughout the United States. The mission of the NEA is to advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the

promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world (About National Education Association, n.d.).

NCLB: No Child Left Behind refers to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a federal law passed under the George W. Bush Administration. It represents legislation attempting to accomplish standards-based education reform. It holds schools accountable for higher standards, provides more opportunities for parental school choice, and emphasizes reading. It requires 100% of students to reach the same set of state standards in math and reading by 2014. The implementation and the law itself is a controversial issue in education (Lewis, n.d.).

Public Relations: It is the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Press Agency: It is one-way communication with propaganda (one-sided arguments) as its purpose (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Public Information: It is the one-way dissemination of truthful information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Social Media: Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content sharing and collaboration (Wigmore, 2014).

Twitter: **Twitter** is a free social networking microblogging service that allows registered members to broadcast short posts (Wigmore, 2014).

Two-Way Asymmetrical: In this communication model, the sender gets input from the receiver and changes the message to better inform or persuade (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Two-Way Symmetrical: In this communication model, information flows both ways between sender and receiver. The public relations practitioner functions as a mediator, rather than persuader (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Summary and Organization of the Study

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter I introduces the study including the problem statement, purpose statement, definitions of terms, assumptions, and the four guiding research questions. Grunig's combination of Systems Theory and his four models of public relations create the Excellence Theory through which this study examines communications between schools and their many publics.

The literature review comprises chapter II and contains a wide array of topics regarding communicative possibilities and problems schools face. Community programs, school staff, professional development, educational issues, crisis, media, school plans, and technology are addressed. The literature also contains a section on Excellence Theory's ties to systems theory and Grunig's four models of public relations.

Chapter III details the methodology and procedures used to accumulate data in this study. The selection process, data collection, and analysis techniques are explained. Ethical considerations along with trustworthiness of the data will conclude the chapter.

Chapter IV provides thick and rich descriptions of the data collected. Interviews, collection of artifacts, and observations of communicative practices will be described in detail.

Chapter V analyzes the data through the Excellence Theory lens and provides interpretation of the data. Finally, Chapter VI provides the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature explains the process of school leaders becoming communicators for their schools and public education. It discusses the importance of creating a public relations strategy in order to create excellent communications with the various publics utilizing the technological advances afforded to the twenty-first century administrator. The construction of the review is broken down into sections concerning the information age and technology, schools and accurate information, schools and inaccurate information, and the theoretical framework. It will emphasize the principles of excellent public relations and describe the Two-Way symmetrical model as the best model for an organization's public relations programs.

Information Age

Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA) mandate that aspiring leaders master today's technologies and that practicing administrators adapt to the new expectations for high-power performance and leadership (Mullen, Kealy, & Sullivan, 2004). School leaders agree that improvement in communication methods would enhance relationships between the school and home (Ramirez, 2001). According to O'Reilly and Matt (2013), school superintendents indicated, a clear need for schools to become cognizant of and involved in virtual communities. Administrators have at their disposal a myriad of ways to communicate their message. Epstein's

framework of six types of parental involvement (2009) includes the idea of designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications concerning school programs and their child's progress. Even in the digital age, face-to-face communication cannot be overlooked by school leaders. For effective face-to-face communication, a Back to School Night may be valuable in connecting with parents (Ferrara, 2009; Ediger, 2001). Ediger (2001) also suggests fun nights where parents show off their talents and how their interests and hobbies may fit into the school curriculum. The Oklahoma State Department of Education suggests the use of communiqués for letters and press releases. In today's fast-paced world it may be difficult to arrange and schedule back-to-school nights. Newsletters and other paper-based communiqués may get lost in the shuffle. Therefore, educators need to find ways to utilize the ever evolving technology at their disposal. Teachers who implemented modern technology to improve their communications with staff, students, and parents were coincidentally, very popular with stakeholders (Mullen et al., 2004). Rogers and Wright (2008) agree, stating educators must become effective at interpersonal communication with a target audience. Dezenhall (2014) found that mass audiences think in terms of familiar stories that tap into their deeply ingrained biases and beliefs. Therefore, school administrators and personnel must develop their skills in three essential areas: seeing a story, shaping the story, and conveying the story so that what is happening in schools can be known in the bigger conversation on education (Dillon, 2012).

The public uses varied sources to gather information. An American Association of School Administrators study (2012) found that 70-75% of the public sees, hears, or reads news about public education. The ability for stakeholders to see, hear, or read news about education is available all the time. The "CNN effect", (Dezenhall, 2014; Mastodicasa, 2008; O'Reilly & Matt, 2013), twenty-four-hour news coverage, the real time Twitter cycle, created a shift in the

media and had a tremendous impact on reporting and the need for rapid communication. Information dissemination is no longer confined from 9 A.M to 5 P.M, but occurs constantly (Dezenhall, 2014). News directors must think in a very different manner from days past, and so must educators who want to work effectively with these news organizations (Trump, 2012). In the past, leaders could control much of the information as they worked to establish their voice as the legitimate source of information (Vielhaber & Waltman, 2008). However, technology has empowered the critics and disarmed the mighty (Dezenhall, 2014). School public relations must embrace this new form of communication with a public that is no longer passive. The public no longer sits, reads, and listens; it now has the opportunity for feedback where everyone has the ability to be a broadcaster and receiver (Hoggan & Littlemore, 2010).

In this information age, schools must take note of the varied ways individuals and groups in society communicate. For example, social media technology allows for question and answer reciprocity via comments or video in seconds (Qualman, 2010; Hoggan and Littlemore, 2010; Veil, et al., 2011). Information through television, radio, computer, e-mail, cell phone, and other devices is constantly and instantly available, discussed, and debated. In addition, recorded images and sounds are shared almost instantaneously with cell phone and other media recordings and can gain instant popularity in the phenomenon of viral video (Mastrodicasa, 2008). The amount of information we shove online has multiplied nine times in the last five years (Dezenhall, 2014). Every minute there are 48 hours of video uploaded to YouTube (Qualman, 2010). Twitter gives users access to hundreds of millions of users, and if Facebook were a country it would be the third largest in the world behind China and India (Qualman, 2010).

Social media is not a fad; it is a fundamental shift in the way we communicate (Qualman, 2010). Research indicates that technology and media consumption by teenagers is up to 20 hours

a day and that they are multi-tasking on more than one device at a time (Rosen, 2010; Dezenhall, 2014). High school students are receiving 2,889 texts messages a month compared to making or receiving 191 phone calls and 47% can text while blindfolded (Rosen, 2010). Cell phones can be a vital tool for schools as most phones are walking computers where students can multi-task texting, listening to music and doing research (Dillon, 2012; Rogers & Wright, 2008; Rosen, 2010). Rosen (2011) found that the iGeneration, those born since 1995, expect smartphones, internet and everything technological to be readily available and do whatever they want it to do, whenever, and wherever. The iGeneration child has the expectation that if they conceive of something they should be able to make it happen (Rosen, 2011). Therefore, having policies in place for how an organization will communicate via social media is crucial (Veil et al., 2011). Social media is the number one activity on the web (Qualman, 2010). A single tweet may generate thousands of likes, and the same goes for YouTube videos (Gordon, 2012; Qualman, 2010; Vielhaber & Waltman, 2008).

Kowalski (2011) writes that the notion of public relations is one of the most recognized but least understood dimensions of organizational administration. He goes on to state that it should be deliberate and planned (Kowalski, 2011). In the past, information was only disseminated by school districts if it was requested; today communication needs to be proactive (Bisland, 2003; O'Reilley & Matt, 2013). Information posted on a school website still requires parents to retrieve said information (Becker, 2005). Report cards may not be specific enough, so there must be other forms of communication (Ziegar & Tan, 2012). Ramirez (2001) contends that schools should train parents on how to access information using students to instruct in a computer lab. In doing this schools can quickly reach as many parents as possible. Ziegar and Tan (2012) contend parents who use technology have increased communication with teachers

and have become more involved in their child's education. Technology has been shown to increase the means by which parents and teachers communicate (Rogers & Wright, 2008). New technologies have the power to better the parent-teacher relationship by providing easy, efficient, and effective methods of transferring information (Ziegar & Tan, 2012). Online sources can be ideal for generating timely communication and interactive, two-way conversations with audiences (Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012). Administrators and teachers are constantly communicating with the school's multiple audiences; when school leaders communicate effectively, students, parents, and community members understand and support what the school is doing, and the processes of teaching and learning moves forward.

Schools and Accurate Information

AASA (2012) found that superintendents are a credible source of information about schools; however, teachers and principals are even more credible. Ferrara (2009) asserts the role of the principal is critical in shaping the perceptions of teachers and staff in a school. The importance of the total school community, including support staff and students, goes a long way in creating positive images of public education. Advocacy materials specifically mention school front offices and the importance of signage, seating and greeting (Thomson, Ellison, Byrom, & Bullman, 2007). Ediger (2001) points to the school secretary as the first point of contact for great public relations, indicating their need to be kind, considerate, and helpful. In creating advocacy, it is imperative there is a plan for professional development. Entrenched mindsets and insufficient training block progress in this area; therefore, there is a need for education about the changing role of public relations and communications technology with the school community (Mullen et al., 2004). Training teachers to deal with perceptual barriers between themselves, parents and the school creates a positive environment (Ferrara, 2009). It is also important to train

the office staff in understanding their role, as they rarely receive training in dealing with parents (Thomson et al., 2007).

Kowalski (2011) tells us that the public relations process intends to produce and maintain positive relationships, an organizational image, and ultimately collaboration. Public relations are planned, strategic communicative efforts that are mindful of all the pertinent publics (Dezanhall, 2014; Dunn, 1986; Horn & Horn, 2014; Newquist, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Watson & Noble, 2007). Public relations departments require continuous training and an understanding of strategic planning to achieve public relations excellence (Horn & Horn, 2014). Newquist (2009) understands that developing a plan and vision for how, when, why and where public relations occur is essential to a successful public relations program. Public relations are for superintendents, principals, and guidance counselors; it encompasses everybody in the district and is something that should be practiced every day (Horn & Horn, 2014; Newquist, 2009). To begin the process of planning it is important that the district evaluate everyday tasks. Newquist (2009) gives a starting list for this evaluation:

- How are people treated when they call the school? Is the person answering the phone courteous, friendly, and helpful?
- Many schools have voice mail systems. Are callers led through a frustrating phone maze, do they get through, and if they leave a message does somebody call them back?
- How often are meetings held? Are they accessible? Are parents and community members notified of meetings in advance? Is there audience discussion?
- Is the community notified of school events?
- How well do teachers and administrators communicate with parents? (pp. 1-2).

Communication with parents is essential, and it must be meaningful, clear, and engaging (Newquist, 2009). It is important that public relations build mutual, beneficial relationships with their publics because they have a vested interest in their school (Horn & Horn, 2014). This collaboration between schools and parents has been linked to increased academic success (Becker, 2005; Ferrara, 2009; Mullen et al., 2004; Rogers & Wright, 2008). Ferrara (2009) insists that involved parents become advocates for the school. Dr. Pedro Garcia, Superintendent of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, after engaging the community to complete a survey, found that parents closely associated with the school had favorable views, while those not closely associated held less positive opinions (Becker, 2005). Epstein (2009) found that involved administrators were critical for successful collaboration with the community. Parents also preferred face-to-face communication (Rogers & Wright, 2008). This is important to the branding of the school as Thomson et al. (2007) note that there are no schools without the parents. This communication provides a basis for positive attitudes among students, which has been shown to increase attendance (Ferrara, 2009). Schools will prosper when there is courteous communication between all stakeholders (Ediger, 2001). This also provides accountability and support as the community feels a sense of responsibility from interactions with their schools (Lawrence, 2006).

A vital part in allowing the community to see what is happening at school is to provide them with information about the presentation of programs (Bisland, 2003; Ediger, 2001; Epstein, 2009; Howell, 2004). Communications about school programs and student progress to mean: two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community (Epstein, 2009). There are several sources readily available to release this information: school newspapers, broadcasting classes, local newspapers, bulletin

boards, sporting events, school board meetings, and parent/teacher conferences (Howell, 2004). Teachers can highlight students in many ways: reader's theatre, PE activities, singing, band, and art (Ediger, 2001). A public relations campaign taught as a project that includes creative thinking, critical thinking and other processing skills is a way for student involvement in the advocating of public education (Bisland, 2003). The important focus of the program is the pupil's success (Ediger, 2001). Once schools get started improving their image and showing off their students' activities, the ideas will keep coming and the rewards will continue to grow (Howell, 2004).

Public relations for schools involve five functions: 1) strategic planning facilitated by the superintendent, principals, or designee; 2) researching what to say; 3) supplying information to the publics; 4) promoting awareness of the school or educational issues; 5) collaborative decision making in respects to the concerns of the publics (Heath & Coombs, 2006;Horn & Horn, 2014). Schools following these guidelines are taking steps toward excellent communication.

One of the models of public relations is the Two-way Symmetrical model. This model is an example of how schools, in communicating with their stakeholders, can make collaborative decisions with respect to the concerns of their publics (Ferrara, 2009; Gainey, 2009; Kowalski, 2011; Mullen et al., 2004; Thomson et al., 2007). Mullen et al. (2004) found that deliberate two-way symmetrical communication is helpful in creating communal support for students, educators, and parents. Establishing these communications from the school office creates a climate of trust (Thomson et al., 2007). This climate of trust is vital in times of crisis.

Unfortunately, there have been more and more instances of crises in public schools. Accurate information is very important in these instances; school officials must be forthcoming with precise information. Zdziarski (2006) defines crisis as " an event, which is often sudden or

unexpected that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution" (p.5). Crisis communication has been viewed as the cornerstone of public relations (David, 2011). A swift response to information inquiries from both the public and media is desirable during times of crisis because it reduces the media's ability to alter the outcomes of situations (Lukaszewski, 1997; Stein, 2006). Dezenhall (2014) warns, however, that although swift responses are desirable, sometimes it is best to ensure all information is correct and accurate. In crisis management, social media can be effective in:

1. Countering demonstrable falsehoods and conveying simple positions and recommended actions.
2. Connecting specific audiences to content that carries an alternative narrative to what they may be hearing from adversary parties.
3. Serving as a stalking horse to keep conventional media more honest than they would be otherwise (Dezenhall, 2014, p.106).

Vielhaber and Waltman (2008) believe that the organization should have a single spokesperson to speak authoritatively for the organization, who realizes the importance of technology and how to disseminate information during a crisis.

Schools and Inaccurate Information

Sometimes information is inaccurate or perceived to be inaccurate. There are several reasons as to how and why information is perceived as inaccurate. One reason is that actual versus perceived environments are important to consider as the perceived environment dictates achieving effectiveness through interacting with key publics (Grunig, 1992). Another is with the use of technology or printed text which relies on the reader for pace, understanding, and common

frame of reference (Horn & Horn, 2014). Horn and Horn (2014) go on to say that, readers assign meaning, intent, and value to the message. They illustrate this with the following example: "The girl ate all the COOKIES. The GIRL ate all the cookies. The girl ATE all the cookies." (Horn & Horn, 2014, p. 28). In these examples, we can see how three very different messages may be received. Reading the written word in emails and other social media platforms does not imply shared meaning between the communicators as words do not always illicit the same responses in all people. For example, punctuation in texts and social media is replaced with line breaks indicating an ongoing conversation. Adding a period to a message marks finality and connotes anger (Crain, 2013). Information may have a negative reception by assuming that all parties want to be involved (Watson & Noble, 2008). Another assumption Watson and Noble (2008) share is that a lack of a common goal of understanding between the communicators may lead to disagreement as well. Negative information can cause harm that lasts forever, especially on the internet (Dezanhall, 2014). Communication devices like email, thumb drives, and the uncontrollable social media landscape, may pass along incriminating information that may be true or false, but nonetheless damaging (Dezanhall, 2014). The monitoring of virtual communities has allowed districts to combat negative information posted by others (O'Reilley & Matt, 2013). Inaccurate information shared and re-tweeted not only makes the organization look bad, but the user as well. Moreover, while it is easier to simply skip over a post to which you do not want to respond than it is to ignore a pointed question from the media, the public, as the media will turn to other sources if the organization stonewalls on key issues (Veil et al., 2011). However, all is not lost; O'Reilley and Matt (2013) found that when controlled adequately the impact of the virtual community is positive allowing for the generation of discussions, perceptions, immediate access, and it allows for different voices to be heard. Regardless of any

planning done by the public relations practitioner, once the courts of social media get a hold of the story, it may overwhelm even the most constructed strategies (Dezanhall, 2014).

As schools have moved further away from neighborhoods, Ziegar and Tan (2012) believe they have also become alien to the students and parents. Part of this problem may be due to school consolidation, which has resulted in the dissolution of nine out of ten school boards since 1940 and the erosion of communities (Lawrence, 2006). In his studies, Ferrara (2009) found that parents generally did not feel welcome at school. Parents want the initiation of contact to come from teachers, and teachers want parents to initiate the communication (Ziegar & Tan, 2012). The barriers created will continue if participation of parents is not valued (Ferrara, 2009). This divide will continue if parents are not seen as partners, consumers or supporters, but rather problems (Cole, 2007). This is often true if parents from diverse cultures have significant differences from the dominant culture at the school (Ferrara, 2009). Thomson, et al. (2007) noted that when immigrant parents felt excluded because of the language barrier. Lawrence (2006) believes that this miscommunication or lack of communication may cause rifts between the community and the school, leading to the possible defeat of bond issues. The rift may also allow for negative feelings toward public schools from the public (Ediger, 2001).

If schools project poor images in their most basic communications, then good public relations will not matter (Newquist, 2009). Public relations without a purpose may fall into the adage of “it’s what we’ve always done” (Watson & Noble, 2007, p. 161). Parents that hear this response from the central office or their respective school lose trust in that school (Broad Foundation, n.d.). The communication with parents must be meaningful, clear, engaging, and not filled with irrelevant content (Newquist, 2009). Educators who fail to communicate effectively

create misinterpretations, misunderstandings and mixed messages that can cause the entire system to spiral downward (Ramsey, 2009).

Often educational issues are vague to the lay public. Communicating the issues to stakeholders is an important move in public school advocacy. The Oklahoma State Department of Education (2012) believes the A-F Grading System is another opportunity for a constructive dialogue between parents, school leaders and teachers. It will also give schools a tool to encourage more parental and community involvement. AASA (2012) found that people think schools are unsafe, yet children are safer in school than anywhere else. When it comes to test scores, the public wants average scores more than disaggregated data (The School Superintendents Association, 2012). It is clear the public wants information and it is up to the local schools to make sure the public understand what information they receive.

Theoretical Framework

In the mid-1980s the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) committed itself to a longitudinal study of public relations. The study asked the following questions:

1. How, why, and to what extent does communication affect the achievement of organizational objectives?
2. How does public relations make an organization more effective, and how much is that contribution worth economically?
3. What are the characteristics of a public relations function that are most likely to make an organization effective? (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Moss and DeSanto, 2011).

In order to answer these questions, Grunig and Hunt (1992) defined public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its publics, which included planning, execution, and evaluation of that communication between both internal and external publics. The Excellence Study, as it would be called, showed the importance of public relations to the organization and how the organization relates to their stakeholders (Grunig, 2008). Out of this 15-year study of best practices in communication management Excellence Theory was born.

Grunig, Grunig, and Ehriling (1992) set forth a proposition indicating the importance of public relations having a strategic role in the management of an organization:

Public relations contribute to organizational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organization's goal with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organization. Public relations contribute to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Public relations is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the senior public relations manager is a member of the dominant coalition where he or she is about to shape the organization's goals and to help determine which external publics are most strategic (p. 86).

Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) developed three spheres, one inside another, that characterized excellent public relations programs as shown in Figure 2 below.

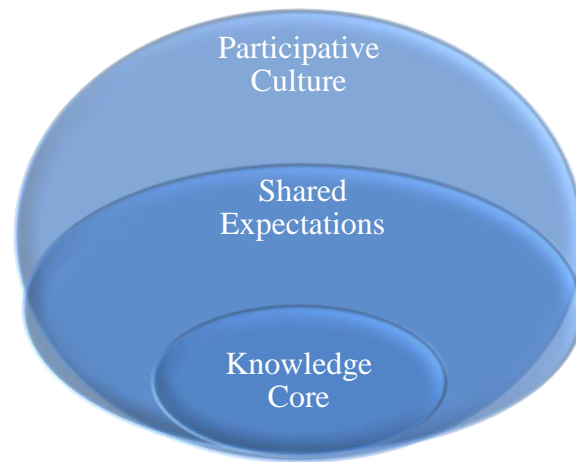


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the three spheres of excellence. Adapted from “Manager’s Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management,” by D. Dozier, L. Grunig, and J. Grunig, 1995, p. 10. Copyright 1995 Erlbaum.

The core of the sphere is the knowledge core, surrounded by shared expectations, and finally surrounded by participative culture (Dozier et. al, 1995). The knowledge core involves a management role in strategic planning of goals, and evaluation of programs. This is coupled with writing, editing, and research done by a technical department under the guidance of a manager of communications (Dozier et. al, 1995). Departments that generate publicity and deflect negative publicity practice one-way communication, which does not lead to communication excellence; excellent programs practice two-way communication (Dozier, et al., 1995). The Press Agency and Public Information models of communication are one-way models where the information flows from the organization to the public. In the Two-way Asymmetrical model, the communicator gathers information about the publics for management decisions, so the message can be most effective. The Two-way Symmetrical model also gathers information, then takes the information, negotiates and manages mutual understanding between the publics and senior management (Dozier et al., 1995). The middle sphere of shared expectations results in forming partnerships with the dominant coalition, those in charge who can affect the structure of an

organization. The communication departments act as advocates for the stakeholders and relay that information to the dominant coalition which is the senior management. Once the dominant coalition makes a decision, it is up to the communication departments to craft clear messages that carry the desired outcomes expressed by the dominant coalition (Dozier et. al., 1995). The final sphere is participative culture. From the Excellence Study two forms of organizational culture emerged: authoritarian and participative. The authoritarian culture is closed to outside ideas and tends to favor asymmetrical communication. The participative culture allows for a sharing of values, openness, and innovation which favors symmetrical communication. The participative culture embraces diverse groups with varying backgrounds in the make-up of the organization. The participative culture carries the characteristics of excellent communications (Dozier et al., 1995). In 2008, Grunig clarified that Excellence Theory explained the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with shareholder publics (Donsbach, 2008; Yaxley, 2009).

After this study, the pondered question was whether or not excellent public relations could be practiced in similar ways across the world. Effective public relations will share generic principles across cultures, discounting any specific variables related to the different nations (Vercic, Grunig et al., 1996). Grunig, Grunig & Vercic (1998) corralled excellence characteristics into ten generic principles when applying them in different and diverse cultures.

1. *Public relations is involved in strategic management:* An organization that practices public relations strategically develops programs to communicate with strategic publics, both external and internal, that provide the greatest threats to and opportunities for the organization.

2. Public relations is empowered by the dominant coalition or by a direct reporting relationship to senior management: In effective organizations, the senior public relations person is part of or has access to the group of senior managers with greatest power in the organization.

3. The public relations function is an integrated one: Excellent departments integrate all public relations functions into a single department or have a mechanism to coordinate the departments. Only in integrated systems of public relations can public relations develop new communication programs for changing strategic publics.

4. Public relations is a management function separate from other functions: Many organizations splinter the public relations function by making it a supporting tool for other departments such as marketing, human resources, law, or finance. When the public relations function is sublimated to other functions, it cannot move communication resources from one strategic public to another the way an integrated public relations function can.

5. The public relations unit is headed by a manager rather than a technician: Communication technicians are essential to carry out daily communication activities. Yet excellent public relations units must have at least one senior communication manager who conceptualizes and directs public relations programs or this direction will be supplied by other members of the dominant coalition who have no knowledge of communication or relationship building.

6. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is used: Two-way symmetrical public relations is based on research and uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics. Excellent public relations departments

model more of their communication programs on the two-way symmetrical model than on press agency, public information, or two-way asymmetrical models.

7. *A symmetrical system of internal communication is used:* Excellent organizations have decentralized management structures that give autonomy to employees and allow them to participate in decision-making. They also have participative symmetrical systems of internal communication. Symmetrical communication with employees increases job satisfaction because employee goals are incorporated into the organizational mission.

8. *Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical public relations:* Excellent public relations programs are staffed by professionals—people who are not only educated in the body of knowledge but who are also active in professional associations and read professional literature.

9. *Diversity is embodied in all roles:* The principle of requisite variety states that effective organizations have as much diversity inside the organization as in the environment. Excellent public relations include both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners of different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

10. *An organizational context exists for excellence:* Excellent public relations departments are nourished by organic, decentralized management structures, which allow participative rather than authoritarian cultures. Organizations turbulent complex environments produce activist publics that pressure the organization and actually push it towards excellence (p.337-339).

Using the above principles, Fawkes (2012) concluded that excellence in communications places the practitioner as a boundary spanner linking external publics to organizational strategic communications where the highest level is in symmetric communication. A study conducted by

Yunna Rhee (2002) found that the dimensions of communication, knowledge potential for public relations, participation in a strategic management, support for public relations and value of public relations, clustered into a single index of excellence, thus validating the theory in the cultural context of Korea. Evatt and Lee (2005), using the ten generic principles of excellence, showed the relationship between these principles and variables that might be seen to predict excellence. The contribution of the Grunig, Grunig, and Vercic's 1998 study is twofold. First, the excellence scale is a potentially useful vehicle to transmit excellence principles from remote theory to day-to-day practice. It is a step towards making the principles accessible in practice. Secondly, the tests of relationships among variables add to an understanding of those characteristics of organizations that can be expected to contribute to excellence. This verified Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig's (1995) finding that excellent organizations and less than excellent organizations are distinguished by communication departments that act as eyes and ears for management and as conduits of information from the public to the decision makers.

This translates to the public school setting with the superintendent or building administrators taking on the role of the dominant coalition with either themselves or designees as the public relations department. School marketing promotes the school's dedication of providing the best possible educational needs to the community (Lockhart, 2011). Successful school marketing meets the needs of both internal and external audiences, thus both sides benefit (Lockhart, 2011). It requires gathering a team of communicators and developing strategies to carry out an action plan targeting the community and its leaders (Warner, 2009). Proactive communication should also be two-way communication. School leaders generally agree that improvement in communication methods would enhance relationships between the school and home (Ramirez, 2001). Ediger (2001) advocates for a harmonious relationship between teacher

and parents. To facilitate this, schools and districts can engage parents and communities by utilizing the Internet as the hub of the connected learning community; a school's Internet presence can be so much more than a set of web pages with information about the district or school (Becker, 2005).

Summary of Literature Review

Chapter II presented a review of the literature pertaining to the ever changing landscape of technology and its potential use in public school public relations. First, the review detailed the importance of getting information to the relevant stakeholders via different methods. The review went on to explain how the information age has provided an explosion of platforms as to how to reach students, teachers, and relevant stakeholders. The review explained the importance of social media technology to the iGeneration, and how public schools need to latch on to this medium to spread positive messages about public education. With a myriad of communication devices at a school's disposal, all relevant public education information can be sent to pertinent stakeholders with ease. Secondly, the review explained that sometimes information is received accurately and sometimes it is received inaccurately. Accurate information is important in discussing local, state, and national public school issues. Accurate information during a crisis situation is imperative. Thirdly, the review discussed inaccurate information as perceived by the receiver such as instances wherein using new technology caused the message to be misinterpreted or lost all together. Finally, the review detailed the theoretical framework used in this study. The review explained the origins of the Excellence Study of public relations, which begat Excellence Theory. The review indicated the foundations of excellent communications lies within strategic two-way public relations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Expanding and changing media and greater access to information-on-demand have increased the pressure on schools to be open, responsive and transparent (National School Public Relations Association, n.d.) School officials are pressured to find ways to engage with their various publics about the school's purpose, programs, and expected outcomes (Lashway, 2002). Now more than ever, image, communication, and marketing of schools is vitally important (Hanson, 2003). The purpose of this study was to explore the planning and creating of excellent communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of public education.

Research Method

Qualitative research uses real world observations to explore human elements and understand the meanings ascribed by groups to social problems (Creswell, 2007; Givin, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) state, "qualitative research is suited to promote deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (pp.7-8). Another characteristic of qualitative study is that the "researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Merriam (2002) explains qualitative research as being "richly descriptive" using words and pictures instead of numbers (p.5). This research, which will explore the planning and creating of excellent

communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of public education, lends itself to qualitative inquiry.

Case Study

Yin (2003) explains that case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed and the investigator has little control over events (p. 1), therefore this study employs case study methods since it is focused on how schools communicate effectively with their many stakeholders. As I had no direct control over the public relations communications of any of the participating schools, the case study was a viable strategy for this study. This case study focused on how schools communicate and how effective stakeholders perceive those communications to be. The study also explored four school sites of varying sizes, which follows Creswell's (2009) discussion of how the case study researcher might select several programs to show different perspectives on the issue.

Research Questions

1. What is being done to communicate with the community?
 - a. How is communication established?
 - b. How is communication maintained?
 - c. How does the communication advocate for the local education system(s)?
 - d. How does the communication advocate for broader public education?
2. How is this communication perceived?
3. How does Excellence Theory explain the above?

Sampling Procedures

The selection of participating schools was made using purposive sampling, a deliberate method of choosing participants in an effort to yield relevant and plentiful data (Yin, 2010). Participants in this study came from four different schools of varying sizes based upon the Average Daily Membership (ADM) listed on Oklahoma Secondary Activities Association (OSSAA) website for the years 2014-2016. The schools were broken down into four categories:

1. A district with less than 200 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
2. A district with 300-550 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
3. A district with 600-950 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.
4. A district with more than 1000 students based on the ADM according to the OSSAA.

The participants chosen from each of the schools consisted of a public relations or superintendent designee, a secondary teacher, an elementary teacher, a secondary parent, an elementary parent, a school secretary, and an at large community member. Criteria for school selection were based on permission, availability, and proximity to the researcher. With the exception of Gotham City, most of the schools studied were within a sixty-mile radius of each other. The participants were chosen by referral from the respective superintendents. This wide range of school sizes presented a well-rounded picture of how differing school sizes handled their public relations with their respective publics. Each school was asked for permission to observe their public relations practices and collect any artifacts that may include public relations material.

Schools that fell into each respective range of students were contacted via phone or email asking for permission to use their site(s) in the research. Once permission was granted, the superintendent was asked to direct the researcher to staff members that would participate in the

study. Community members willing to participate were also suggested by the respective superintendents in the study.

The reasoning behind including teacher participants was two-fold: to see how they use public relations in their communications, and to determine if they had received any public relations professional development. The parent or community participant was addressed as a receiver of the communications given to them from the school. These participants gave a well-rounded picture of the public relations processes, if any, that each school uses. Another aspect of the selection of participants was that most, if not all, of these participating schools were familiar with each other and might have been able to share practices they find valuable from these other sites.

Sources of Data Collection

The following table below illustrates Yin’s (2010) four potential data collection activities: 1. Interviewing, 2. Observing, 3. Collecting and Examining, and 4. Feeling.

Table 2
Data Collection Methods and Types of Data for Qualitative Research

Data Collection Method	Illustrative Types of Data	Specific Examples of data
Interviewing and Conversing	Language (verbal and body)	Another person’s explanation of some behavior or action; a recollection
Observing	People’s gestures; social interactions; scenes and the physical environment	Amount and nature of coordination between two people; spatial arrangements
Collecting	Contents of: personal documents, other printed materials, graphics, archival records, and physical artifacts	Titles, texts, dates, and chronologies; other written words; entries in an archival record
Feeling	Sensations	Coldness or warmth of place; perceived time; interpretation of other people’s comfort or discomfort

Note. Adapted from “Qualitative Research from Start to Finish,” by R.K. Yin, 2010, p. 131. Copyright 2010 by Guilford Press

The sources of data collected in this research included observations, interviews, documents, websites, and social media (if applicable) of the various schools.

Interviewing and Conversing

The participants of the study were divided into two categories: school personnel (public relations designee and teachers), and stakeholders (parent/community member). These options provided different viewpoints of the school's communication processes. The participants were asked how the schools communicate with their different audiences, the effectiveness of those communications, the perceptions of those communications, the ability to offer or receive feedback, and which model of public relations was mostly used. There were two different sets of questions designed for each category of participant. The interviews were conversational and included open-ended questions, so that participants could answer freely and in their own particular vernacular (Yin, 2010).

The interview protocol consisted of the following guiding questions. The questions were modified slightly when interviewing a parent or community member.

- What is your definition of public relations?
- How is public relations used in public education?
- How is public relations used in your school?
- What is the process of crafting and disseminating public relation material?
- What types of information do you or your school put out as a form of public relations?
- In what ways do you inform the public about the state of affairs in public education?
- How do you solicit feedback from stakeholders?

- What, if any, technological platforms are you using for public relations?
- What else can you tell me about your school and the way they use public relations?

Observations

The observations at each of the school sites focused mainly on any signage that may be visible to the public as they pass or enter the school grounds; any other visible banners, signs, or documents were also noted. For each site, permission was requested to observe the inside of the school building, especially the area near or around the main office as this is normally the public's first impression of the building. In these observations I was able to use my senses, which allowed me to gather an impression of the building that was not filtered by what others might have seen or reported seeing (Yin, 2010).

I observed technology, including, but not limited to the respective web sites of each of the participating schools, looking for instances of excellence in communication. If applicable, I also observed any social media accounts, including Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram that the schools officially manage.

Documents

I observed and analyzed pertinent documents used for communicative purposes, including press releases, parental information, and upcoming events posters that would assist in the research. Documents and other artifacts represent another form of data important to a qualitative study and may reduce reflexivity as these objects were created prior to my study (Yin, 2010).

Senses and Reactions

Yin (2010) uses the word feelings to describe what the researcher senses not only physically, but emotionally during the course of data collection. I took note of any reactions I had during this process to see if it corroborated with any of the collected information. During the research process and interviews, I never sensed any negative reactions from the participants. The interview environments were always comfortable and by the end of the interview I sensed the participants were comfortable with me as the researcher asking questions. The one exception to this was the interview with the Metropolis community member, Tom. Tom was a willing participant and the environment was comfortable, but he was a man of few words and was worried he was too negative. This was, however, a reflection of how he responded to the questions and not directed at me, the researcher.

Data Analysis

A conscious effort was made to allow the data to guide the research and not impose the researcher's viewpoints on to the data. In analyzing data Yin's (2010) five phases was used, which includes: compiling, disassembling reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (p. 176).

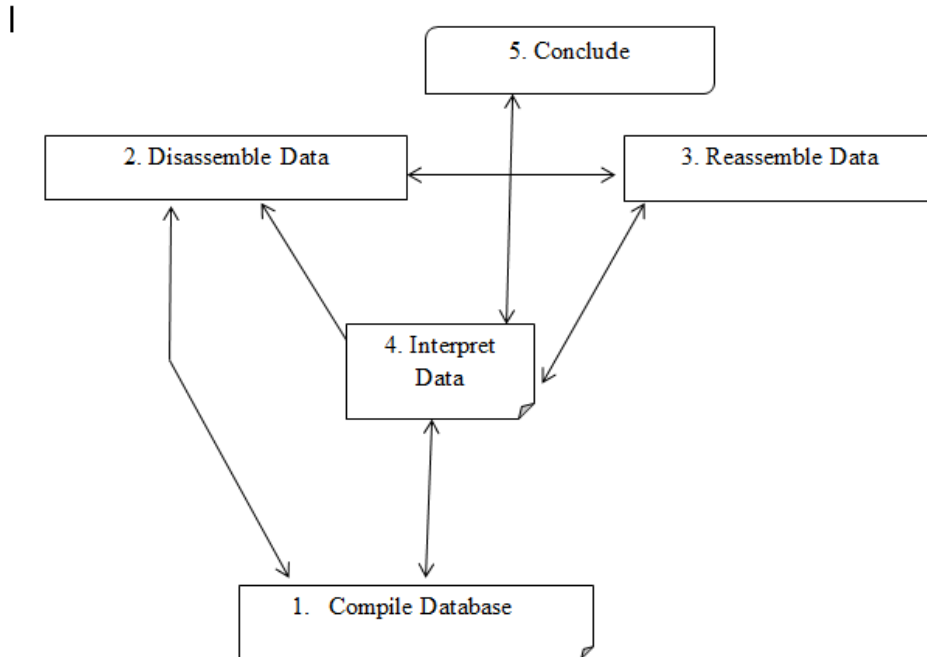


Figure 3. Five phases of analysis and their interactions. Adapted from “Qualitative Research from Start to Finish,” by R.K. Yin, 2010, p.0178. Copyright 2010 by Guilford Press.

Figure 3 above is a visual representation of Yin’s five phases. In the compiling phase, all interviews were transcribed, arranged, and any other artifacts gathered from the various school sites. The data were read through thoroughly to get a general understanding of the ideas in the data. After reading through the data, the data were compiled into an order to form my database. The disassembling phase broke down the compiled data further; labels or codes were assigned to the new pieces (Yin, 2010). This process was repeated over and over again, thus the two-way arrow between these phases. During this labeling or coding phase, the themes were color coded and categories emerged not only by themes, but also by parent, teacher, administrator and public relations representative. Once the themes and categories were generated and re-read multiple times, then the reassembling phase began. In the reassembling phase, the data were reassembled and guided by the research questions. Also, the theoretical framework of Excellence Theory was used, which analyzed the importance of public relations to the organization and how the

organization related to their stakeholders (Grunig, 2008). The theoretical framework shaped and framed how the researcher looked, thought, and conducted the study (Mertz & Anfara, 2015). Another guiding factor was Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations, which coincided and originated as a result of Excellence Theory, as a way to "filter the information through my worldview, values, perspectives, and theoretical frame" (Harris, 2015). Using the data in its reassembled form, the interpreting phase was entered, in which the data evolved into a narrative. The concluding phase was the final phase, wherein conclusions were made on the significance of the study (Yin, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher received the necessary permission from the Institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University. All of the participants were informed of the purpose of this study. Each of the interviewed participants received a form that provided information on the study, allowing participants to understand their rights and commitments when they gave consent for an interview. The study dealt with communication processes; therefore, there was no controversy in participating in the research. However, any participant that wished not to participate may have opted out without any reprisals. There are no personal identifiers in any of the notes taken during the data gathering process. All information collected has been kept confidential and locked in a cabinet until it can be discarded. All participants and schools were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) utilized four criteria to determine trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. I will use these criteria to determine the trustworthiness of my research.

Credibility essentially means the results of the qualitative study ring true with the participants. It was established by showing each participant the findings of the study to cross-reference any item that may have been overlooked or missed.

Transferability is the ability for the findings to be transferred to other settings. This study is based on how schools utilize public relations in creating excellence in communications. It is likely that some of the techniques and tools used by some schools may be transferable; however, each community is different and there may be processes that will not be applicable in some school communities.

Dependability is determined by the repeatability of the study. I utilized external validation by having another doctoral candidate from another institution examine the data to see if the conclusions are valid.

Conformability involves eliminating bias in research. All of the materials collected were made available for an external audit to determine no researcher bias interfered in the analysis or interpretation of findings. Table 3 below overviews the techniques used to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Table 3

Trustworthiness Table

Credibility	
Criteria/Technique	Examples of Activities
Engagement	In the research field (school districts) during September – November, 2016. Communicated via phone calls, emails, interviews. Read public relations materials and school websites.
Observation	Observed participants during interviews in their school settings, community members were interviewed at their place of business, wrote observation notes, toured and was given access to all of the facilities including administrative offices and educational foundation offices; accessed school websites, social media sites, written publications.
Triangulation	Used multiple data sources: interviews, observations, websites, documents. I followed qualitative interview protocols. I met all university coursework, assessment, and accountability standards that established my authority as a researcher.
Peer debriefing	Received additional perspectives and guidance from a doctoral candidate from another university.
Member checking	All participants received transcripts of the interviews to check for accuracy and provide any other information or clarification.
Purposive sampling	Four schools of different sizes from small to large; 7-8 participants at each site (4-5 school personnel and 3 non-school personnel).

Transferability

Criteria/Technique	Examples of activities
Thick description	Descriptions of each of the participants, their title, position, and their role in the research. Descriptions of each of the school sites and the place where the interviews took place. Descriptions of each of the communities.

Dependability/Conformability

Criteria/Technique	Examples of activities
Access to an audit trail	Transcripts from interview and notes are available.
Reflexivity	Self-reflection was used while examining the data to prevent bias.

Note. Adapted from “Naturalistic Inquiry,” by Y.S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, 1985. Copyright 1985 by Sage Publications.

Summary

This chapter described the methods used in this study. Because this study sought to explore how public relations influence communications in selected schools, a multi-site case study design was used. In order to obtain relevant and plentiful data purposive sampling was the method in which the twenty-nine participants were chosen, four participants being school employees and three participants being other stakeholders. The main source of data collection was interviews, observations, collecting, and viewing artifacts. The analyzation of the data and determining the trustworthiness of the findings were done in a systematic way as to not impose any researcher bias. Finally, the ethical considerations put in place for all of the participants including permission from the IRB and participants was obtained and all necessary action was taken to protect the participants and the school site's anonymity.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF CASES

This study was a multiple case study that garnered many perspectives of how public relations are used in the school districts sampled. The study looked at the importance of public relations in changing or upholding perceptions of public education. The study delved into the process of creating messages and sending them out in a variety of platforms in today's largely technology-reliant public. The participants in the study included a public relations person or superintendent designee, a secondary teacher, an elementary teacher, a secondary parent, an elementary parent, a school secretary, and a community member at large. There were a total of 28 interviews and 29 interviewees, as Metropolis had two public relations people that were interviewed at the same time. All of the interviews conducted with school personnel were based on 12 questions. The parents and community member questions varied slightly in wording and there were only 11 questions. All of the questions related to the overarching research questions explained in Chapter One.

This chapter was arranged by size of the school district. The sizes were based on the Average Daily Membership (ADM) of each school as stated by the Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association (OSSAA) website for the year 2016. This number was based on high school attendance and used to classify schools for football competition. There are several classes in Oklahoma ranging from B, the smallest, to 6A, the largest. This method of sampling

procedures allowed for a wider variety of school sizes. The schools were broken up into four categories:

1. A district with less than 200 students based on the OSSAA ADM.
2. A district with 300-550 students based on the OSSAA ADM.
3. A district with 600-950 students based on the OSSAA ADM.
4. A district with more than 1000 students based on the OSSAA ADM.

The above districts are arranged in order of smallest to largest. Pseudonyms were given to each of the school districts: Smallville, Star City, Gotham City, and Metropolis. Table 4 provides a breakdown of each participating’s district.

Table 3:

Participating Schools Demographics

School District	ADM 2015-2016	Total Students in District	District Population	Average Property Evaluation	# of certified personnel
Smallville	Less than 200	580	3,512	\$33,202	43
Star City	300-550	1,656	8,972	\$31,135	131
Gotham City	699-950	3,026	14,683	\$52,436	205
Metropolis	1000 or more	11,376	67,621	\$66,259	670

Note: Demographic data was provided by the Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association for the 2016 school year

Smallville Public Schools

“I have travelled this road so many times,” I thought to myself while meandering down the back road to Smallville High School where I would be meeting with Bob, the principal at the High/Middle School. As a driver’s education instructor, this was the route the students took the first time they stepped into a car with me. I am extremely familiar with the location of the church, the dependent schoolhouse, the deer sanctuary and the curve where a few years earlier I

was merely inches away from a tree with a student driver. Due to cuts in educational funding from the state, the high school students were moved to the middle school. This created an entire K-12 district separated by a covered walkway between two buildings. The buildings are tucked back and not visible from any main roads. Amidst the cars lined up for pickups, I noticed a sign that had information about parent/teacher conferences scheduled for the next week. I was struck immediately by the amount of school colors and the giant “Home of the Stamped Steers” sign that hung from the ceiling. I noticed school colors, hand drawn posters of the mascot and a trophy case adorned with varieties of trophies. There was a sign that pointed to the main office. I heard Bob, the administrator, ever the raconteur, before I saw him, telling tall tales, leaned back in a chair just behind the front counter. He saw me and quickly changed to a story about a time twenty years ago when we worked for the same school district.

Smallville Participants

The participants in the study, who all were given pseudonyms, were asked how they fit the requirements of this study, such as how long they’ve been in public education (when necessary) and how long they’ve lived in the school district. A minimum of three years teaching experience and three years in their current district was the requirement for participation. Each participant will be introduced in the order according to Table 5 (below) and not necessarily in the order in which they were interviewed.

All of the Smallville interviews took place in the High/Middle School, the Elementary school, and one was done at the participant’s home. Table 5 provides participant pseudonyms and their respective roles in the school district.

Table 4:

Smallville Participants

Name	Classifications	Years in Public Ed.	Years in District
Bob	Public Relations	30	13
Carol	Elementary Teacher	36	36
Angela	Secondary Teacher	5	5
Alice	Elementary Parent	NA	8
Meredith	Secondary Parent	NA	10
Pam	Secretary	40	4
Ted	Community	NA	17

The following provides a brief description of each of the participants interviewed in Smallville. Each of the participants answered the same questions and often times without variation from a previous participant; therefore, to connect ideas from one interview to another, the interviewees will be introduced, described, along with the setting where the interview took place to get a fuller description of the interview setting. This format will be repeated throughout Chapter IV.

Bob. Bob was a Smallville administrator and public relations superintendent designee. He was a football player as a younger man, was tall and had a grin that was as gregarious as he was. His office was decorated abundantly in Oklahoma State paraphernalia; Bob was a Cowboy fan, alumnus, and when not in school, rode and maintained horses.

Carol. Carol was a Smallville elementary teacher. I called on Carol at her home per her request. Carol had short black hair and glasses. Her home was a one-story house right in the middle of the block surrounded by houses that looked similar. I knocked on the door and was

greeted by Carol and a large black and white cat, who took no time to jump into my lap when I sat down at the kitchen table. In her kitchen, we sat opposite the refrigerator, which I noticed had several magnetic Smallville Steers and pictures of students, former and current. Carol has had a variety of duties in her thirty-six-year career. For example, she has taught third, fourth and fifth grades and this year she became the advisor to the 5th and 6th grade student council. She has earned a master's degree in education.

Angela. Angela was a Smallville secondary teacher. She taught math and her room was adorned with posters all relating to the discipline of mathematics. She was young and wore glasses. Her desk was busy with papers she was grading. She sat behind her desk which faced the door on the opposite wall. Her students' desks were arranged in rows and there were bookshelves surrounding the room. Angela has a master's degree, but has only taught for five years, and in all of those years in the same room. She was in charge of the student council.

Alice. Alice was the parent of a Smallville elementary student. She was a young woman with long black hair. Alice, a parent of an elementary student in Smallville, has been in this school district for eight years. All of her children attend Smallville public schools. Alice was also an aide for the elementary school on occasion. She was an involved parent and wants to be of any help she can to the school. We met and went to a makeshift computer space in a common area between the hallways that led to the kindergarten and first grade area. There were papers all over the walls of students work with vocabulary words and coloring sheets.

Meredith. Meredith was the parent of a Smallville secondary student. She was a middle-aged woman and was sitting behind the computer lab monitor's desk, the computer lab was not being used this hour by students. The computer lab was dimly lit and carpeted. She started out by explaining she had a sick child, who was covered in a blanket and resting comfortably under a

table along the wall just adjacent to the desk in which Meredith was sitting. Meredith's oldest child goes to the Middle/High School. She has been in the district for ten years. She was very soft spoken.

Pam. Pam was the Smallville secretary at Smallville High School. She had grey hair and wore glasses. We met in the main office behind the big counter where most of the office work was conducted. Pam was a very authoritative figure; as she sat down for the interview, she yelled out some instructions to two young ladies that came in to help sort some paperwork. In Pam's forty years in education, she has been a librarian, counselor, and a principal. Since retiring, she spends a few days in the office for Smallville.

Ted. Ted was a member of the Smallville community. He was a formidable figure. Our interview was in his office, a small glassed area at the top of a couple of stairs from the main floor of the building. His desk was cluttered and the walls were adorned with pictures of him and his crew. Ted was a public servant. Ted, a no nonsense person, put a little tobacco between his cheek and gum and told me to fire away with some questions.

Definitions

In establishing public relations with the public, it was important to understand the reference point from which it originated. A personal definition of public relations was solicited from each of the participants. Most of the Smallville participants gave similar responses about public relations as a way of relating to people on a personal level. Participant responses can be summed up by what Bob said: "all the parents I have here, I'm on a first name basis with them. I know little bit about every one of them, their family, who's sick, who lives where and just getting to know people" (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Relating to the public is important, but according to Pam and Angela, working internally is also important. Pam said, "the

public needs to know, but then also the staff needs to know. There are too many times we have the communications where some people know and not everybody does” (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Ted was the only one who mentioned the importance of branding when he said, “public relations is being involved in the public, getting out, doing good things for the public and branding your organization“ (Ted, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Public Relations’ Role in Dealing with Negative Perceptions of Public Education

The declining perception of public education is one of the main reasons that public relations in schools are needed. Most of the participants agreed that the perception of public education as a whole was viewed negatively. The negativity was attributed to many factors including the media, state legislation, and emphasis on test scores linked to school performance. Bob explained that sometimes the negativity came from a parent’s educational experience; “I have some parents that are just negative...I think they’ve had a bad experience...I think a lot of people just feel that schools have taken them or their family and unfairly treated them” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Alice put the onus on parents, stating:

If your school ranks poorly [test scores] across the state or ranks poorly nationally, that’s what a lot of parent’s camp on, then if their student struggles it’s much easier to blame the system then it is to blame themselves or take credit for maybe not investing into their child’s education like they should (Alice, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

To counter these negative views, Smallville, starts with personal connections. Bob explained his hands-on personal approach by simply having an open-door policy:

There’s no really plan. It’s just kind of my personality is coming in here and having an open door with the parents and any time they want to come see me, I do visit with them. I treat the parents like they’re number one (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Carol agreed with the importance of personal connections and said:

I guess if you went and talked to the legislators or who make those rules and things just to explain what we have to deal with...maybe get more parents involved with the school system and help out in other ways. We send a lot of notes home. You call them [parents]. We do have a carnival and there's a lot of parent involvement there...We do a thing right after spring break where we feed the parents, Feed the Family (Carol, personal interview, October 6, 2016).

Angela, Meredith, and Pam all conveyed the need to get more positive information out. Angela said, "public relations should focus on the good things happening in the school. I've seen schools that have Twitter feeds of what their teachers are doing and they're posting pictures...the things you want people talking about" (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Ted stated the best way to change the branding of public education was to have students do some community service type events. He said, "I think if you can get out brand your school with your students it could change people's perceptions" (Ted, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Sending the Message and Stakeholder Perception of Messages

Smallville utilized many different tools to get their messages to the public: elementary students' Thursday folders, weekly newspaper, and various technological platforms. Technology that Smallville used includes Facebook, SchoolWay, Remind, Smallville school web page, and emails. Facebook became the preferred method for Bob who agreed that putting information on Facebook was easy and a great way to convey information. Bob intimated that Facebook was much easier than navigating through congested school websites. They have been using Facebook for the last three years. Angela agreed Facebook was a good method, but said it was born out of necessity, "we've had issues with people not feeling like they've been informed and complaining

about that in the past, saying that the school never told them what was going on” (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Although there was a Facebook page, the parents Angela and Meredith rely on Thursday folders and the school website for their information. Angela and Carol acknowledged the use of the newspaper, but also acknowledged the limitations of it being a weekly newspaper where some of the information may be out of date by the time of printing. Not all of the participants were aware of the different methods of technological availability. Meredith didn’t know the school had a Facebook page and mentioned the school website was not always up to date. SchoolWay was an app for the phone used for sending messages like school cancellations. Pam and Ted knew of SchoolWay and Facebook, but don’t use them.

Participants who worked in the school district and Ted, the community member agreed the messages emanating from the school appeared to be perceived positively by the public. It was best described by Pam, “I think most things are positive. Because it’s mostly information, we don’t put out information about bad things that are going on in school...I think the school’s trying to be very positive” (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016). The parents, Angela and Meredith, agreed that it is probably positive because it’s [the messages] going to be paperwork; however, the times when it is a disciplinary issue, those aren’t always viewed positively. Meredith’s school interactions stemmed from discussing grades her child received, so it could be perceived as negative, but she accentuated this point by saying that teachers don’t seek her out to say, “he’s doing a good job or he’s a good kid” (Meredith, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Creation of the Messages

The only person that knew how the messages were crafted for Smallville Public Schools was Bob, the administrator. Every other participant, except those outside of the school as they

were not asked this question, assumed that the administration was in charge of creating and disseminating the information out to the public. Bob said, “we meet once a week with our superintendent, where that [a plan of action] might be discussed and what’s the best way to present this to the parents” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Advocating for Education

The budget cuts to education handed down from the legislators caused Smallville to rethink its school year at the end of the 2016 school year. Smallville does inform their stakeholders of the affairs of public education as a whole in the state by using the personal one on one interaction. Bob said, “I talk to parents all the time. When they come up and say, ‘why don’t we have this?’ I say, well it’s probably because of who you voted for” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Angela mentioned that town hall meetings were held at the end of the 2016 school year to determine how Smallville was going to handle the budget cuts, but it was still via word of mouth and nothing formal. She also mentioned that any time there is a school function she sees the administration speaking to stakeholders and encouraging them to reach out to the state legislation. As outsiders of the school system, Angela, Meredith, and Tim all agreed that last year was a dire year and there was a lot of information sent out about the budget cuts, but for the most part it was through interactions with school personnel that they receive information about the state and public education.

Other Public Relations Thoughts

The last item that the researcher asked the participants was to talk about anything that they wanted to discuss regarding public relations in their school. Some participants answered that question and some did not. Angela offered up a strategy for how to make the public more aware of day-to-day operations:

I think the school could do a better job of letting the public know [what happens] on a daily basis, in the school. I think we do a good job of talking about our extracurricular [activities], they do things like participate in parades and stuff and sees them out in public. The normal day-to-day this is what's happening in a classroom doesn't really get talked about much. We tend to talk about testing a lot and that's where the focus goes, but we don't spend the majority of the year testing, we spend the majority of the year teaching! I wish the public just knew more like what life is like in the school building and just sharing those things and I think people would have a more positive view of what we're doing if they know what we were actually focusing on, because we're not focusing on testing every single day, we're not filling in bubbles (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Carol commended the elementary school's program of having health care professionals come and check eyes, ears, and teeth. Alice acknowledged all of the different methods that the school uses to communicate with the public and agreed she was well informed.

Smallville Summary

Smallville used a personal approach in getting their information to the stakeholders because of the convenience of a small town community. Smallville was able to use personal connections, open-door policies and community involvement to advocate for public education and help debunk the negative perceptions of public education. It is best summed up in something that Pam, the secretary, said; "We encourage people to come by; we encourage people to call, they can respond on Facebook to the quotes, you know just an open door policy" (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Star City Public Schools

It was a scenic drive to Star City as I passed through a few of the smaller towns in Oklahoma. Driving down the main road in Star City, I noticed several store windows on the street displayed paintings of the Star City mascot. I saw a few signs that said a Star City athlete lived in that house, I thought about how it appeared that the Star City community rallied around the Star City schools. I turned off and took a back street through a neighborhood and ended up on the backside of the school where the baseball and softball fields sat. Star City Schools was off of the main road, but the entire campus including a high school (grades 9-12), middle school (grades 6-8), intermediate school (grades 3-5), primary and early childhood center (grades Pre K-2), and an administration building are all contained in this one section of land. Star City pulled students not only from Star City, but from some small towns that are up to 9 miles away. The Star City stakeholder populous was far more reaching than Star City proper, which differed from the other schools in the study. Entering from this position allowed me to arrive at the administration building first. The main focal point of this campus was the fairly new field house which sat prominently between the fields and the school buildings. In front of the field house, an electronic sign flashed information about upcoming events in the district. This technique, which was also used in Smallville, was a great public relations tool, but only those who would make their way on campus would see it. In front of the fieldhouse was a statue of a distinguished alumnus who went on to be an exceptional football player for the University of Oklahoma. The football stadium, situated in another part of town about a mile away, was named for this distinguished alumnus. As I pulled into the fieldhouse parking lot, which also served as the parking lot for the high school, I noticed students parking their cars and heading into the building. I asked one of them if the main office was in this direction, and they kindly walked me

to the door and pointed me to the office. The door, colored in one of the school colors, placed you in a hallway where the combination of the two school colors was the painting scheme. I noticed many hand-painted posters for upcoming football games and homecoming activities. I noticed several faculty and staff wearing Star City identification badges on Star City lanyards. They were all wearing shirts of different Star City colors with Star City displayed on each shirt in various forms and sizes. Danny, a secondary parent said about the shirts, “It’s to model pride for the students. We take pride and they should too” (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Star City Participants

Table 6 below illustrates the names of participants and their role in the research from Star City schools.

Table 5:

Star City Participants

Name	Classifications	Years in Public Ed.	Years in District
Todd	Public Relations	13	3
Emma	Elementary Teacher	25	17
Steve	Secondary Teacher	22	3
Diane	Elementary Parent	NA	12
Danny	Secondary Parent	NA	20
Karen	Secretary	29	29
Owen	Community	NA	10

Todd. Todd was the superintendent and was in charge of public relations of Star City Public Schools. Todd was a young man for a superintendent and sat behind his desk on the phone

in the administration building. The administration building sat back by the ball fields and faced away from the school buildings. The walls in the entranceway were filled with Star City history from the turn of the century prior to Oklahoma's statehood. There was a ledger from the first school, photographs, and other memorabilia. Todd had black hair that was a tad spiky and was wearing a Star City warm-up jacket. The office was decorated with a large desk and a large bookshelf behind the desk adorned with personal pictures and some University of Oklahoma paraphernalia. There was a table to the right and the view from his office looked over the baseball field.

Emma. Emma was a Star City elementary teacher. I met Emma at the primary school. The door to the primary school had the same Star City color scheme as the rest of the campus. I walked past some yard signs for a book fair and there was a large book fair banner tied between two pillars at the entrance. The office was large with many different rooms. It was dimly lit by a few lamps while the overhead fluorescent lights remained off. I noticed some small tables and boxes filled with bags and a few ladies worked on filling the bags. On one of the small tables was a stack of scrap paper that had different shapes cut out. The room was fitted with a small circular table with small chairs. Emma was a lady of small stature. She was blonde and wore a Star City t-shirt. She had a very bright personality. Emma sat in the small chair opposite mine. Emma was one of the Star City staff in charge of the book fair and was responsible for the placement of the signs I noticed coming into the building.

Steve. Steve was a Star City secondary teacher. He was a military man and it was obvious by the way he carried himself in posture, handshake, and answering questions. He had close cropped hair and wore glasses. He wore boots and when his legs were crossed, he banged the ring on his finger on a boot. Steve was a math teacher, and on the wall to my right was a full-

length dry erase board broken up into periods and days of the week with that day's assignments written in them, page numbers included. There was an underlying tone of chaos to the room's decorations that were math and technology related. Some shapes made by students hung from the ceiling tiles. Books were on the desks, which were aligned neatly facing away from Steve's desk toward the Smartboard. In another area of the room sat an overhead projector, an item not seen in many classrooms anymore.

Diane. Diane was the parent of a Star City elementary student. I met Diane, a shorter woman with short black hair in the same room as Emma. She was dressed in a pink t-shirt signifying breast cancer awareness.

Danny. Danny was the parent of a Star City secondary student. He was a man of solid build with short hair and facial hair. Danny had children in both the middle school and the high school. Danny had a Doctorate in Education and was the principal of the high school. His office was a standard office with a big desk with a book shelf behind him decorated with several pictures and Pittsburgh Steeler paraphernalia.

Karen. Karen was the superintendent's secretary for Star City Public Schools. She was a sweet, older lady with well-coiffed hair and glasses. We met in the Board of Education room, which was pretty impressive. There was a dais with high-back leather chairs for the board members and nameplates naming all of the members. Karen and I sat down just below the dais and I noticed a television screen in the upper corner of the room for presentations. Karen earned a Bachelor of Science in Business and used it in the private sector before taking this job as a favor to the then-superintendent. It was supposed to be a temporary job until they found somebody else, which was twenty-nine years ago. Karen was quiet and polite.

Owen. Owen was a member of the Star City community. He was a big, imposing figure dressed in his uniform as a civil servant for Star City. Owen's handshake was one that you would notice and his office was filled with commendations and certificates. There were different pictures on the walls of Owen and other members of his staff as well as family photos. His desk was neat and there was an American flag and an Oklahoma flag in the corners of the office. There was a shelf to the right that stood between two windows that looked out onto the busiest intersection in town.

Definitions

As stated previously, in order to understand Star City's approach to public relations, it was important to garner an idea of what public relations meant to the participants. Most of the Star City participants equated public relations to the relationship and interaction between the school and the community. Some of the ideas included keeping the community informed, transparency, and relationship building between the community, the city, and the school. Some equated the school and the community as a family. Todd compared it to a marriage, he said:

Public relations, to me, is you almost reverse the word and it's the relationship with the public. It's a two-way street, it's just not me relating to the public, it's the public relating back to me and it has to be a fit and so when I think of public relations I think of that. I think of a marriage (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Public Relations' Role in Dealing with Negative Perceptions of Public Education

Most of the participants responded that public education was viewed negatively, especially Todd, who was very adamant about public education being viewed negatively. Todd's justification for that position used recent leanings of the legislators in Oklahoma City:

I say that pretty confidently not only because of the media releases, the recent press or anything else. I think you view it negatively not only because of the legislation that is being pushed through to where you see for the first time in recent history things of...things of to get away from the traditional public school setting...I ask myself why have we had an explosion of virtual school, and explosion of charters, an explosion of voucher talk and legislation trying to be passed. Why are these things being created? If it wasn't because people's perceptions were that schools were failing, then they wouldn't have been pushed...I think I can say it pretty confidently that people's perceptions of public education is a negative perception (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Emma was concerned that public education was viewed negatively based on what the public deems as accountability. She said, "I think we're not showing them the results, through our testing or through accountability...accountability doesn't mean anything to us [teachers], because it's not really tapping into what we're doing really" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Emma would change the definition of accountability to include showing teacher improvement and the methods of improvement and this would change the public perception of education according to her. Most of the Star City participants blamed the media and the way education was displayed in the media, only highlighting the negative. Karen blamed the negative perception on gossip; she said, "too many people don't know what's going on and they just start speaking out. They don't hear the other side of the story, Facebook is terrible and so is the information they get uptown running around. They're not informed" (Karen, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Even though some Star City participants stated that public education was viewed negatively overall, that did not necessarily translate into the view about Star City. Diane, as a

parent, views Star City very positively. Danny upheld that positive belief intimating that regardless of what is spread by the media or politicians, parents in Star City believe that "...their public school is the exception" (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Steve argued that public education was viewed positively due to the benefit of education. However, Steve had some reservations about how public education was run; he said, "I don't know that we're set out exactly the best way that we should be for education these days, I think it ought to be revamped, but I don't know exactly how to do that" (Steve, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Todd said, "I think that we are in marketing. I think my primary job is that I am the face of Star City. We do a large and vast push to continually put out what is great about Star City...we put out all the successes of our students" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Todd assured this was not bragging, but rather celebrating successes of the Star City public school system. Todd expressed that it was important for schools to use whatever means necessary to continue that conversation with the public. He said:

You make a priority to continue to have conversations with the public via whatever platform that may be, whether that's an open forum...newspaper articles...social media, or whatever it is. We've spun up websites; we've done all kinds of things to help produce a positive image of Star City (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Todd also opined that the public will start seeing a campaign across public education to combat the negative perceptions. Todd and some of his staff have monitored to the best of their abilities anything that has cropped up on social media and have always looked for opportunities to advocate for public education. Emma implied the real way to change the perception of public education was to have an approach that has the staff bringing people into the school to see what life is like there. Emma modeled this position when she sponsored "tutor volunteers" that serve

in the capacity of teaching students on a one-to-one situation. She did this by putting it out into the public; “I just started getting people to come, getting in the newspapers, we want you to come be a part of our school, and we will train you” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Steve and Diane both liked the idea of forums, and Steve complimented the superintendent on having public forums. Diane agreed it would help by allowing stakeholders to ask questions they might be afraid to ask if they’re just one-on-one with school leaders. Danny, Karen, and Owen all agreed that public relations between the school and the community, in which more positive stories were told, would be a way to erase any negative views of public education.

Sending the Message and Stakeholder Perception of Messages

Star City, with their emphasis on community involvement, used many sources to send their message out to the stakeholders including events such as public forums, the superintendent’s involvement in civic organizations, and newspaper articles. Star City also has a cadre of social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and the school website. They also utilize an auto-calling system to push information out to the public.

Superintendent Todd was a strong proponent of the old-fashioned town forum to get the message out. He explained:

I believe that there’s no better way to show that the school district wants your input. You can send out surveys, you can do all you want to but an open forum, if you really want that relationship with the community, whether it’s just a perception but you’re putting this out that you are willing to listen to the community (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Public relations to Todd were an opportunity for Star City to be transparent with the public. As much as Todd loved to tout the successes of Star City, he did not shy away from the school's failures. He suggested it was not just a school problem, but a community problem, since the students were part of the community. He had no reservations in asking the community for help in some of those problems. The new norm of social media technology was not lost on Todd as Star City monitored social media sites, not only to receive information, but to also push information out. Social media is monitored, but Star City does not respond on social media. Todd and his principals instilled an open-door policy, where the community knows they can come and have concerns addressed and provide their feedback. Superintendent Todd encourages his staff to engage in discourse with the public at school activities. Emma conveyed they are constantly finding ways to get the public to come to the school, including grandparents' day, "pops for cops," and veterans day. In making sure people feel welcome to the school, Emma and three teachers stood outside every morning and greeted the students as they entered the school building. Steve contacted parents via a personal email; he is not comfortable using Facebook or Twitter like some of his colleagues. Diane noticed public relations coming from her children's school in the form of newsletters every week and the use of the auto-call system.

Star City's big push of community involvement seemed to be working and everybody was under the impression that the messages received from the schools were perceived positively. Emma was appreciative of the superintendent's leadership in how the school's messages are received positively; she said, "I think it has a lot to do with your leadership...It's probably superintendent's number one thing to show the public that we want them to be included in the educational process" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Diane, as a parent, found the messages very positive and informative with all the details and the dates that are sent.

Creation of the Messages

Star City messages are created and approved through the superintendent. Karen, secretary for the superintendent, stated that one person was in charge of getting that information to the public, but the order comes from the superintendent. Todd agreed, but he clarified that it depended on the scope and size of the messages. Danny voiced that more could be done in the social media world, and understood the double edged sword social media can cause, especially when negative aspects are accentuated, but he did note that, “the school needs to look for ways to continue to use social media as a positive” (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Advocating for Education

Star City found itself in the same position as many other schools at the end of last year facing massive budget cuts to education. Star City went to a shorter calendar year, cutting three weeks off their calendar. The superintendent, Todd, informed stakeholders about public education on a regular basis through emails, websites, newspaper articles and he said, “I have a superintendent update at every board meeting. We [staff] are always looking for opportunities to advocate for public education” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Steve complimented the superintendent and his ability to keep the public informed on public education matters. Diane and Danny, the parents, effused about the superintendent’s diligence in getting information out to parents about public education issues. They both agreed they have been included in feedback by filling out a series of surveys for Star City’s balanced scorecard. Emma mentioned that the best way to advocate for education and keep the public informed was through the volunteer program and other programs where people get to come to the school. It gives them value and creates a great relationship between them and the school.

Other Public Relations Thoughts

Every single participant raved about the direction that Star City was heading. Steve thought the district was moving in the right direction by getting all of the feedback from the community in ways to make Star City better. He said:

Sometimes we saw some stuff and we said, ‘Oh they see this as a little more important, we didn’t realize it was so important to them. That’s nice to know that it was important and we need to put that as a priority, so I think that’s good that we’re trying to listen to the stakeholders (Steve, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Emma said, “I just feel like we’re just striving to be more whole rather than separate entities” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Overall, Superintendent Todd liked the direction that Star City was going and he understood that at any given time things can go wrong, “I’m never going to be there, wherever that there is. I think we’re headed there. I think a lot of good things are happening in our district” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Star City Summary

The culture created by Superintendent Todd managed to build a bridge between the school and the community, creating a communal bond. It is best summed up by Karen, Todd’s secretary; she said, “you don’t get very many superintendents that will take the time out to talk to you, lots of times they’d say I’m busy, I can’t visit, but he will” (Karen, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Gotham City Public Schools

The immensity of the state of Oklahoma was the sense I got driving to Gotham City. I passed places where I imagined the first Boomers or Sooners wandered in the plains finding a place to stake their claim. Mesas appeared every so often and it was hard not to marvel at the

layers of dirt and rock formations surrounding the mesas. Quixotic was the word that came to mind as I began to meander through the miles and miles of wind turbines twisting in the wind. They were massive structures that gave me the feeling of uneasiness, and at night it was a little more disturbing when all I saw was the night horizon staring back at me with hundreds of beady red blinking eyes. Eventually I got to Gotham City, and it was easy to see how the community fit into the Gotham City school system. Appearing on signs, store windows, yards, and two large color advertising signs were pictures of the Gotham City Knights or signage that read Gotham City Knights. The Gotham City schools consisted of a Pre-K-1 building, 3 elementary schools with grades 2-5, a middle school for grades 6-8, and a high school with grades 9-12. All buildings are spread out through town with an administration building in the downtown area.

When I arrived at Gotham City High School, I met with my liaison, Valerie, one of the assistant principals. I pulled into the parking lot and immediately noticed a student getting out of a car with a bandage wrapped around his head. Coming down the sidewalk from where I parked another student was hobbling on crutches and just behind her two students were both in arm slings. “What was going on in Gotham City?” I wondered to myself. I learned later it was “Walking Wounded Day” for homecoming week. Valerie showed me into the office which sat just inside the doors to the right of a commons area. The commons area also served as the cafeteria and had several tables set up with students milling around them. The library sat just behind the commons area and I noticed on the wall surrounding the commons area the Gotham City mission statement, along with several pictures of the Gotham City Knights mascot. There was also a brand new million-dollar renovation, which was due to the school suffering tornado damage. The renovation’s purpose was to create a new safe room. The renovation led into the gym, where many banners hung from the rafters and some students arrived for their first hour of

physical education. The intercom came on as we exited the gym and I heard and the morning announcements, which included a moment of silence, the pledge of allegiance and the mission statement said aloud by the students.

Gotham City Participants

Table 7 below indicates the participants and their role in the research from Gotham City.

Table 6:

Gotham City Participants

Name	Classifications	Years in Public Ed.	Years in District
Charlotte	Public Relations	18	13
Gina	Elementary Teacher	20	17
Jake	Secondary Teacher	18	13
Wendy	Elementary Parent	NA	20
Charles	Secondary Parent	NA	20
Amy	Secretary	22	22
Jessica	Community	NA	17

Charlotte. Charlotte was in charge of curriculum and public relations for Gotham City Public Schools. I met Charlotte in the administration building. The administration building was located on the main downtown street where I couldn't help but notice the many Gotham City mascot drawings on store windows and on yard signs. The administration building had an ample supply of mascots as well, from painted pictures, floor mats, and a chalkboard welcome sign colored in various chalks. The administration building actually sat in a historic building that at one time was the post office and county courthouse. When I opened the old wooden door with the brass door knob and stepped inside, I was standing on a wooden floor. It was one of those

wooden floors that bulged here and there and was not necessarily straight. In front of me was the only piece of modern décor, it was a glass door that led down a small hallway. To the right of the glass door was a pair of double wooden doors, painted white and closed. Above those doors a sign hangs down that says “curriculum.” Down to the left was an old wooden staircase with a wide banister that curved around itself at the bottom. Above the stairwell was a sign that read “Superintendent.” Charlotte came in a side door to my right and apologized for running late; she was a woman who moved with purpose. She had black hair and was dressed very professionally. She opened up the double doors and inside was a spacious office lined with bookshelves behind a large desk. In front of the desk was a circular table that held eight seats, and this was where we sat. As I prepared my materials, I looked around and saw motivational posters on each wall and some scattered on the table. Charlotte sat opposite me and put her phone on the opposite bookshelf.

Gina. Gina was a Nationally Board Certified Gotham City elementary teacher. She taught Title I reading at Fallen Timbers Elementary School. Fallen Timbers elementary school sat just about a mile away from the high school. It was nestled in a neighborhood, off a minor thoroughfare and on a corner. It was a typical square, bricked building that looked like any elementary school. The entrance was on the corner of the building and it jutted out at a diagonal. The door had a buzzer that I had to push to gain entrance; this put me in a little hallway with one door to the school that was locked and another buzzer to get in to the office. I buzzed and they unlocked the door to the office. I still could not gain entrance to the school itself, which was an added safety feature to coincide with the buzzer. We met in a small conference room just off the main office. It was completely bare except for the table against the wall where there were a few

chairs and a telephone on top. Gina was tall with short blonde hair. She wore a leopard print shirt over a black shirt.

Jake. Jake was a Gotham City secondary teacher and coach. I met Jake in one of the vice-principal's offices at Gotham City High. The office was cramped, but big enough to house a desk and a couple of chairs; a wall of shelves on the opposite wall had yearbooks arranged by year, several pictures of Gotham City High and miscellaneous books. On the right side of the desk was another door that led into an area where there was a copier, a coffee machine, and some mail slots for teachers. Jake was a very tall man with a beard. When he spoke, I detected a slight accent and learned that Jake hailed from another continent, but had been in the United States for well over twenty years. He came to the United States to play tennis and still continued his passion for tennis by coaching. His foreign upbringing allowed him to teach US history from a different perspective.

Wendy. Wendy was the parent of a Gotham City elementary school student and President of the Fallen Timbers Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). I met her in the Fallen Timbers office where she sat behind the counter and wore a very colorful headband around the top of her head. Her whole ensemble was bright and cheery. She wore glasses and had short brown hair. I found out that Wendy was working behind the desk this morning. There was not a lot of space between the desk and the main door; around the corner of the desk there were some rooms. One room was a teacher's work room that contained a long table, paper cutter with discarded pieces of cut-up paper on the table, a copier, and many shelves that served as faculty mailboxes. Wendy earned her high school diploma from the Gotham City public school system.

Charles. Charles was the parent of a Gotham City secondary student. I met Charles in the same vice principal's office where I met Jake. Charles had sandy blonde hair with glasses. He

very upbeat and had a great energy about him. Charles, like Wendy, was born and raised in Gotham City and graduated from Gotham City high school. His children attended the middle school.

Amy. Amy was the secretary for the two assistant principals at Gotham City High School. Having worked in the office for twenty-two years, Amy had a confidence about how she handled situations that arose in her office. Amy's desk was decorated with pictures, a name plate, and a plant. There were several books, a telephone, and a computer at Amy's disposal also on this L-shaped desk. There were pictures on the wall to the right of the desk depicting the Knight mascot. As we talked, a young man came and sat in the chairs along the wall and ate his lunch. Amy checked in on him every so often to make sure he was eating and drinking something.

Jessica. Jessica was a member of the Gotham City community. She worked behind the desk at a hotel. The hotel was located on the main road in Gotham City. It sat on the corner next to a bank, which housed a colorful LED sign that once in a while would show pictures of different activities going on in Gotham City public schools. She had worked in this business for a number of years. Jessica was of Native American decent and had a high school diploma. She had a daughter in college in Gotham City.

Definitions

The personal definitions of public relations by the participants tended to dominate how they answered many of the questions. All of the Gotham City participants' definitions included garnering relationships with the community, whether relaying good or bad information. Most of them included the use of technology as the most viable resource for getting information to stakeholders. Charlotte, Gotham's public relations person, had a definition that encapsulated other responses; she said:

Public relations is how an organization not only disperses information to the community but also responds and reacts to the community's needs and desires in terms of what they are wanting out of that organization. As a public school for example, we try to stay ahead of the game when things come up...and get the information out first so that it's first and accurate (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Public Relations' Role in Dealing with Negative Perceptions of Public Education

Most participants agreed on the notion that public education was viewed negatively. The reasons varied from teacher accountability, hours that teachers work, misunderstandings about how public education works with state mandates, and the scrutiny of topics created by social media. Charles said, "I think it all goes back to social media because everything that happens is so scrutinized" (Charles, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Not everyone thought public education was viewed negatively. Some thought there were negative perceptions about public education, but overall there was a positive movement in the perception. Jake's experience in education, which has carried him to different states, gave him a unique perspective on the perception of public education:

I think that there are some communities that view it as being a failure...then again there are communities that support public schools one hundred percent. I've worked in four different school districts in three different states...I think generally speaking you're probably going to have the support that public education is doing a good job. I mean not only are we changing lives, but you know we are shaping the future and so to me I think we have a lot more positive input (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Jessica, a community member, had mixed reactions, but was the harshest critic for of the schools. She said:

It's positive to me, from what I've heard, you know and from my beliefs it is positive because you get more interaction and whether it be just with kids or with sports or whatever. Negative, because they just don't treat people right sometimes...the schools, the teachers, the kids, there's lots of bullying going on that does not get addressed. I

know that a lot of the times they have to come up with certain scores and a lot of the times they will just push the kids through. Just to do what they need to do, go as far as to give them a study guide, give them the answers, which is good because then they can study it. But it is the exact question, the exact answer on the test, just so they can get the scores (Jessica, personal interview, September 26, 2016).

In hopes to change that type of perception, Charlotte, public relations person, expressed that it was public relations and being transparent that has helped shift that focus from negative to positive on public education. She said:

I think part of what is happening is the public relations aspect. I think social media has a huge role in education. A whole sharing, celebrating successes they are seeing with the community and putting themselves out there...what's your brand as a school...what are you communicating to your community on a daily basis. I've worked very hard on that the last two years or so to market ourselves to the community to show them the positives so that they're not only seeing the negative and I think we're seeing some benefits from that (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

She explained that, in the past, there were some negative perceptions about Gotham City public schools wanting to keep things internal and not let the community know what was happening in the school system. Charlotte conveyed that transparency was a way to reverse this type of attitude and was grateful that Gotham City public schools have been working on transparency.

The Gotham City participants agreed that public relations could change the negative views and enhance those that were already positive by continuous positive communication with the community through various formats and personal connections. Gina stated, “just promoting the positive aspects of education will change those views, especially by highlighting different projects that kids are doing and projects they’re doing for the community” (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Wendy followed that train of thought, but flipped it bringing the community to the school, she said, “the only way to do that, to change people that do have a negative view is to have them in this school and spend a day in the building” (Wendy, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Charles wanted to use social media along with the school resources as a tool to change the negative perception of public education to a positive one. He said:

Once again use social media. The school can do a lot of broadcasting things and I noticed here at Gotham City they’ve started a video production class and they are going to start doing highlights of kids throughout the year and publish them on the local TV station” (Charles, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Jessica, community member, didn’t have an answer to whether or not public relations could change those views, but she wanted more people to get involved. She said, “one person getting involved, even if you could change just one person’ life and making it better, it’s always going to be better, not matter what it is...If the public could get involved more it’d be great” (Jessica, personal interview, September 26, 2016).

Sending the Message and Stakeholder Perception of Messages

Gotham City sent messages in a myriad of ways including, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Remind 101, auto-calling system, school website, newsletter, radio, newspaper and

PowerSchool, which is a student informant tool that also may be used as a public relations tool, with its ability to send and receive messages. Charlotte was in charge of the district Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts. She also sent out press releases to the newspaper. Instagram was a photo sharing social media site akin to Facebook and Charlotte went on to explain how Gotham City schools employed Instagram:

We partner with an advertising firm here in Gotham City... they have [two] electronic billboards around town, so we are hooked in with them... anytime anyone posts a picture to Instagram on our account that picture and caption are displayed on the electronic billboards...any event that is going on in our district we have people that are shooting pictures of that and posting them on our Instagram and then the community can see what's going on in Gotham City public schools on any given day (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Charlotte espoused the billboard as an excellent public relations tool. Gina complimented the superintendent for doing a radio broadcast once a week to inform the community as to what is going on in Gotham City schools. Gina also mentioned the Remind 101 program, a program that pushed messages through texts and emails. State budget cuts had Gotham City conserving paper in all buildings, facilitating school messages in a variety of ways was a necessity. Wendy, an elementary parent and president of the PTO, validated the importance of communication in getting parental volunteers, and felt social media had improved that effort. PowerSchool was another program and app that Gotham City used to disseminate information. It was available for the staff and the parents and it provided up-to-the-minute access to grade and absence data. It was also used to send out school cancellations and evacuations for fire and other events. Public relations was a communal effort in Gotham City. This relationship was validated when Jake said,

“there’s a great relationship between the community and our school system...we are always working together” (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016). The participants’ all agreed that the messages were perceived positively by the community.

Creation of the Messages

Each school site had someone in charge of relaying information, however, the information originated with Charlotte. Charlotte was the sole public relations person for Gotham City, so she was in control of the messaging that was sent out. She said:

I think that part of our moving forward in terms of the digital age [is] kind of branding ourselves, crafting our websites to be more user friendly and more appealing goes right along with...when people are researching a new community to move to, there are two main things that ask about...schools and the hospital. So when they call the Chamber of Commerce, we need to have a viable product that we can share with them (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

I asked about the massive numbers of Gotham City Knights I had seen in town, on campuses, on buildings on Main Street and asked if that was conscious effort or something organic. She replied:

It is just a natural thing. One thing about this community, you hear this slogan over and over again, ‘Once a Knight, always a Knight!’ It’s something that is definitely instilled in you that fact that you are a Knight, that you’re a part of this community; you are part of this family. That symbol means something to people here” (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

All of the other participants, except for Amy, were unsure of how the messages were crafted. Jake assumed it was a school board function. Amy knew of the origins as she ran the high

school's automated phone calling system, in that she crafted the messages on there from different clubs, counselors, or teachers that had a message that needed to be sent. Amy also mentioned the use of Facebook, and a school website as some other ways to push public relation materials. Amy said, "I put it all together and I shoot it out" (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Advocating for Education

All public relations materials pushed out by Gotham City schools was to advocate for the Gotham City Knights. If there was a lacking in this system, it was advocating for public education in general and relaying what was going on in the state concerning education. Charlotte stated, "I think I share more as myself than I do a Gotham City Knight, but we're one in the same so I'm always marketing our school and sharing those messages" (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016). The majority of the messages are pushed out through social media and the superintendent writes an editorial piece for the newspaper and is on the radio on Monday mornings getting information out to the public. All of the other participants really only shared public education advocacy on a personal basis with parents; most of them said they would leave that to the superintendent to make sure no wrong information was put out in the public.

Other Public Relations Thoughts

The remaining thoughts of the participants dealt with the community and the tradition of community and schools working hand in hand. Charlotte imparted this important aspect of Gotham City schools:

It is the inherent family culture that we build in our district and our community. This familial culture is apparent everywhere that you go. We instill that culture. We are open, we're going to share, we're going to be transparent, and we're going to work together as

a team...it's a deliberate course of action that we take in terms of communications with our public at all times to know the good, the bad, and the ugly (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Amy's favorite type of public relations is the community service the students do. Amy explained:

We have several clubs here that it's a requirement to put in 'x' number of hours in order to be a member of the club. Every year our kids participate in the Thanksgiving baskets and the Christmas angels and the Christmas decoration of the park. This is just a great community and we encourage them because most of our kids come back and we want them to be a part of that when they grow up and that's part of growing up is becoming 'community-wise' and so and again the Facebook, and the websites and our open door policy we've allowed parents to come sit in classrooms if they think there's a problem and it's pretty neat (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Charles said an overlooked form of public relations that goes along with tradition is the singing of the Alma Mater after every game. Lastly, Jake mentioned how important the school is to the community and vice-versa; "We just have good people, people that care about our kids, they care about the future of our kids, and they care about the future of our educational system...it's great to be a part of that I really enjoy it" (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Gotham City Summary

It was obvious from the moment I drove into Gotham City that there is a great relationship between the community and the school system. From the large, colored LED signs that flashed pictures of elementary students working on projects, to high school athletics, and teachers' interaction with students. The abundance of Knights that I saw around town and in all

of the buildings, the volunteers at the elementary schools, and the apparent hard work to create the Gotham City Knight brand by those in the administration building showed the community's enthusiasm for the schools. Jake summed it up best about the students and community being always willing to help each other out by saying, "it's really cool what we have here" (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis Public Schools

Driving east in the early morning was not the best idea, especially when the sun sat in the sweet spot of the windshield. Metropolis was one of the largest school districts in the state of Oklahoma. They had many campuses and all were impressive. I was heading to the educational service building to meet Michael, one of the public relations persons. This was a newer building made of brick to match other buildings around the campus. I stepped into the foyer and saw large paintings up on the walls, some sofas and chairs to sit, a set of stairs and just to the right of the stairs was a door leading out to a back parking lot. The ceiling was very high and the glass skylight allowed the morning sunlight to shine down in the foyer. There were meeting rooms and other doors that led off into different hallways with many different rooms in each of them both upstairs and down. A receptionist sat at a desk just to the left of the stairs.

Metropolis Participants

Table 8 below explains the participants and their role in the study.

Table 7:

Metropolis Participants

Name	Classifications	Years in Public Ed.	Years in District
Michael	Public Relations	1	1
Jan	Public Relations	10	10
Kelly	Elementary Teacher	18	9
April	Secondary Teacher	5	5
Donna	Elementary Parent	NA	3
Ann	Secondary Parent	NA	13
Leslie	Secretary	21	21
Tom	Community	NA	9

Michael and Jan. Michael and Jan were the public relations department for Metropolis Public Schools. I met with them in Michael’s office on the second floor of the Education Center. Michael, a young man, had spent his life in the private sector of public relations before coming to education. He wore a shirt and a tie and sat across from me at the table. Jan was held up in a meeting with the superintendent and arrived later. Michael had been in Metropolis only one year, but brought private sector public relations experience with him. Jan headed the communications department and was older than Michael, and had spent more time working around public education. Michael and Jan worked hand in hand along with a graphics person, Jimmy, in getting public relations materials out to the public. The room consisted of a round table just inside the door where we sat and a desk that faced the door. Behind the desk was a large window that looked over part of the high school campus. Along the walls were shelves with pictures and other mementos of Michael’s career and newborn child.

Kelly. Kelly was a Metropolis elementary teacher. She worked in Adams Elementary, one of three elementary schools in the district. Adams was situated at the corner of a busy intersection. Adams had a red digital sign in the school yard, which had a fence bordering it and some trees in the middle. This was not the recess area, which was in another section on the backside of the school; it was also fenced in with a chain-link fence. The digital sign was putting up dates for different things: picture day, parent/teacher conferences, and Metropolis Dragons. The entrance of the school had a long driving area where parents can pick up or drop off their children. In the middle of this driveway were places for parking, there was another parking area just off to the left of this one. The main entrance of the building was set back and created two building wings where the main entrance served as the central hub. Inside the building, a group of students were walking in single file with their teacher leading the way down one of the wing's hallways. I saw two parents signing in on a sheet and then having a seat along the glass just inside the door. The meeting room was a teacher workroom with a copier, a sink, a coffee machine, and a long table with a paper cutter on the far end. Kelly had short black hair and wore a Metropolis Dragon t-shirt with a Dragon lanyard with an identification card around her neck.

April. April was a Metropolis High School secondary teacher. She was young, energetic and the cheerleading sponsor. She had shoulder length auburn hair. April was not originally from Oklahoma and was unaware of Metropolis' reputation. She quickly learned and believed it was the best public school system in the state. She had only worked for the Metropolis public schools. To get to April's classroom, I had to take two streets on the campus of the high school. I slipped in a back door, just by April's classroom where the small hallway was half brick and a neutral colored wall that matched the tile floor. A few more feet up the hall, there was a larger hub area that took you to other parts of this large building. She was wearing glasses and had a

classroom full of students. She milled around the room and answered questions from the students. The room seemed cramped considering the perception of Metropolis High being large. The room was full of posters, projects, maps, and various other educational tools.

Donna. Donna was the parent of a Metropolis elementary student. We met just down the hall from Michael's office in a large conference room with a table that sat twelve. There was a screen on the opposite wall and a projector on the ceiling. The room was partially enclosed by glass which had blinds on them that are closed. There was a small credenza to the right of the door that had bottles of water on it. Donna was a shorter woman with long black hair and an energy that was unstoppable. She had an infectious smile and loved talking about Metropolis' schools. She wore a Metropolis Dragons shirt in the darker of the two school colors. She also was not originally from the Metropolis area, but immediately fell in love with Metropolis' public school system. Her daughter was an elementary school student.

Ann. Ann was the parent of a Metropolis secondary student. We met in the same room as Donna. Ann had long brown hair and was very nicely dressed. She worked for the Education Foundation. She had a college education and also had enormous pride and belief in the Metropolis School district. Ann, like Donna, could not stop smiling when speaking about Metropolis Public Schools.

Leslie. Leslie was a secretary at Metropolis' Adams Elementary. We met in the same room as Ann at Adams Elementary. She had short brown hair and a bouncy walk. She was very kind and wore a lanyard with an ID on it as well, as she sat down she told me she just finished taking care of a bloody nose. She went on to say that her position required her to perform varied duties. She has performed those varied duties for twenty-one years.

Tom. Tom was a member of the Metropolis community. We met at one of my favorite eateries in Metropolis. Tom was an older gentleman with grey hair and a stocky build. Tom had been a business owner in this area for the last nine years. The restaurant sat in a strip mall behind some big-name fast food places. Tucked in between stores, Tom's restaurant offered up some of the tastiest, guilty pleasure foods. The windows were dark on the outside so you cannot see inside, but once inside, the restaurant was hustling and bustling. Everything was visible: the grill station, the counter, there were televisions all over, different pictures of memorabilia from various celebrities and posters of Metropolis sporting teams. Tom and I sat in one of the booths. He opened the restaurant in Metropolis so his children could go to Metropolis schools.

Definitions

The participants' definition of public relations was important to understand each participant's starting point when discussing public relations. The definitions included interacting with consumers, communicating something the public will understand, communication between the district and the community, to be helpful and understand the community needs. Michael, the public relations officer, summed it up when he said:

Public relations is communicating with the community and consistently communicating a message, that gets across your mission, your values and your goals making those easily understood both to internal and employees and external stakeholders (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Public Relations' Role in Dealing with Negative Perceptions of Public Education

The perceived negative view was not necessarily the case in Metropolis. Some agreed that education was viewed positively, but understood why some may have a negative view on education. Some blamed the media and demographics on the negative view of public education.

Others opined that the virtue of public education will outweigh any negative connotations. Michael blamed the media in creating the negative perception of public education by only highlighting those stories that frame it in a bad light. He said:

The media loves anything with scandal, corruption and outrage. Those are the food, water, and oxygen of the media organism. I think any sort of negativity will always take precedence over positivity. I think I saw some stat that said that most or close to 50% of parents would give their school an A or a B grade just based on what they know of that school and their experience...that's still half who think their kid's school is average or worse! And then if you look nationally, I think it goes down 24% of people would give public schools an A or a B grade, so that's 3/4 of the population that say public schools are average or below. And you know, I know the numbers in reality are not that low, but there are people, hardworking, dedicated teachers, principals, and administrators doing awesome work every day that goes unnoticed and unfortunately that perception remains (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Kelly conveyed that public education was viewed positively in Metropolis because stakeholders see the value in public education. Kelly also stated that in some places it may be viewed negatively based on demographics, “when the socioeconomic level of that area tends to have a more negative impact in the community...I think they view it negatively, because of the property taxes...aren't necessarily driving a large chunk of funds coming back into the school” (Kelly, personal interview, November 4, 2016). April found the idea about not viewing public education positively ridiculous and gushed about the Metropolis school system. She said, “the idea of my kids being able to go and graduate from Metropolis is like one of the main reasons I would want to stay in Metropolis” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016). The impressions that

people may have about public education were dependent upon where they get their information, according to April. Donna expressed public education was viewed positively, however, Donna's view came with a caveat. She said, "it really just depends, I think a lot of your personal experience in your school district of how you view public education" (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Ann and Leslie blamed the negative perception on the media for propagating the belief that all teachers care about was teacher pay. Tom, the community member, philosophized that although it may be viewed negatively, public education is a good thing. He asked, "why would it be negative? Unless like in Oklahoma the ratings are not as good as they are everywhere else. I view that negatively, but public education for one is good, if you're doing it right" (Tom, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis uses public relations to negate that negative view in a variety of ways, as Michael said, "part of my job is to pump the sunshine" (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Positive stories, highlighting great things and the opportunities provided to the student was part of the process of letting the stakeholders know the great value of Metropolis schools. Michael contended it was essential to understand the responsibility given to educators and to highlight successes, such as teachers caring about student successes and different programs going on in the schools that are usually not presented to the public. Kelly admitted a good public relations tool to help with negative perceptions was to be visible in the community and by having opportunities to bring the community in to your building. Kelly mentioned that her Metropolis elementary had parents volunteer in a program called Dynamic Dads. Dynamic Dads is a program in which the students' fathers come to school, there is a guest speaker that gives a program, and there is an activity for students and their fathers to complete. Kelly mentioned some other valuable public relations visits with the community, "We have Picnics on the

playground... musical programs, author visits, so we're constantly trying to do things where you are bringing in the community, asking for volunteers, but also being visible in the community as well” (Kelly, personal interview, November 4, 2016). April claimed that Metropolis does a good job at countering the negative by highlighting Metropolis’ positive achievements. Donna agreed that the communication between the school and the community fostered engagement. Donna said:

I'm a real engaged parent and so I see what's going on in the classroom and it blows my mind what the teachers are doing...so I think the more that we can almost kind of look at the schools as a business and use some of that public relations stuff that other companies do to show off, to showcase what they are doing. I think that as a community it's important you know as much as what the school does for the community. I think that the community should do as much as they can for the school...so I think we really need to take ownership as a community into our schools and help pour into that and help support that because really if we don't do that as a community, you know we're going to be on the back end of the consequences. If our schools are not strong, our future leaders are not strong, our future economy is not strong, you know, crime, there's so many things that public education can positively or negatively have an impact on a community's future, so I think it's important that the community pour into the schools. (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Ann brought politics into the foray as a way to change negative perceptions of public education. She contended public relations could change views by “educating the public on what the policies are, how we can, as a voting body, change the policies in place that would benefit our teachers and our school districts” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Leslie noted good public

relations need to start with the principal, particularly in the elementary setting. They set the tone in the building for the staff, students and parents. Tom, the community member, did not say that public relations could change negative views, but could be used by schools as a tool for research:

Well, find out where you're lacking first, if your own teachers are not up to date, if your system is outdated, if those are the things that are required by the state, that's where you start. And if it's with your students find out why they're lacking and then get that taken care of, find out what the good schools are doing, what the good states are doing and then maybe mirror those. (Tom, personal interview, November 4, 2016)

Sending the Message and Stakeholder Perception of Messages

Metropolis Schools, being one of the largest districts in the state, has a full time communications staff that allows them to utilize almost every form of news media and social media available. I reference the poster that I've seen in every room of every building describing the mission and vision of the school district as an effective public relations tool. Michael responded:

That's more of an internal public relations piece and every three years, you know, we go through the district goals process and we identify: Who are we as a district? Where do we want to be in three years? And what's most important to us? I think that's where it starts for us, highlighting those things that fit into our goals, into our mission, into our values as Metropolis public schools (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Michael wanted to use every point of contact possible to reach stakeholders, not just in generic ways, but meaningful ways. He explained:

I think it's important that we do that in a lot of different platforms, social media is an easy way to reach people, very quickly. We want to have a website that's easy to navigate and

share news, we want to have a newsletter that is more feature driven, I want to know about the people and the students, that to me is good public relations is when, you're really highlighting those folks. So we want to do that through the written word, we want to do it graphically with pictures, and then you know I'm big on the use of video as well. I think video is a very powerful medium as well, now it takes time and we don't have as many resources as we would like in that area, but I think for people with today's attention span and especially if we are reaching students, those can be really powerful things (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Michael was quick to point out the use of the television media from nearby Megalopolis was a most valuable tool for Metropolis. He reasoned that the news media now has to fill content for all of their outlets twenty-four hours a day, which gives Metropolis an advantage as to what stories they will push for the cameras. Michael's approach to public relations was proactive and not reactive modeled by his continuous pursuit to find and use varied resources.

Newsletters, which are more like magazines, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Peach Jar, a program designed to electronically send classroom folders and or announcements are just a few of the plethora of ways that Metropolis was able to push information out in the form of public relations. Kelly reported using a program called Canvas, which allowed her to type in a daily review of the day for parents. Kelly received positive feedback from parents as it allowed them to engage with their students. She mentioned in her school they received a letter called 'Notes from the Principal,' and the scrolling marquee on the sign out in the front on the corner of a busy intersection created another public relations platform. Kelly created a monthly PowerPoint that provided pictures on a television in the lobby so visitors could see what kind of things were happening in the school. April conveyed she uses

social media to communicate with parents, but she also liked to write emails and make phone calls, because “it’s just positive information that no one would know about that was happening in here unless I made somebody aware of it” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Donna was very passionate about how important community involvement in public schools should be and was pleased and impressed with the amount of public relations materials Metropolis pushes to the public. She explained the hierarchy: “On a weekly basis from the classroom...on a monthly level from the principals...and I think it's quarterly from the school district itself” (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016). She listed the various ways she could receive messages, including the school’s Facebook page, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Facebook page, the automated calling system, and Peach Jar. Peach Jar was a program that sent out digital flyers or announcements from the school sites, instead of sending a paper flyer home. Ann mentioned a publication called “Our Schools,” a digital magazine that is also printed a couple of times a quarter that has information that was relevant to the district. Ann has seen a shift in the importance of public relations this year; “I feel like they’ve taken a more active role in what’s going on in the district” (Ann, personal interview, November 4 206). Although the elementary school had a scrolling marquee because of its location on a busy intersection, they were limited as to what could be put on the screen. Tom was unaware of how Metropolis uses public relations. When I mentioned the Metropolis athletic posters on the wall of his business, Tom said, “yeah, well if you look at them a lot of them are outdated, they don't come in and give me new ones, unless I ask for them” (Tom, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Tom had never received any public relations materials from Metropolis public schools.

Tom could not respond to questions about whether perceptions of messages were positive or negative. All other participants were very sure of the positive perceptions of the Metropolis

messages. Both Michael and Jan thought the messages were perceived as positive due in part to the supportive community of the Metropolis stakeholders. Leslie, April and Kelly all backed this notion of positive messages and supportive community. Kelly added that it was obvious by the number of volunteers they get at her school. The parents, Donna and Ann, found the messages to be positive. Donna commended the high visibility of the superintendent and the importance of that top-down approach. Ann conjectured it was deliberate in part due to the communications team. She said, “I think they intentionally try to select things to put out on social media that represent the district in a positive way and that energy feeds in the district...they strategically work on their programming that they put out there” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Creation of the Messages

Metropolis schools was in a truly unique position in that it had three full time employees who solely worked in the communications department, strategizing, and carefully deciding what goes out to the public and how it goes out. All of the school employees agreed that public relations materials for the most part had to go through the communications department. Michael and Jan’s communication department were given autonomy to highlight the stories that are the most relevant. They also had another person in their department, Jimmy, who worked with photos, graphics and layout. Michael wrote all the content for the Dragons newsletter, but turned it over to Jimmy to design. This is how the group complimented one another. The group met every morning to discuss what messages were worthy of posting on social media that day. Michael reported, “it’s all very strategic” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). As administrators for all of the social media in the district, it was sometimes hard to be in all places

at once, which was why it was important to have those morning meetings to make sure the right stories were chosen.

Advocating for Education

Metropolis, again, was in a unique situation, by having a communications department in direct contact with the superintendent. They had more opportunity to get positive messages out, extolling the virtues of Metropolis public schools, but also could keep the stakeholders abreast on any state or national public education news. They also had the ability to push all of this through the multitude of platforms that Metropolis schools utilized. The important thing about news stories pertaining to education, according to Michael, was that parents want to know, “how does this affect my kid, my site, my job” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). They continued to update the websites and social media as information became available. The websites often had tabs that stakeholders could click that would take them to any posted relevant information on the subject clicked. One great public relations tool they used was a video message from the superintendent showing graphics about funding in the state of Oklahoma. Jan added that in the spring the superintendent, Chief Financial Officer, and director of finance had meetings open to the public so that they could clear up any misconceptions. They had placed a Google form on the website, in which stakeholders could ask questions about Metropolis, state, or national education. April made it a point to speak with her friends about Metropolis and state matters, and she was also excited about was a process called Dragon Link. This program allowed citizens to raise money for the schools and businesses in the community matched the money raised. She said, “Metropolis tried to get every family to donate five dollars...and through that campaign they were able to almost eliminate the loss that we got from the government” (April,

personal interview, November 4 2016). Ann talked about the Foundation's involvement in this effort:

This is where the foundation comes in...we just partner with community businesses, community leaders and try and sadly we call it 'Bridge the Gap.' The gap has gotten huge, so we can't realistically bridge the gap, but we're trying to fund programming that otherwise the district would have to cut because we just don't have the funds for it anymore (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Ann and Donna mentioned the Parents Legislative Action Committee (PLAC) as the means for informing the public about public education in the state. Parent participation was encouraged in this group and the leader of the PLAC attended all of the PTA meetings and delivered information on state issues. Donna stated that the PLAC also had a Facebook page, but contended the best way to solicit feedback from the stakeholders was to make a personal appointment and talk with someone.

It was apparent in the responses that Metropolis school goes above and beyond to get messages out about local and public education. However, Tom, a community member, doesn't agree. Tom got a little ruffled when asked if Metropolis has ever informed him about public education from state level, "No, if I'm a citizen, I've been here nine years and have not received anything, then that's not a good thing, whether or not I have a student in school I'm paying taxes so I should know" (Tom, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Other Public Relations Thoughts

One of the best public relations strategies is that in Metropolis you [students] are a Dragon from day one until graduation day. April gloated about the noncompetition of schools and that they all worked off of the same vision plan. Michael agreed with this great strategy:

What we also want to accomplish with public relations is that we are all in this together, right? So no matter what site you go to in Metropolis, we're all Dragons...and so I think having that sense of family even in a district of 12,000 kids really runs through every school site and is ingrained in the students and the parents and we want to emphasize that as much as possible. (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016)

The teachers felt fortunate to work for such a district and praised the community and stakeholders. The parents spoke about the dedication of the entire staff living out the Metropolis culture and embodying the message. Even Tom, who seemed not to have much information about Metropolis' public relations practices said:

The public view when I first moved here was you want to live in Metropolis, because they have a great school system. It's one of the top in the nation, was what I was told, and over the years I haven't lost that perception. I still believe that Metropolis has the best school in the Megalopolis area and possibly state wide. And that is because, I believe that they get the best information from the best sources and they use the tax money wisely, when you pass that school district it looks more like a college, like a university setting, so somebody's doing something right. (Tom, personal interview, November 4, 2016)

Lastly, Michael and Jan expressed how fortunate they were in a district that necessitates the need for public relations positions. The downfall of a district this size was that it will also receive a lot of scrutiny, so Michael contended, "public relations needs to be in place to be positive, be ready to react when the time is right...to be prepared to give a response and a very careful, very calculated response" (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis Summary

Metropolis was a very large district and had the ability to do things the majority of the other schools in the state wished they could do. It was overwhelming to see the resources that Metropolis had at its disposal, but they were utilizing all of them in a way that promoted the successes of those mighty Dragons.

Summary of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the research in an ascending format from smallest school district to largest school district. Each of the participants were described as was the school district itself and the researcher's foray into those districts to give a rich description of the districts. Each district was broken down into subsections that answered the research questions. Themes developed independently in each of the districts and were consistent in each of the participants' answers. Chapter Five analyzes those themes and how they fit into Excellence Theory and the importance of the four models of public relations.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to explore the public relations practices of four Oklahoma public school districts of varying sizes and their use of those practices in strengthening public perceptions of public education. Excellence Theory was the theoretical framework used in this study. Excellence Theory was derived from a fifteen-year study by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). The study, led by James E. Grunig, explained the value of public relations to an organization. Three books were published from the research (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). The research found that the characteristics of excellent public relations can be categorized into four levels as seen below in table 9.

Table 8:

Characteristics of Excellent Public Relations

Characteristics	Description
Program	Public relations are managed strategically by having measurable objectives and an evaluation process
Functional	Public relations should be an integrated communication function separated from other management functions and should be contained in a single department for the purpose of strategic planning
Organizational	Excellent organizations communications, both internally and externally, should be based on the two-way symmetrical model
Societal	Organizations must recognize their impact on other organizations and publics

Grunig and Hung (1984) created the Linkage Model to identify an organization’s stakeholders and their communication linkages.

The Linkage Model has been modified from the original to conform to the organization of the school,

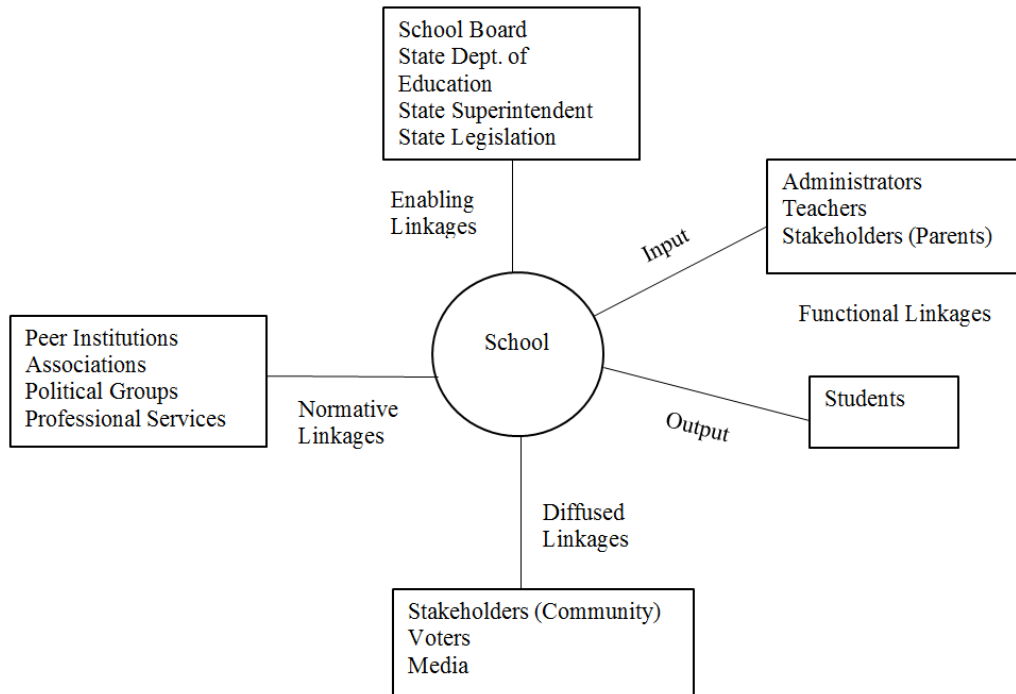


Figure 4. Linkage Model demonstrating how various stakeholders relate to the school. Adapted from “Managing Public Relations,” by J. Grunig and T. Hunt, 1984, p. 41. Copyright 1984 by Harcourt Brace.

The linkage model, as shown in Figure 1 above, identified four linkages: enabling, normative, functional, and diffused. This study found most public relations related to the functional and diffused linkage, as communication with enabling and normative linkages are usually perpetrated by the enabling and normative linkages to the school. Therefore, the communication between the enabling and normative linkages were part of some of the messages sent from the school to the stakeholders included in the functional and diffused linkages.

The Excellence Study also identified four models of public relations: press agent, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It was through the lens of this Linkage Model and the utilization of the four models of public relations of Excellence Theory the data from this study was organized.

Enabling Linkages

Enabling linkages are stakeholders who have some control and authority over the organization (Rawlins, 2006). The local school board, state department of education, and federal departments are those stakeholders who have some control and authority over the school. Federal and state monies can be withheld if the school does not comply within the parameters created by those organizations. Local school boards create policy to which the schools must adhere. The following will show how each studied school communicated with their publics concerning the enabling linkage entities.

Smallville

Enabling linkages at Smallville included the Oklahoma legislature, state department of education, and the local school board. For example, Smallville, due to budget cuts brought on by Oklahoma legislation, had to make some hard choices before the 2016-2017 school year started. As Carol, elementary teacher, described, there were several possible choices including, “moving the high school, going four days, no buses, no football, no sports, and that ain’t going to happen” (Carol, personal interview, October 6, 2016). Consequently, strategic management meetings began occurring between the superintendent and principal of the high school, Bob. Bob said, “we meet once a week with our superintendent, where that [a plan of action] might be discussed and what’s the best way to present this to the parents” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Carol, Smallville elementary teacher, offered some possible solutions to problems arising from legislative actions; “I guess if you went and talked to the legislators who make those rules and things just to explain what we have to deal with...maybe get more parents involved with the school system” (Carol, personal interview, October 6, 2016). Principal Bob concurred that communication with the parents on legislative matters is important, and Smallville does inform their stakeholders of public education matters. When asked why Smallville does not have adequate amenities, such as better athletic facilities including turf on the football field, separate middle and high school campuses (due to the levels being combined when the high school building closed), and technology for the classroom, Bob said, “well, it’s probably because of who you voted for” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Star City

Star City found itself in the same position as Smallville and many schools at the end of last year facing massive budget cuts to education. Enabling linkages included the Oklahoma legislature, state department of education and the Star City School Board. Decisions made by these enabling linkages resulted in significant changes: Star City went to a shorter calendar year and cut three weeks off of their calendar. The superintendent, Todd, informed stakeholders about public education on a regular basis through emails, websites, newspaper articles, and he said, “I have a superintendent update at every board meeting” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Superintendent Todd found this tactic necessary to combat some of the negativity surrounding public education coming from the legislature. Todd said, “I think you view it negatively not only because of the legislation that is being pushed through to where you see for the first time in recent history a move to get away from the traditional public school setting” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Star City elementary teacher, Emma, had concerns about the emphasis on testing and accountability being touted from the state legislature because it is a snapshot of something a teacher does. She said, “ I think we’re not showing them the results, through our testing or through accountability...accountability doesn’t mean anything to us [teachers], because it’s not really tapping into what we’re doing really” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Superintendent Todd assured that he and his staff are “always looking for ways” to get their message out concerning public education (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Gotham City

Gotham City, like the other school districts studied was feeling the pressures of inadequate funding from the state legislature. Enabling linkages included the Oklahoma legislature, the state department of education, and the local school board. An example of a budget caused by decisions made by enabling linkages is that the schools were sending most of their messages electronically in order to save paper. Elementary teacher, Gina said, “There are certain things we send notes home for but a lot of it is electronic...we are on a paper shortage...I mean we're just trying to save money everywhere you can” (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Therefore, most of the messages concerning enabling linkages come from the superintendent’s office. Jake, secondary teacher, said:

It's going probably start at the local level in terms of the school board meetings and then it's going to spread from that. I think you're going to use the media to try to translate that information into layman's terms, so the community is always informed...to whatever it may be (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis

Metropolis' enabling linkages included the Oklahoma legislature, state department of education, and the local school board. However, Metropolis school district was in a unique position. Although the educators felt the same budget pressures as the other three schools studied, it was large enough to maintain a full-time public relations department. The three employees met daily and strategized carefully what would be sent out and how. Michael reported, "it's all very strategic" (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Michael, Metropolis public relations, blamed the media for some of the woes public education was suffering. As part of the public relations team, Michael had to ensure those negative stories were combatted. He said, "the media loves anything with scandal, corruption and outrage. I think any sort of negativity will always take precedence over positivity...but there are dedicated teachers, principals, and administrators doing awesome work every day that goes unnoticed" (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Secondary parent, Ann, agreed and wanted to educate the stakeholders. She said, "educating the public on what the policies are, how we can as a voting body change the policies in place that would benefit our teachers and our school districts" (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

This study did not focus on any communiques sent from the school to the enabling linkage stakeholders, but it did find instances where the messages were sent about those enabling linkages stakeholders. The messages were mostly negative as funding for public education has been a critical issue in Oklahoma for the last several years. Most of the messages dealt with how the districts were going to overcome the state's budget shortfall and the effect it was going to have on their individual school districts. The majority of the messages were crafted and delivered

by the superintendent of each district and were disseminated in many forms, including social media, radio and newspaper.

Normative Linkages

Normative linkages are stakeholders with similar values and common interests (Rawlins, 2006). The normative linkages come from career tech centers, neighboring schools, political groups, and professional societies that all have public education as their main focus. This study did not focus on the messages sent from the school to the stakeholders who are part of the normative linkages. However, normative linkage stakeholders were part of the messaging sent out from some of the studied schools.

Smallville

There is a career tech center located in Smallville that services many surrounding area school districts, one of them being Star City, another school in this study. However, there were no indications of any messages delivered pertaining to that career tech center in any of the interviews for this study, as the career tech handled their own public relations. Normative linkages at Smallville only included the career tech center.

Smallville does have an annual carnival in which the students and parents are invited to attend. They have food and offer games as a way to raise money for the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). Elementary teacher Carol said, “We do have a carnival...The kids come and play games, have food, and they have to pay for it. That's how our PTO raises money to buy playground equipment and stuff like that” (Carol, personal interview, October 6, 2016). As this carnival is a fundraiser for the PTO, it serves a dual purpose as a normative and diffused linkage.

Star City

Normative linkages at Star City included, the career tech center located in Smallville, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Rotary Club of Star City. Star City's Superintendent Todd delivers messages to organizations such as the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce personally. He is a member of these organizations and attends regular meetings giving regular updates. Todd's rationale behind joining and being visible in these organizations is two-fold. First, Todd intimated that it was important for him to attend these meetings as a way of returning the favor when they attended the town hall forums Todd set up when discussing the budget shortfall for the upcoming school year. Secondly, it is a great public relations tool, Todd said, "I think, as a superintendent, I'm always in marketing. I am the face of Star City and make it a priority to continue to have conversations with the public via whatever platform" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Gotham City

The Gotham City was another school district that was fortunate to have a career tech center in their district, but like Smallville, Gotham City's career tech center handled their own public relations. Normative linkages in Gotham City included the career tech center located in Gotham City, Gotham City Chamber of Commerce, and a local business which donated the use of two large electronic signs. There were two areas that Gotham City utilized different organizations that would fall into the normative linkage stakeholder group. Charlotte spoke about having positive messages for the purpose of advertising the school through the Chamber of Commerce as a way to attract residents to come to Gotham City. She said, "when people are researching a new community...they call the Chamber of Commerce...we need to have a viable product that we can share with them" (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016). The

second was partnering with a business who owned two large electronic billboards in key locations in town which projected many photographs, courtesy of the Instagram app, showcasing different moments in the different school buildings in the district.

Metropolis

Metropolis had so many different platforms to release public relations materials; it would be difficult beyond the scope of this study to isolate messages pertaining to normative linkages. However, there were a few organizations that Metropolis used to provide and receive information to normative linkage stakeholders. Parent Teacher Association's (PTA) for each of the elementary schools, the Parents Legislative Action Committee (PLAC), and the Education Foundation were examples of these organizations.

Elementary parent Donna was enthusiastic when she talked about the strength of the PTA and the availability of the superintendent attending PTA meetings she said, "our PTA's are very active and do a great job of doing public relations...Our superintendent comes to each PTA meeting, which is incredible because there's PTA for all of our schools" (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Both parents, Ann and Donna mentioned the Parents Legislative Action Committee (PLAC) as a way of educating the community on the state of public education in Oklahoma. This organization was created by a parent in the district who is very active with the state legislature. A luncheon is organized once a month where someone from the legislature will come. Donna said, "you RSVP and it's a free lunch...you have an hour and a half with the legislator who will run down what's going on in the legislature and how it impacts public schools" (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016). They also mentioned the organizer of the PLAC will also attend PTA meetings and deliver information at those meetings.

Secondary teacher April spoke about Dragon Link which was a way for citizens to raise money for schools, and the businesses in the community would match the money raised. This worked in conjunction with the Education Foundation, of which secondary parent, Ann spoke; “We just partner with community businesses, community leaders and sadly we call it ‘Bridge the Gap’” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016). This program allows Metropolis schools to keep some programs that may have been cut to due to state funding.

Like the enabling linkages, this study did not focus on communications from the schools to those organizations, but there are organizations in each of the school districts that would be part of the normative linkage stakeholder group. Some of these groups were on the periphery, such as Rotary and Chamber of Commerce, but important nonetheless in their support of local public schools. Other groups, the PTO, PTA, PLAC, and the Education Foundation played roles directly related to the educational process in either communicating with the public or generating funds for public education.

Functional Linkages

Functional linkages are essential to the function of the organization and are divided into input and output (Rawlins, 2006). The functional linkages display the working part of the school, in that input is derived by administrators, teachers, and parents based on what is best for that school and community. The students are the output of the school, which has far reaching effects as students go on to become members of the community and the workforce. This study did find functional linkages were communicated to on a regular basis.

Smallville

Functional linkages at Smallville included the superintendent, teachers, parents, and students. For example, the decisions for the upcoming school year and the impact the shortfall in

the state budget was going to have on Smallville caused the Smallville administration to reach out to the parents in a way they had never experienced. In creating the town hall forums, it brought the parents and the school, which were already close, closer. Principal Bob spoke of that closeness, “All the parents that I have here, I’m on a first name basis with them...I know just a little bit about every one of them” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Pam, Smallville secretary, noted the importance of the public receiving information, but felt the staff needed to know also. She said, “the public needs to know, but then also the staff needs to know. There are too many times we have the communications where some people know and not everybody does” (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

This issue concerning everybody not knowing relevant information was the impetus for using social media, which Principal Bob had to convince the superintendent was a good idea. According to secondary teacher, Angela, “we had issues with people not feeling like they've been informed...the school did create a Facebook page where they started sharing stuff directly with the public” (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Another method of connecting with parents was through Thursday folders. Thursday folders were sent home with students and contained graded papers, assignments, and pertinent information for the parents. The parents were instructed to sign the Thursday folder before it was returned to school, indicating that the information had been seen.

Star City

Functional linkages at Star City included building administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Star City’s superintendent, Todd, was the catalyst behind the push for more positive interaction with parents and other stakeholders in Star City’s public relations. Todd said, “we do a large and vast push to continually put out what is great about Star City...we put out all the

successes of our students” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Todd expressed it was important for schools to use whatever means necessary to continue that conversation with the public. He said, “you make a priority to continue to have conversations with the public via whatever platform” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Star City used many different avenues to communicate with their functional linkage stakeholders including newsletters, emails, social media and being visible.

Star City elementary schools used classroom newsletters to get information to the parents. Star City elementary parent, Diane said, “the school is really good about sending stuff home, I get weekly newsletters from my children’s teachers.” (Diane, personal interview, October 14, 2016). The automated phone calling system was another method of reaching the parents with information about attendance, school closings and any special announcements. Secondary parent, Danny said, “we have a calling system and the majority of the information of the school comes out through the calling system” (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Secondary teacher, Steve, liked to use emails as a way to communicate with the parents. Emails were found to be an effective way to stay in touch with parents concerning grades and any other issues concerning a student and their parent. Steve said of emails; “I try to email all the parents at the beginning of the year a welcome letter making sure they know that they can talk to me or call me” (Steve, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Steve also made it a point to ask after a few weeks of school how the students and parents felt about the class.

Social media is an incredibly simple tool to utilize in getting messages out quickly, however it sometimes can be an avenue for negative statements. Superintendent Todd of Star City said of monitoring Facebook; “Last night we had negative things start popping up on

Facebook, so what are we doing, we're calling those parents personally...asking how we can address those concerns" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

At Star City Elementary, it was a simple approach of being visible to stakeholders every morning when they dropped their students off for school. Elementary teacher, Emma said, "every morning, we stand out there and we open the doors for each child that comes in...it's just a way of saying to the parent, that we're a friendly place" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Secondary teacher, Steve approved of the direction the superintendent was taking. Elementary teacher, Emma was appreciative of the superintendent's leadership and the messages produced by the superintendent. She said, "I think it has a lot to do with your leadership...It's probably superintendent's number one thing to show the public that we want them to be included in the educational process" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Gotham City

Functional linkages at Gotham City included the superintendent, building administrators, teachers, parents and students. In Gotham City, just like Star City, the automated phone calling system was an effective method to ensure messages got home to the parents. Amy, Gotham City secretary, was in charge of making sure the messages put out were timely and accurate. She said, "the phone caller has been a real help for us...we put out a lot of messages" (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016). The automated calling system calls parents and gives them important dates to remember, events that are coming up, and reports if a student was unverified at any time during the day. It also has a feature that allows it to call immediately if there is an emergency. As an elementary parent, Wendy was appreciative of the calling system, especially in cases of school closings.

Wendy also said the parents were well informed, communication was consistently sent home, and the educators “want your child involved as much as possible” (Wendy, personal interview, September 27, 2016). One of the methods of communication she was speaking about came in the form of the Student Information Systems (SIS). The SIS systems, regardless of the company, basically served the same function for schools and teachers. They were a gateway between the parent, teacher, and student, covering grades, attendance, lesson plans, email capabilities, progress reports, announcements, lunch accounts, and discipline. Any information a parent or student would need was retrieved at the click of a mouse or touch of a button on an app. Gotham City secondary parent, Charles said:

I can pull up my kids’ grade [showing a phone] right now and look and see what they've done. I mean it's up to the minute, as soon as a teacher puts in a grade and it’s saved it pulls up on your phone (personal interview, 2016).

Secondary teacher, Jake, mused on this idea, noting that sometimes the connection is too quick. He said, “I had mistakenly counted someone absent...and they checked their phone and said, ‘you counted me absent.’ That was done 30 seconds ago, so the technology is instantaneous” (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis

Social media outlets, magazine-like newsletters, and other programs like Peach Jar, which were like digital Thursday folders, were some of the ways that Metropolis linked with their functional linkage stakeholders. Elementary teacher Kelly used another program called Canvas, which allowed her to post a daily classroom review for the parents of her students. The parents have responded positively to these posts as it allowed them to engage with their students.

Kelly also created a monthly PowerPoint that provided pictures on a television in the lobby, which allowed visitors to see what kind of things were happening in the school.

Metropolis secondary parent, Ann, echoed those remarks in her use of Canvas and another app called PowerSchool for her child's progress in school. Ann explained the difference between the two programs; "PowerSchool the district uses for record keeping and Canvas is more of the day-to-day where the teacher can send an email to her class and individual grades go in there" (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016). These types of student information systems and one-way communicative programs or apps were the norm for each of the schools in the Metropolis school district.

Peach Jar, a virtual Thursday folder, was used more in the elementary school setting. Elementary parent Donna gushed about the convenience of having a program like Peach Jar. She said, "anytime you get a new Peachjar, which is a new flyer, you get an email and then you go to the Peachar website... they do a lot of community announcements like that" (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Social media platforms were another way that Metropolis communicated with their functional linkages. Metropolis utilized the gamut of social media applications, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Michael, Metropolis public relations, was even trying to figure out how to use Snapchat. Secondary teacher, April, used social media along with some traditional means of communication to link with parents of her students. She said, "it's just positive information that no one would know about that was happening in here unless I made somebody aware of it" (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis had a myriad of outlets to deliver their messages, including a magazine published every other month with feature articles and stories about Metropolis students and

teachers. They created a phone call-in help system for parents or others in and around the district that may have questions about anything related to Metropolis public schools. Metropolis public relations practitioner, Michael, said, “we have people who care and who are dedicated and who are hardworking and [we] highlight those things” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

One aspect of Metropolis public schools that resonated loudly with their functional linkages was the intentional naming of the mascot for all Metropolis schools as Dragons. It instilled a sense of belonging at an early age. Michael, Metropolis public relations, thought this was a great strategy. He said, “we're all Dragons...having that sense of family in a district of 12,000 kids runs through every school site and is ingrained in the students and the parents and we want to emphasize that as much as possible” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Metropolis secondary teacher, April, agreed and said, “I think that that there's just so much unity in everybody being a Dragon...there's no competition...everybody in the district is focused on the Metropolis vision. It's like Metropolis against the world! Go Metropolis!” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

The functional linkages, which include teachers and parents, were a main focus of the schools studied. A large portion of the messages were sent to parents concerning their students' classroom work, grades, attendance, discipline, and upcoming events. The platforms used to create these messages were, for the most part, two-way communication devices, which allowed teachers and parents to receive feedback from each other. This type of two-way communication was important as it related to the students who are the output of the functional linkages. Everybody had the opportunity to think on the same lines in terms of the students and their success. This relationship between school and home was one reason why April, secondary

teacher, wanted to stay in Metropolis for her kids. She said, “the idea of my kids being able to go and graduate from Metropolis is like one of the main reasons I would want to stay in Metropolis” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Diffused Linkages

Diffused stakeholders are those that have a stake in the school but aren’t necessarily involved in the daily function of the school (Rawlins, 2006). In some communities, the school is the central figure that binds that community together, and it is important for the school to not only thrive, but survive. It is important, therefore, for administrators to recognize and understand these stakeholders and their links in order to achieve excellence in communications and realize the overall mission and vision of the school district.

Smallville

Diffused linkages at Smallville included the community and the weekly newspaper. Smallville connected with its diffused linkage stakeholders on a personal level. Smallville sponsored an event where feeding the family was the main theme. Students and parents were fed a small meal and students would display some of the work they had completed over the past year. This coincided with Smallville community member Ted’s views on public relations. Ted said, “public relations is being involved in the public, getting out, doing good things for the public and branding your organization” (Ted, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Another member of the diffused linkage is the media. Smallville did have a weekly newspaper. A weekly newspaper posed a problem when trying to get messages out in a timely manner. Angela, secondary teacher, thought the newspaper was sometimes selective in what they put in the paper. She said, “The newspaper is kind of picky about what they publish. A lot of

times you'll send in a story and it never makes the newspaper and you wonder if your story was important enough" (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

This may have frustrated Angela because she had an idea on how to create more public awareness as to what goes on in a public school on a day-to-day basis. She said:

I think the school could do a better job of letting the public know [what happens] on a daily basis...We tend to talk about testing a lot, but we don't spend the majority of the year testing, we spend the majority of the year teaching! I think people would have a more positive view of what we're doing if they know what we were actually focusing on, because we're not focusing on testing every single day, we're not filling in bubbles.

(Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016)

Smallville ultimately wanted to create a personal touch with its diffused stakeholders. The district wanted them to know that they were valued. Pam, Smallville secretary, summed it up best; "We encourage people to come by; we encourage people to call, they can respond on Facebook to the quotes, you know just an open door policy" (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Star City

Diffused linkages in Star City included the community and the local newspaper. One of Star City superintendent Todd's main focuses was to create a lasting bond between the community and the school comparing it to a marriage. He said, "It's a two-way street, it's just not me relating to the public, it's the public relating back to me and it has to be a fit...I think of that. I think of a marriage" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). This was both true for good and bad news. Todd also suggested that school problems were community problems as the students and their families were part of the community. Some of the negative problems Star City

secretary Karen blamed on gossip. She said, “too many people don’t know what’s going on and they just start speaking out...They’re not informed” (Karen, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

In order to change that perception, superintendent Todd was an advocate for the town hall forum, he said, “I believe that there’s no better way to show that the school district wants your input...if you really want that relationship with the community” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Community member, Owen, agreed with this approach and praised Star City schools for the open town forums and the accessibility of the superintendent as a means to establish communications between the school and the public. Star City elementary schools establish community connections through programs that get the public to come to the school for various activities. They have a grandparent’s day, “Pops for Cops”, and veterans are always welcome.

The superintendent used multiple modes of communication to share the image of Star City schools to the community, including the newspaper. The newspaper in Star City was like that of Smallville and was only published once a week. However superintendent Todd utilized the paper as an effective communications tool. Steve, Star City secondary teacher, said, “He [superintendent] routinely puts articles in the newspaper...and informs us” (Steve, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Emma, elementary teacher, said, “It is the superintendent’s number one thing to show the public that we want them to be included in the educational process” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). This outlook has strengthened the bond between school and community.

Gotham City

Diffused linkages at Gotham City included the community, radio station, and local newspaper. Gotham City linked with its diffused linkages on a few different levels including, personal level, marketing level, and a level steeped in tradition. Charlotte, Gotham's public relations person, shared how Gotham City made that personal level connection:

Public relations is how an organization not only disperses information to the community but also responds and reacts to the communities needs and desires in terms of what they are wanting out of that organization. As a public school for example, we try to stay ahead of the game when things come up...and get the information out first so that it's first and accurate (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

One of the ways that Gotham City public schools connected with their community was with different community projects in correlation with city events. Amy, secretary, explained that the different organizations and clubs in the school have a community service hour agreement. Each year they are involved in some of the major events that take place in Gotham City. She said, "every year our kids participate in the Thanksgiving baskets and the Christmas angels and the Christmas decoration of the park" (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016). She went on to explain that this was encouraged in hopes that the students would return to Gotham City and be a part of their community. It was a way to teach them to be "community wise" (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Gotham City elementary parent, Wendy, not only thought the students going out to the community was important but felt the community should come to the school. Jessica, a Gotham City community member said, "one person getting involved, even if you could change just one

person's life and make it better, it's always going to be better... If the public could get involved more it'd be great" (Jessica, personal interview, September 26, 2016).

In Gotham City, the superintendent and sometimes the principals of the buildings would share articles for the newspaper. The superintendent wrote a recurring feature called "From the Superintendent's Desk". The superintendent also did a radio show on Monday mornings to inform the Gotham City public about major issues in education from a local and a state level. This was all a concentrated effort to be more proactive in getting information out to the community. Charlotte, Gotham City public relations, said, "we are open... and we're going to work together as a team... I feel like it's a deliberate course of action that we take in terms of communications with our public at all times" (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Secondary teacher, Jake, followed up on this thought when he said, "there's a great relationship between the community and our school system... we are always working together" (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

One of Gotham City's brilliant uses of social media came in the form of Instagram. Instagram is a social media app in which users share photos. Charlotte was in charge of all of the social media in Gotham City, which includes Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Charlotte had designated people at each of the school sites to photograph significant moments in their respective buildings such as homecoming dress up days, special guests, classroom experiments, or anything going on in the building demonstrating successes of students in Gotham City. Those pictures were then immediately projected to two large electronic billboards located in Gotham City in key locations. Elementary teacher Gina was a proponent of changing negative attitudes by showing positive ones. She said, "just promoting the positive aspects of education will change those views, especially by highlighting different projects that kids are doing and projects they're

doing for the community” (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Charlotte said, “I’ve worked very hard on the last two years or so to market ourselves to the community to show them the positives so that they’re not only seeing the negative and I think we’re seeing some benefits from that” (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016). This was a great tool to showcase and highlight to the public the things happening in Gotham City Public Schools.

Finally, Gotham City public school’s relationship with the community was built on tradition and culture. It is evident in the vast number of Gotham City Knight images seen in buildings, paintings, store front windows, yard signs, and on the streets. Charlotte, Gotham City public relations person, spoke of the importance of that culture:

Something that is really important is that inherent family culture that we build in our district and our community...it's apparent everywhere that you go. You hear this slogan over and over again, ‘Once a Knight, always a Knight!’ It’s something...instilled in you...you are a Knight. That symbol means something to people here. I think that's something that is fairly unique and I think that part of what we do with public relations.

We instill that culture (Charlotte, personal communication, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis

Diffused linkages at Metropolis included the community, several newspapers providing Metropolis coverage, several radio stations, and several television stations. Metropolis had a multitude of ways to connect with their diffused linkages and used all of them to provide a variety of means for their stakeholders to get their messages. Metropolis was fortunate enough to have a full time public relations staff. Michael, a member of the public relations staff, spoke about the role of public relations when he said, “public relations is communicating with the community and consistently communicating a message, that gets across your mission, your

values and your goals making those easily understood both to internal and employees and external stakeholders” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Michael wanted to use every point of contact possible to reach their stakeholders and not just in generic ways but meaningful ways. He wanted to use social media as a quick way to reach people. He wanted a school website that is easily navigable that shares news, information, and other stories. He wanted a newsletter that is more feature-driven, highlighting students and people in the Metropolis system. He was also in the process of using videos for messaging. He said, “we want do that through the written word...graphically with pictures and... the use of video as well...I think for people with today's attention span and especially if we are reaching students, those can be really powerful things” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Another part of the public relations team’s duty in Metropolis was explained by Michael; “Part of my job is to pump the sunshine” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Metropolis shared many positive stories highlighting the achievements of their students and staff in an effort to let the stakeholders see the value of Metropolis public schools. This aspect of Metropolis’ public relations utilized video as a key forum; Metropolis had its own YouTube channel. Some of the videos they have produced include ‘Teacher Testimonials’ and ‘Where are they now Wednesday?’ Michael said of the teacher testimonials: “We featured one teacher from each one of our school sites...saying this is why I do what I do...why I'm passionate about it...what I love about Metropolis...These are the kind of adults that are leading your children” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Donna and Ann, the elementary and secondary parents, spoke about the “Where are they now Wednesday” videos being powerful. Ann said, “it's very interesting to see the path that the alumni have taken and I think that's so

positive, people like to see what paths former students have taken” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis also reached out to its stakeholders through volunteer programs especially at the elementary schools. Elementary teacher, Kelly, spoke of a program called Dynamic Dads. Dynamic Dads is a program where dads come to school for a program and an activity with their students. Kelly also mentioned community-involved projects: “Picnics on the playground... musical programs, author visits, so we're constantly trying to do things where you are bringing in the community, asking for volunteers, but also being visible in the community as well” (Kelly, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Elementary parent, Donna was passionate about the importance of community involvement. She listed the ways that she receives messages from Metropolis public schools which included Facebook, PTA, an automated calling system, Peach Jar and a digital magazine. She said of receiving information, “on a weekly basis from the classroom...on a monthly level from the principals...and I think it's quarterly from the school district itself” (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis had a myriad of outlets for delivering their messages to their diffused linkage stakeholders. Michael and Jan, of Metropolis public relations, focused daily on the best way to promote, respond, and celebrate the successes of Metropolis public schools. They alluded to the linkages as customers and the importance of deliberately honing in on excellent customer service. Jan said, “one of our areas of focus is customer focus and I think that's a big part of public relations. Having that attitude that we are here and we want to serve you” (Jan, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Metropolis used a mix of media methods coupled with tradition with a focus on the stakeholders to create an enviable image of their school district.

This study found that the diffused linkages and the functional linkages from the Grunig and Hunt model were the only two linkages with which these schools' public relations had contact. They took information about or from the enabling and normative linkages and passed that information along to their functional and diffused linkages. Figure 8 below is a graphical representation of a linkage model as it related to this study. In it, the top tier entities deliver information to the school public relations, and school public relations relay information from or about those entities to the linkages representing parents, staff, community, and students. All of the information is about and for the students.

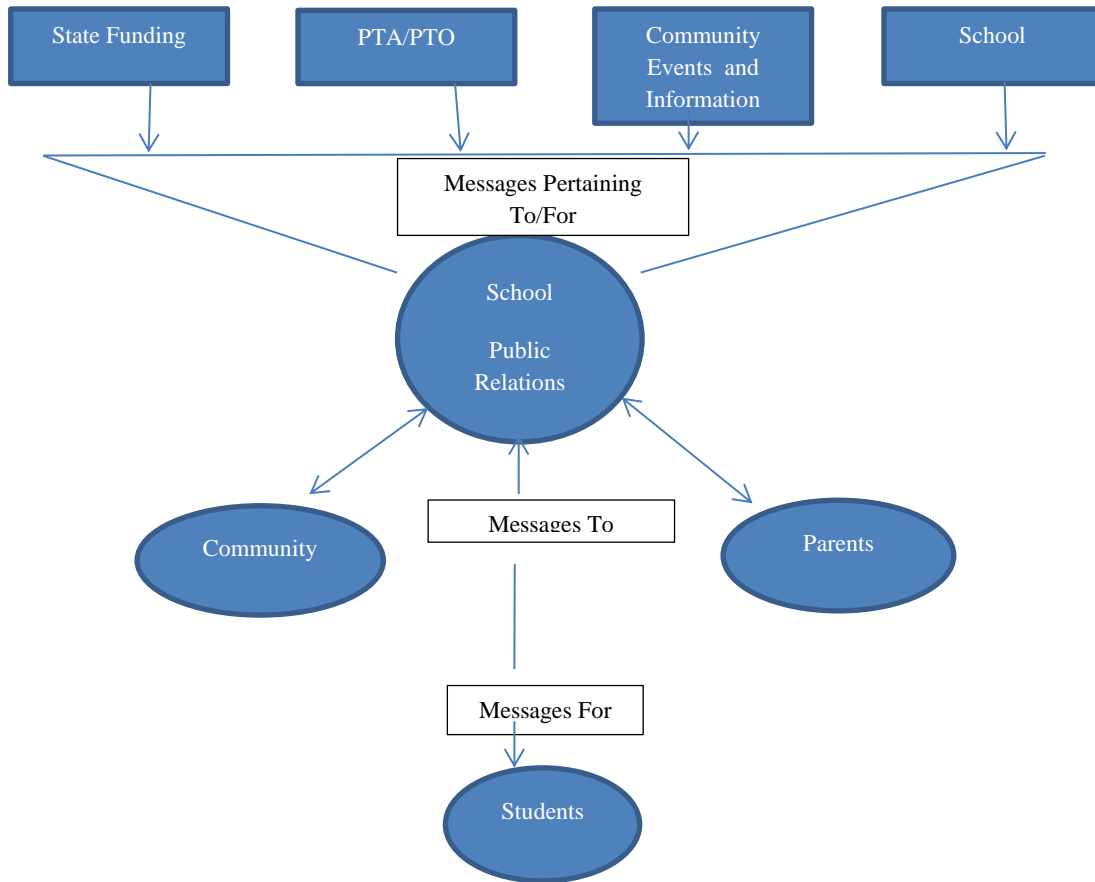


Figure 8. Linkage Model based on this study. Adapted from “Managing Public Relations,” by J. Grunig and T. Hunt, 1984, p.41. Copyright 1984 by Harcourt Brace.

As the figure demonstrates, the typical pattern found in this study is for information to flow one way from the top to the school public relations out to the community stakeholders, parent/teacher stakeholders, and the student stakeholders. The press agent and public information models of public relations would be examples of this type of public relations. At times, there would be communication from the community, parent/teacher, and student stakeholders back to the school creating the possibility of either two-way asymmetrical or symmetrical public relations.

The Four Models of Public Relations

Press agent, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical were the four models of public relations that emerged from Grunig's Excellence study. In the Excellence study, Grunig and Hunt (1984) found that public relations could be categorized into these four models. In public education, the public information model is the most commonly used as schools tend to push a multitude of informational material. The four schools studied in this research used all four of the models in some form.

The twenty-nine participants were asked to respond to which of the four models they thought their school used most. They could also talk about the four models individually and how they were used in their school. While the majority of participants decided to speak about one or two of the four models, all the participants agreed that all four of the models were used by their school districts.

The press agent model, described to the participants as propaganda, was observed by the researcher in the hand-made signs around the respective school buildings. Each of the four schools had several signs hung in their buildings proclaiming the dominance of their respective mascots and some proclaimed that their school was the best. Pam, secretary from Smallville,

noted that there was a lot of press agent type material when the district was transitioning from closing the old high school to moving to the middle school. Todd, superintendent from Star City, said of the press agent model, "...there are times when we just want to brag" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Emma, Star City elementary teacher, said, "we try to do that [press agent model] all the time, especially here at the primary" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Danny, Star City secondary parent, does not like the word propaganda, but he said, "I think schools need to do a better job at the Press Agent part of it. I think they need to tell their story because somebody else is going to tell it if they don't" (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Jessica, community member from Gotham City, also mentioned the press agent model when she said, "I was going to say probably propaganda [press agent] for sports [is the most used]" (Jessica, personal interview, September 26, 2016). Amy, Gotham City secretary, said Gotham City used the press agent model daily: "Press Agent model every day! We say our school motto at lunch" (Amy, personal interview, September, 27 2016). Michael and Jan, Metropolis public relations, summed up their use of the press agent model, "...there's probably an element to propaganda in that information we want to be overwhelmingly positive and be a good reflection for the school district" (Michael & Jan, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Public information was unanimously chosen as the model most often used in the schools under study. The schools continuously push out messages of an informational nature regarding everything from grades, events, important dates, and copious amounts of other information. This continuous bombardment of informational material was an effort to ensure the public was aware of what is going on in and around the schools. Emma, Star City elementary teacher, explained the public information model as being the dominant model: "We have parent's nights...we give them tips with how to deal with certain things about academics...and talking to your child"

(Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Gina, Gotham City elementary teacher, echoed Star City's Emma: "I think we do a good job of getting information out there. I mean they have all the stuff on social media, they get phone calls...I don't think any parent can say they haven't been informed" (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Gotham City participants, Charlotte, Charles and Gina, shared similar sentiments about public information as the model used most. Gina added, "they're good at passing along information and they want parents involved" (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Metropolis participants also chose the public information model as the main model of public relations used in Metropolis. Even though it is public information, it still must be done with planning and precision. Michael and Jan, Metropolis public relations, said, "I would say a lot of it is passing along information, but that information has to be carefully chosen and calculated" (Michael & Jan, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Press agent and public information are one-way models of public relations, which means there is no feedback needed from stakeholders to produce the message. The final models of public relations that emerged from Grunig's Excellence study are two-way models. The two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models allow for stakeholders to provide feedback to the public relations practitioners. Grunig theorized that two-way symmetrical public relations model is the model of public relations needed for excellence in public relations (Grunig, 1992). In this study, participants tended to view the two-way asymmetrical model as a negative model and the two-way symmetrical model as a positive. Danny, Star City secondary teacher, said, "I would hope that is not the school's goal" (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Often the participants compared the two models against one another. Star City superintendent, Todd, said, "I think Star City was typically and historically a very asymmetrical

type of district...I hope that it gets where we are two-way symmetrical” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Principal Bob from Smallville spoke of the education tide turning to two-way symmetrical: “Now, you’ve seen the change of guard that comes in here and uses the two-way symmetrical...I’m the type that [wants to know] what you think is good and I’ll do it” (Bob, personal interview, October 11 2016).

There were some participants that spoke of the two-way asymmetrical model, and how it may have been used in their district. Charles, Gotham City parent, mentioned there were times when parents could vent, but there were no resulting policy changes. He likened that to the two-way asymmetrical model. In Metropolis, Donna, a parent, explained how difficult either of the two-way models would be due to the size and diversity of the Metropolis stakeholders. Ann, secondary parent, echoed Donna’s sentiment by speaking of the many variables in decision making and gave an example of what she thought was an example Metropolis’ use of the two-way asymmetrical model:

They are building a new elementary school...there was a lot of parent feedback that they did not want this new elementary school built where it was going to be built and ultimately, the school board and the superintendent had to make a decision, on what was best for the district, and they [superintendent and school board] decided to go ahead and build that elementary school [on the unpopular site] (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Jan agreed with the two Metropolis parents about the difficulty of navigating feedback in a large district when she said, “I think that you have to look for trends” (Jan, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

The participants' tendency was to give more examples of the two-way symmetrical model. For example, Smallville participants agreed that living in a small town makes the two-way symmetrical model a viable model. Angela, secondary teacher, said, "this is something I've learned from working in a small school...once parents get on their phone and call the superintendent and chew him out a lot of times, things do end up changing" (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Ted, community member, agreed stating that the school gets feedback from the community, and that is how they make their decisions. Star City participants were almost unanimous in the two-way symmetrical model being dominant in Star City. Star City secretary, Karen, said, "we have changed our policies...with our dress code, kids have come up here as a group and voiced their opinion...and things got changed" (Karen, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Diane and Danny both mentioned two-way symmetrical, using examples from the public forums. Diane said, "I think they're very open to that [two-way symmetrical], because we've had public forums about the bond issue. I think they're very open to doing what is best for the students and what the parents view as important" (Diane, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Danny recalled a community committee he was on dealing with bond issues, "I know for a fact that some things were added, and some were taken off, because of community influence" (Danny, personal interview, October 14, 2016). He conveyed the superintendent really wants to back up his decisions based upon community research. Emma also found that the two-way symmetrical is the one most used: "One thing that I know that we do is my husband is part of a group the superintendent brings in to know the pulse of the community" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Superintendent Todd supported the use of the two-way symmetrical model by claiming, "you can't ask for it [input] if you don't want it" (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). The Gotham City participants were split as to

whether the two-way symmetrical model was used in their school district. There was an example of a dress code change that came about due to feedback from stakeholders. Charlotte, Gotham City public relations, said, “I would say we solicit feedback, if we plan on doing something with it...if we are going to be partners with our community, they need to understand that they have a say” (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Metropolis, as stated earlier, had an issue with the two-way models based on the massive size of the district. Michael, Metropolis public relations, mentioned like his Gotham City counterpart, Charlotte, “I don’t think we would disregard feedback from stakeholders” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Summary

Chapter 5 used the linkage model created by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as a lens to see the linkages between the studied schools’ public relations and their stakeholders. Although the study did not concentrate on how schools communicated with enabling linkages, which include stakeholders who have control and authority over the organization, the study did look at how the studied schools took information from these entities and passed the information to their stakeholders. Most of the enabling linkage information was related to the budget shortfalls that public education in Oklahoma was experiencing and how those shortfalls were going to affect the studied schools.

Normative linkages, stakeholders with similar values and common interests, were shown to be effective in several ways. Some examples of the effectiveness of these linkages include Smallville’s PTO carnival, Star City superintendent Todd’s membership in the local service organizations and the chamber of commerce, Gotham City’s partnership with a local business’ video signs and chamber of commerce as a way to promote Gotham City Public Schools to

possible future residents, and Metropolis' affiliation with the PTA, PLAC, and their use of multimedia to promote Metropolis' messages.

Functional linkages, linkages essential to the function of the organization, were the most essential linkages for the studied schools. Functional linkages include parents, students, teachers and staff; therefore, the majority of public relations were directed toward these linkages. These linkages created a closer relationship in Smallville in having town hall forums. Star City advocated the use of public relations via any platform that works best for the parties. Gotham City used technology and automated phone calls to deliver messages to their functional linkages. Metropolis had a variety of methods including video, phone, and technology to ensure their functional linkages were fully aware of the happenings in Metropolis' Public Schools.

Diffused linkages, stakeholders involved based on the actions of the organization, were another group that was a main focus of the studied schools' public relations. The studied schools found many ways to engage with their community and used multiple forms of media to do so. Smallville held a community event for feeding families, Star City superintendent Todd's endless quest to create a marriage between school and community, Gotham City were traditionally a part of community events and the superintendent had a weekly radio address. Metropolis, again with the multitudinous opportunities with the media including newspapers and television stations, connected with their diffused linkages on many levels.

Based on the studied schools with these linkages, a modified linkage model was created to show how the messages flow into the schools from each of the linkages and is then filtered by the public relations of the school and sent out to the functional and diffused linkages mostly.

Chapter 5 also provided a section on the four models of public relations and how each of the studied schools used and perceived use of the models in their respective public relations

practices. Each of the participants agreed that all four models: press agent, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical, were used by their respective schools.

According to participants, public information was the most common form of public relations as the school devotes much of its public relations to passing along information to the public about important dates pertaining to upcoming events. However, many of the participants felt as if the two-way symmetrical model of public relations was becoming more and more prominent. The participants felt that schools in general have been asking more of the public in terms of their ideas and suggestions on policy.

All of the schools studied followed similar patterns in public relations and relating to their publics. Some schools had more resources than others, but they also had a larger number of stakeholders to reach; however, they all had the same goal in mind of making sure their stakeholders were informed and that their school and public education was in the forefront..

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the planning and creating of communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of public education. In looking at the various means of communications available to schools, it was hoped that an understanding of how schools of different sizes utilize public relations to promote their schools and public education as a whole in order to bolster the perceptions of public education to the stakeholders. The study was based on the following research questions:

1. What is being done to communicate with the community?
 - a. How is communication established?
 - b. How is communication maintained?
 - c. How does the communication advocate for the local education systems(s)?
 - d. How does the communication advocate for broader public education?
2. How is this communication perceived?
3. How does Excellence Theory explain the above?
4. The research questions are answered in the following section.

Findings

What is Being Done to Communicate with the Community

How is Communication Established?

The four schools studied established communication in similar ways. However, their delivery of the messages varied. For example, Smallville used a very informal approach to public relations by relying mostly on its close-knit community and personal connections. All of the participants in the Smallville district spoke about having personal connections with many of the stakeholders and how important that was to the district in getting their messages to their stakeholders. The stakeholders are top priority according to Smallville High School principal, Bob, who said, “it’s having an open door with the parents...I treat the parents like they're number one” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Star City, under the leadership of third year superintendent Todd, focused on community relations. Throughout all of the interviews in Star City, everyone mentioned how Todd excelled at getting information to the public and inviting input from the community. Superintendent Todd takes part in many of the civic organizations in Star City and talks to anybody that comes through the superintendent’s office door. Emma, an elementary teacher, said, “I think it has a lot to do with your leadership, and I believe our superintendent really wants to have that input from the community” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Superintendent Todd admitted that they were going in the right direction: “I'm never going to be satisfied. I'm never going to be there, wherever that there is...I think a lot of good things are happening in our district. We’re heading in the right direction” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Gotham City’s long-standing relationship between the community and the school had created a long-lasting culture, where pride and tradition are the overarching features. Gotham

City's public relations person, Charlotte, spoke about a slogan that has been part of the community for the thirteen years that she has been in Gotham City, she said:

Once a Knight, always a Knight! You are part of this family and that symbol means something to people here. It's not something that we try to do; it's something that occurs naturally because of the culture that we built in terms of our community and specifically our schools (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis had the most formal public relations practices, where part of the vision of the Metropolis school district was community partnerships and branding. Community partnerships were the second goal on a vision poster that adorned every classroom and office. Branding the Metropolis Dragon as a symbol of pride and excellence was part of the public relations plan. Metropolis' public relations emphasized the use of technology, which allowed the creation of a one-stop shop for stakeholders to find information and played a huge part in imparting communications, not only to the public but between the school sites themselves.

Establishing communication in all four of the studied districts created a through-line that began with informal personal connections in Smallville and bloomed into community partnerships in Metropolis. The through-line of all the districts was connections with the community. It was achieved differently in each of the school districts, but the fundamental base was a personal connection with the stakeholders of the community. In Smallville, it was possible to speak to many stakeholders while being out and about. In Star City, it had the same feel, but some stakeholders lived several miles apart from the community. Gotham City was unique because its larger size did not negate the small town feel. There was still possibility for many one-on-one conversations, but the size of Gotham City made it hard to do that consistently with the same stakeholders. Metropolis was so large that they had to make those connections through

the various forms of communications, creating that personal touch that gave the stakeholders the perception of a personal communication.

How is Communication Maintained?

Maintaining communication between the schools and the stakeholders was achieved through similar methods, ranging from simple to complex. The public relations were delivered through face-to-face communications, physical documents, digital documents, student information systems, school web pages, and varying social media platforms. All of the school districts used all of the above mentioned delivery systems; however, as the size of the school district grew, so did the number of delivery methods.

Smallville had face-to-face communications with its annual carnival and feed-the-family events mentioned in Chapter V. The events used to be heavily attended, but due to rising costs and low funds, the school had to charge a nominal fee and this dramatically reduced the attendance of this event.

Smallville also used simple public relations such as Thursday folders. The elementary schools sent home Thursday folders containing information, graded papers, and forms that need to be returned signed. Alice, elementary parent, said, “any communication like notes about pictures or any school things goes home in those [Thursday] folders...” (Alice, personal interview, October 12, 2016). The school sign that sat between the two school buildings was another simple form of public relations. The sign held information about upcoming events. The drawback to the sign was the location. Someone would have to go back between the buildings purposefully to see the sign. Although most of the public relations were simple, Smallville did use technology in the forms of a school website, SchoolWay, and Facebook. Technology was not always an easy sell in Smallville, but Bob finally talked them into getting a Facebook page

because he found school website pages confusing. Smallville also used an app called SchoolWay, which is a one-way communication device that can push out messages to anyone with the app. There was also a school website, but according to Alice and Meredith, the Smallville parents, the website was not always up to date.

Star City, like the other schools, used a variety of methods to maintain communications with their community. Technology in the secondary schools played a big part in that communication as Star City utilized Facebook, Twitter, and the school's website. Some of the faculty at Star City used Remind 101 for their classes and extra-curricular clubs or teams. More traditional uses of communication, such as the news media, classroom newsletters, and notes being sent home were other ways Star City maintained contact with the community. Star City superintendent Todd's involvement in many of the city's civic organizations and his town hall forums were an integral parts in maintaining communications.

At the elementary level, Emma used a volunteer approach to stay in touch with the community. She organized many different days, including grandparent's day, veteran's day, "Pops for Cops" where the public is invited in to the school for different activities. Emma said, "the volunteer program, it's been good and it's gotten people in and they feel valued. I think that's huge" (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). It just so happened that particular year they had the highest turnout for parent/teacher conferences, and Emma attributed that to the culture that the superintendent allowed for her building to create.

Both the elementary and secondary parents agreed that Star City does a good job getting information to them. The elementary parent, Diane, commented that she received weekly newsletters from her children's teachers. She also received information via notes and automated calls on assemblies, book fairs, literacy night and things like Red Ribbon week. Summing it up,

she said, “they [Star City schools] are really good about informing parents” (Diane, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Star City used varied communicative programs including Facebook, Twitter, a parent portal on the school website, and a calling system. Star City, like Smallville, used a variety of simple methods and added a few more technological methods in creating their public relations.

Gotham City, like the other schools, used most forms of social media, print media, news media, and notes sent home to establish and maintain communications. One unique feature at Gotham City was the use of Instagram. Gotham City partnered with local advertising firms who own two electronic billboards across town and thus the use of Instagram as a public relations tool was born. Anytime one of the school sites snapped a picture and Charlotte approved, the picture appeared immediately on the electronic billboards.

Each school site managed its specific social media sites. Charlotte ran the district pages, but each school, club, and team also had their own. This was done so that specific information pertaining to specific groups could be found on their specific site. The information mostly included schedules, notices, and celebrations of successes in that organization. Every school also had its own website, which could be accessed by anyone in the community. PowerSchool and Remind 101 were used as other means of communication with parents and students. Wendy and Charles, Gotham City parents, both liked the idea of the calling system to inform them of upcoming events, absences, closings, and emergencies.

Metropolis school district is in the largest class of school districts in the state of Oklahoma. As a large district, it was no surprise that Metropolis used complex methods of public relations. Metropolis exceeded ten thousand students in 2011 and now, according to Michael, one of Metropolis’ permanent public relations employees, has in the neighborhood of 12,000

students. Therefore, any and all types of public relations materials are needed to facilitate such a large group of stakeholders. Metropolis ran the gamut of social media using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and they are even looking at a way to incorporate Snapchat, an image based messaging app. Michael said they planned use, “as many platforms as possible and then finding those campaigns that can kind of resonate with people” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Michael had two other people that he worked with in the public relations offices: Jan and Jimmy. They not only controlled the messaging of the social media sites, they also put out a feature-driven, magazine-like newsletter every other month. They also monitored and created videos for the Metropolis YouTube channel. Michael strongly advocated for the use of video as a great way to reach students and parents in today’s society of diminishing attention spans. While this study was conducted, they were doing a ‘Where are they now Wednesday’ which featured Metropolis alumni who have gone on to become successful at their chosen profession.

Some of the other resources available to teachers to communicate with parents included web-based programs: Canvas, Peach Jar, and SchoolWay. Peach Jar is a program that allowed an email blast to parents concerning upcoming activities and special announcements. Canvas covered everything including absences, assignments and grades. The parents also spoke of having access to the ‘Our School’ newsletter that Michael, Jan, and Jimmy put out and was available in print and digital. They spoke about the website which had a feature called ‘Let’s Talk,’ which allowed parents to submit questions or suggestions.

Metropolis used a variety of outlets to maintain communication with its stakeholders. At the elementary site, there was a flashing sign out in front of the school. Secretary Leslie was in charge of that sign, but unfortunately due to its location they were limited with what they can do

with the sign. She said, “we can’t have any flashing, like they can at the high school or some of the other schools, we have to scroll in one direction” (Leslie, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Another example of public relations was a poster that hung in every room, which stated the district goals. One of the goals on that poster was to increase community partnerships to supplement educational resources. Secondary parent, Ann, who is part of the educational foundation said, “this is where the foundation comes in and we try to partner with community businesses, community leaders and sadly we call it, Bridge the Gap, but the gap has gotten huge, so we can't realistically bridge the gap” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

All of the school districts used many of the same public relations delivery methods to maintain communication with their stakeholders including phone calls, social media, paper folders, electronic folders and many more. As the size of the school district grew, so did the complexity of the public relations, with Metropolis having the most complex and greatest number of delivery methods. Regardless of the complexity of the methods of delivery, each of the schools maintained communication with the stakeholders.

How Does the Communication Advocate for the Local Education System(s)?

Many of the public relations materials sent out via traditional methods like newspapers, telephone calls, or papers home to the more complex like videos, quarterly magazines, and Instagram all had the sole purpose of showcasing each school district. Almost all of the communications sent out advocated for the local school districts in some form. It might have been something as simple as parent/teacher conferences or videos showcasing past alumni.

In Smallville, all of the communication sent out to the stakeholders had something to do with the local educational system. There was a wide range of information shared, including parent/teacher conferences, picture day, health initiatives, extra-curricular events, school club

events, and school-community events. Ted, community participant, wanted to see more of this informational type of correspondence coming directly from the students in some forms of community service, public events or fundraising activities.

Most of the Smallville participants thought that everything they did advocated for their local school. They all agreed that sports activities were highlighted the most. Meredith, secondary parent, felt that not enough academic achievement stories were shared with the public. For example, she wanted to share that over ten percent of the elementary student body qualified for the gifted and talented program. Angela, secondary teacher, agreed with Alice and wanted more communication about what actually happens on a daily basis in the school building. All of these stories would enhance the branding of Smallville schools, which Ted found to be the most important aspect of public relations between schools and communities.

In Star City, advocating for the local school system was achieved through city/school forums and the superintendent's approach to celebrate successes and pass that along to his staff. Todd said:

We do a large and vast push to continually put out what is great about Star City. We put out all the successes of our students. Some say, "quit bragging". We're not bragging we're celebrating! I think it is our profession, not only as a superintendent, a principal, a teacher, or anyone that cares about public education and the opportunities we provide for children. It is our job to be the advocates for that (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Superintendent Todd and the Star City teachers mentioned the impact the town forums had on the community and their view of Star City schools. Superintendent Todd also encouraged all of the staff to find opportunities to engage with the public on any occasion. The superintendent said

about the forums: “I believe that there’s no better way to show that the school district wants your input” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Emma, elementary teacher, agreed that these forums were good, but offered another example of building community relationships; stakeholder surveys as a way to collaborate on Star City’s mission, goal and strategies. She conveyed that it was important to understand what the community wanted when she said, “we tapped in to what they thought was important” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Elementary parent, Diane, agreed that the town forums and last year’s survey for a balanced scorecard gave parents and the community an opportunity to share feedback that they might not share one-on-one. All of these events allowed for the advocacy of the local school system and created a bond between the community and the schools.

Gotham City advocated for the local educational system through the Instagram account, which was linked to the electronic billboards. The continuous presence of the Gotham City Knight mascot throughout town was another way that the pride of the school and community worked hand in hand. A noticeable public relations tool promoting community and school partnerships in Gotham City was community service. Amy, Gotham City secretary, said, “we do a lot of community service...Every year our kids participate in the Thanksgiving baskets and the Christmas angels and the Christmas decoration of the park” (Amy, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Gotham City has created a culture of pride in the relationship between the school and the community. They tap into each other’s resources during events like decorating the park at Christmas, which is a huge draw from people in other communities who come to Gotham City to see the decorations. That sense of culture is also showcased when visitors enter the high school;

they are struck with the school's mission, the words to the Alma Mater, and many symbols of the Gotham City Knight adorning the walls. Charles, secondary parent, found that the singing of the Alma Mater solidified the relationship between the community and school. He said, "we sing it after every game, win or lose" (Charles, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis schools wanted to be a major presence in their community and instill a sense of belonging by branding any Metropolis student a Metropolis Dragon from day one. Metropolis elementary teacher, Kelly, stated that being visible in the community is a great way to open up the lanes of communication to showcase what is happening in the schools. She was in charge of a program called Dynamic Dads. She said, "we have Dynamic Dads, a program where we're getting the dads to come in and listen to a guest speaker that talks to the dads about being, interactive[with their children] and they do a STEM activity together" (Kelly, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

Secondary teacher, April, enthusiastically claimed that everything done is advocating for Metropolis public schools. One aspect that she believed is that the Metropolis Dragon is branded on a student in kindergarten, she said:

Something that I've really been impressed by is when you're in kindergarten until you're a senior in high school, you're a Dragon. Where I grew up, you had 5 elementary schools and all these middle schools that fed into different high schools. I think that that there's just so much unity in everybody being a Dragon and everyone working toward the same thing and there's no competition at all within the district, so everybody in the district is focused on just the Metropolis vision. It's like everybody's on the same page. It's like Metropolis against the world! Go Metropolis (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

All of the material put out by the Metropolis public relations team clearly advocated for the Metropolis public school system. It does this by continuously showcasing the successes of present and past students in a variety of platforms.

Advocating for the local school system must be the impetus of any public school public relations program. The main directive would have to be to highlight the strengths and successes of the school district to the stakeholders of that district. All of these schools had that purpose and it created a bond between the community and school in all instances.

How Does the Communication Advocate for Broader Public Education?

Smallville, in the past year, advocated for broader public education out of necessity; however, the staff was encouraged to engage the stakeholders in these conversations. Smallville was facing some serious decisions at the end of the last school year, knowing that there were going to be some major cuts in education and that they would be affected. The superintendent and his administrative staff prepared some town hall forums in which many different options were discussed, including consolidation of buildings, a four-day school week, having no busses, and cutting extra-curricular activities. The town hall forums were designed to engage the stakeholders and find out what was important to them and to find out what was important to the Smallville school system. In this setting, it was easy to discuss the problems facing Smallville schools based on what was happening at the state capitol.

The normal and desired route taken by Smallville staff to discuss state-wide educational issues was to personally talk to stakeholders whenever they saw them. Bob, principal, said he responds to parents who wonder why Smallville schools does not have certain amenities like other schools with this response: “Well it’s probably because of who you voted for” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). Ted, community member, said that he talks to teachers

about state affairs in the coffee shop or the grocery store using the phrase “one-on-one” (Ted, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Angela, secondary teacher, said, “anytime there is a school function and the parents are there, the administration is speaking up and using that personal word of mouth” (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016).

Star City has the same approach as Smallville when it comes to advocating for broader public education in that communicating on an individual basis is key. In advocating for broader public education in Star City, Superintendent Todd conveyed that this was something he does continuously. He said:

I address legislation, budget concerns at school board meetings...I send out emails to let our school district know. I try to write a monthly article in the paper...I call the state of Star City...I address budget, legislation issues, bullying and others. I'm a member of the Rotary, the Chamber, and I go to City council meetings. I try to hit the community forums...and I've earned enough trust and respect from those individuals. They're almost coming to me now, because I've went to them so many times (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

Although the superintendent put out this information, the teacher participants did not feel as though Star City did a good enough job in advocating for public education as a whole. Emma, elementary teacher, said, “we don’t do a very good job with that. Not all teachers feel like that’s one of their high priorities” (Emma, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Secondary teacher, Steve, said, “I will talk about it, if I’m asked about it. I know the superintendent addresses some of those things” (Steve, personal interview, October 14, 2016). The parent participants of Star City both agreed that in order to get that information, one has to go to the school or read it in the newspaper. Both of them also extolled the diligence of the superintendent in getting the

information to the public. Owen, community member, also stated that the school should do a better job at getting that information to the community.

In the area of advocating for public education as a whole, Gotham City faltered somewhat, in that it wasn't a concentrated effort by the whole school system, but rather individually motivated. The superintendent had a radio program every Monday morning where those matters were discussed and he wrote editorials for the newspaper. They also share this information on social media, but for the most part, there was no directive for the staff to engage in this type of activity. Charlotte said:

I think I share more as myself as I do as a Gotham City Knight and because we're one in the same I'm always marketing our school and sharing those messages. Our superintendent is really good about getting those messages that the people need to be aware of and these people are the people that need to be on your radar (Charlotte, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Elementary teacher, Gina, said, "the superintendent would put that out there because he would know the correct way to do it. We don't put our view, well teachers obviously on Facebook will put their opinion, but not as a class page" (Gina, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Wendy, elementary parent, said, "they don't, you would have to watch the news" (Wendy, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Most everyone agreed that the superintendent put out information, but nobody was really sure how they were to take that information to the public. In Gotham City, a more personal, not necessarily school official approach to discussing matters with the public was used.

Metropolis' public relations department, in concert with the superintendent, continuously monitored the happenings at the state capitol and was ready to push out any communication

related to Metropolis schools. Michael said, “we definitely keep people informed” (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Michael and Jan set up a special budget page on the Metropolis website, which was continuously updated to show how legislation would directly impact Metropolis. The teachers agreed that the district level, Michael and Jan, handled all of that information and were forthcoming with it. Secondary teacher, April, spoke about the budgetary concerns: “A Dragon link was set up so that businesses could match donations to ease the pain of budget cuts” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016). April also said that she does speak and advocate for public education but only in her inner circle of friends and family, not necessarily to the stakeholders. Elementary parents, Donna and Ann, spoke about the Parent Legislative Action Committee (PLAC) started by a Metropolis parent. The PLAC is an excellent way for the community to meet one-on-one with a legislator over a casual luncheon to gather information and ask questions. Ann added that a PLAC chairperson will also attend all PTA meetings at each of the school sites and hand out information pertaining to any of the proceedings from the capitol. The PLAC and the Metropolis PR department kept many of the Metropolis stakeholders informed of the affairs of public education.

Advocating for public education is important to all public schools as it can directly affect them, sometimes adversely. Smallville had to make some tough decisions about their district, and advocating for public education became a need. Star City and Gotham City relied heavily on the lead of their superintendents in getting important public education information out to their publics. Metropolis had the resources to provide a continuous opportunity for stakeholders to follow what was happening at the state capitol. They were also fortunate to have the vision of a stakeholder to create the PLAC, which advocates for public education. Regardless of the size of the school district, whether a district like Smallville or one as large as Metropolis, all of them

were affected by the deep cuts in the education budget set forth by the Oklahoma state legislation.

How is Communication Perceived?

Across the four districts in the study, all agreed that the perception of the messages received by the stakeholders was positive. This positive reaction was due in part to the fact that most of the messages were a form of passing along information. In instances like Smallville, where the information contained a negative overtone during the town hall forums where budget decisions had to be made, the participants agreed that those were perceived positively by the stakeholders because of their part in the process. In Star City, communication was perceived positively because of the investment that the superintendent put into community relations. Superintendent Todd agreed they were perceived positively because people care about the kids, and they want to know what is going on in school. He also mentioned building trust and being open: “Any public relations done with honesty and trust will build trust within the community. I think is going to be viewed as successful” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). Gotham City secondary parent Charles said public messages were “always positive, I’ve never seen anything negative” (Charles, personal interview, September 27, 2016). Jake, secondary teacher, summed up the positive messages. He said:

I think our messages are extremely positive. I think that in this town our school system is really kind of looked upon or viewed as going above and beyond. We really just push for a positive school environment everybody is helping everybody else out (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

The Metropolis participants emphatically agreed that the messages are perceived positively. They also agreed that it is because of the supportive nature of the Metropolis school community.

The parents and staff are invested in making sure that the students receive the best possible education. Secondary teacher, April, said, “I think it’s really positive. The community, the parents, and the stakeholders love Metropolis, and they have had positive experiences with the schools and their staffs” (April, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Similar to Smallville, negative information is perceived positively. Donna said, “even when they have to communicate a negative message you can just see it from a top down perspective by the superintendent coming to each PTA meeting to answer questions” (Donna, personal interview, November 4, 2016). Secondary parent, Ann, said, “I think they intentionally try to select things to put out on social media that represent the district in a positive way, and that energy feeds the district” (Ann, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

The majority believed that the messages were perceived positively, but there were times brought up in Smallville where the messages may not be viewed positively. Smallville secondary parent, Meredith, felt that parents could find it negative due to parents usually being contacted on negative behaviors. She said, “I think negative behaviors we hear so much more about than positive behaviors. My child has never been in trouble, but I know some parents who get those messages and they don't hear a lot of positive” (Meredith, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Angela, secondary teacher, supported the idea that some messages may come off as negative, especially if they pertain to new rules or restrictions. The perception of the messages depends on how the message is received by the individual persons. Except in the few instances described above, everybody in the study agreed that the messages sent from their respective school districts are perceived and received positively.

How does Excellence Theory Explain the Above?

Through Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory, I explained that public relations needed to be part of the strategic management and administrative teams that had access to the key decision makers. Excellence Theory fits well with public education, in that most of the public relation materials or messages either need to be approved by the superintendent or the superintendent's designee(s) before they are released to the public. All four of the schools studied adhere to this part of the theory. The differences between the four were all based on size. The public relations of the smaller schools, Smallville and Star City, are either done by the Superintendent or in the case of Smallville, the principal of the high school. Gotham City and Metropolis were large enough to hire designated people to oversee public relations for the district.

In Smallville, the superintendent and the building principals met once a week to decide the best approach to relaying information to the stakeholders. The discussion was mostly about what platforms Smallville would use to disseminate the information. Star City's superintendent Todd had the ultimate position in strategic management, and as Star City's public relations person, he embodied Excellence theory himself. Gotham City and Metropolis, the larger schools, had people in charge of the public relations for the district. In Gotham City, Charlotte, the public relations person, met with the superintendent to make sure the messages being sent were positive, truthful and transparent. In Metropolis, Michael and Jan handled the public relations. Michael said:

What's great about this job is we have quite a bit of autonomy and freedom, and I think the superintendent trusts us to kind of pick those pieces and highlight those pieces that are important and the timeliest and the most relevant (Michael, personal interview, November 4, 2016).

One aspect of the strategic management in Excellence Theory was the planning of public relations. Smallville failed to follow Excellence Theory in this aspect. The Smallville staff participants were not sure if there was one person in charge of public relation materials. Angela, secondary teacher, said, “I think it's more just random, someone decides this needs to be shared. The school isn't really doing the public relations per se, but a school employee decides I want my organization's information to be shared” (Angela, personal interview, October 12, 2016). Bob, principal, said, “there's no real plan” (Bob, personal interview, October 11, 2016). However, due to Smallville's focus on personal connections and one-on-one connections with the stakeholders, it was not found that this lack of planning hindered effectiveness in public relations. In Star City, Superintendent Todd said of public relations planning: “It depends on the scope and the size of what it is I'm tackling” (Todd, personal interview, October 14, 2016). He has formed multiple committees for different areas, including budget, bond issues, and ACT testing. Some were large, and some were three-person committees; the important aspect was that everyone on the committees, which included staff and community members, felt that they had input. Gotham City's Charlotte, like Metropolis, had autonomy on what she shared with the public. Charlotte also met weekly with the superintendent. The Gotham City staff agreed that the planning and disseminating of the messages came from Charlotte's office. The public relations staff of Metropolis met daily to plan for future public relations campaigns, prepare current materials, and deliver them in a myriad of formats, which is another example of Metropolis using Excellence Theory in their public relations.

The Four Models of Public Relations

The four models of public relations were all used in the four schools in this research. The public information model was the most widely used by all the districts, but the two-way symmetrical model was the most widely spoken about by the participants. It was evident in the interviews that the participants were drawn to this model because of the ability to get feedback from the stakeholders and utilize it in their district. When asked which model their school utilized most often, the two-way symmetrical was the first one mentioned. However, when it came to examples, most of the examples were more aligned to the public information model.

Conclusions

At the time of this study, there was a massive shortfall in the Oklahoma state budget, and public education took a deep cut, causing some districts around the state to become creative in finding ways to make up for the shortfall. This also created the need for public schools to become more proactive in getting their messages out. Schools proactively set up town hall forums, parental surveys, and utilized social media to make sure the public was aware of what was happening. If school districts do not tell their story, someone else will (Gordon, 2012). It was a perfect storm of events during the time of this study because some schools needed to react to the budget crisis, and they had to act swiftly. The findings of this study indicated that school districts of various sizes and various resources do, whether intentionally or unintentionally, perform public relations based on Grunig and Hunt's Excellence Theory. It also indicated that the four models of public relations born out of the Excellence Study were also utilized by the four different school districts.

The notions that public relations should be part of the strategic management and that public relations personnel had access to the key decision makers were apparent in all of the

school districts. The differences came in execution and size of the district. School hierarchy usually dictates the school board as the steward of the district, but the superintendent is the key decision maker. In the two smaller districts, the superintendent or the superintendent's designee in Smallville's case was also the public relations person. In the larger schools, there were people hired to handle public relations. Those hired persons still had to meet with the superintendent on a regular basis to discuss strategies for getting information out to their publics. The role of the superintendent in creating a culture of two-way symmetrical public relations was a key finding in all of the school districts. This finding was heavily apparent in Star City and Gotham City as the participants spoke highly of both superintendents and the importance they placed on good public relations with their publics. Regardless of being large or small, this satisfies Excellence Theory's idea of public relations being part of or having access to key decision makers.

The strategic element and the planning also differed based on size and available resources. The resources available to the larger school were multitudinous. The same resources were available to all of the schools; however, as the schools got smaller in size, so did the ability to manage those resources. The strategic planning of public relations correlates with the size of the district and the resources it has to manage. In the smaller schools, the superintendent may meet with a small group of people, or in Smallville's case, the principal of the high school. Smallville did not really have a strategic public relations plan. Rather, they would meet on occasion if there was something big that needed communicated to the public. Star City's superintendent was purposeful in his public relations in order to build community relationships. The two larger schools had regular meetings with the superintendent, and the public relations person or department was given quite a bit of autonomy in how they executed public relations.

Another finding was the execution of public relations differed across different-size districts. It would make sense that in the smaller districts there would be ample opportunities to see stakeholders around town and public relations would be done out by word of mouth. It would follow that as the size increased the less word-of-mouth, but that wasn't the case. Smallville, the smallest district, definitely did most of its public relations through one-on-one interaction with the public. Star City, driven in part by a huge push by the superintendent, was getting to that point. Gotham City, however, was also very adept at one-on-one interaction. Even though it was a larger district, the instilled culture of pride in the community created the feeling of one-on-one interaction. Metropolis was so large that it would be virtually impossible to have one-on-one interaction with everyone, but due to the massive resources, they were getting some of those reactions from the parents interviewed for this study.

All four models of public relations press agent, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical were used by all of the school districts. Public information was clearly used most often by the schools offering up dates and times for different academic and extra-curricular events. This suggests that the majority of public relations materials schools deliver to their stakeholders were one-way models of public relations. However, the majority of the participants picked two-way symmetrical as the model of public relations used by their district. This finding was encouraging since it indicates a desire for the school districts to communicate with their stakeholders and reach mutually beneficial decisions. There were some two-way symmetrical relationships happening in the districts. Smallville's was born out of the necessity to reach decisions concerning the budget cuts' effects on the school. Star City Superintendent Todd went out and solicited those two-way symmetrical decisions for his district.

The two larger districts allowed for the stakeholders to have a voice in their districts, but, because of numbers, they had to be more diplomatic in their decision-making processes.

Another finding was that all staff members undertaking public relations tasks were not only advocates for their district; but for public education as well. In all four of the school districts visited, it was mentioned how the superintendent of each of the districts wanted to make sure that stakeholders were aware of what was going on in the state concerning public education. They were updated frequently by the superintendent on state matters, and they were tasked with spreading the word via personally or digitally. Metropolis was the only district that had the PLAC run by a stakeholder to truly keep everybody informed by inviting different legislators to come and talk to the stakeholders and staff in the district.

In summary, in this study, regardless of size and resources, the four studied schools were in line with Excellence Theory in their planning and execution of public relations. Technically they all utilized the resources available to them similarly, but the difference came within the style and manner in which they executed their public relations.

Limitations on the Research

Limitations on the research included the socio-economic status of the participating schools, the dynamics of the community, and the suggested participants received from the superintendents of the participating schools. There was a vast difference between the schools in their socio-economic demographic. The smaller schools were of a lower socio-economic status compared to the larger schools. As the size of the school grew so did the socio-economic status of the community. This difference between small and large could have an impact on public relations methods of delivery to their stakeholders. The smaller schools had most of the same resources the larger schools had to deliver their messages; however, the ability for stakeholders

to receive those messages via technological platforms may have been hindered for the lack of technology in the stakeholder home.

The dynamics of each community played a part in the research process. Gotham City had an excellent relationship with its community and it was exhibited in the responses. Star City was in a phase of transition from little communication with the school to constant communication with the school due to Superintendent Todd's leadership.

Participants chosen by superintendents would have a proclivity for being positive about the school. Two participants chosen by the researcher were the only negative responses received in the research. The negative views expressed by these participants were not negative about the messages received, but the messages they wanted to hear. One participant wanted to know more about bullying policies and testing and the other wanted to be part of the communication even though he no longer had children in the school.

Implications

Implications for research, theory, and practice may be drawn from this study.

Explanations of the implications are included below.

Implications for Research

Excellence Theory was born out of research on the public relations practices of businesses. In that realm, businesses use public relations as a tool to compete against other companies for limited consumer resources. There are only so many consumer dollars to spend on certain ventures, so companies must use public relations as a means to capture as many of those consumer dollars as they can.

Similarly, public education has allotted resources from state and federal funding mechanisms, which in Oklahoma have been reduced drastically over the last few years. In order

to combat public sentiment about education and its use of funding, public schools have had to dive into the realm of public relations to get their stories out to the public. Findings of this study confirmed the previous research on the importance of the use of public relations in public schools to garner public support and create better relationships with stakeholders (Ediger, 2001; Epstein, 2009; Hoggan & Littlemore, 2009; Kowalski, 2011).

This study expanded Excellence Theory to include public education to its field of study. This study demonstrated that Excellence Theory can be used as a framework to determine if public schools are strategic in planning public relations and if public relations persons are key parts of the strategic decision making team. Findings revealed that this is sometimes the case, but is usually dependent on the size of the school district. In the smaller schools, the public relations department consisted of the superintendent or a key administrator. In the larger schools, the public relations team had access to the key strategic decision makers, but did not necessarily make any key decisions. However, in the strategic planning of public relations, all of the schools exhibited this practice.

Implications for Theory

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Excellence Theory was the framework used to determine if the four schools studied were creating and maintaining excellent public relations with their stakeholders. The studied schools for the most part fit into the Excellence Theory and truly utilized the four models of public relations that emerged from the original study.

Excellence Theory, though created through the study of businesses, was useful in this study of schools because the school's hierarchal structure fit well with the characteristics of excellent public relations. Usually the school's main public relations person would be the superintendent, who is a member of the dominant coalition of decision makers; in fact the

superintendent is usually the most dominant member of the coalition. Therefore, public relations can be managed strategically and be part of the management function. In instances where there is an actual public relations department or a separate public relations person, those public relations practitioners are still in contact with the superintendent and are brought in as part of the management function.

Another aspect of Excellence Theory was the four models of public relations, which all schools do, whether intentionally or unintentionally. All schools use some form of the models whether they are spreading mythical stories about their prowess on the athletic fields using the press agent model or gathering input on dress code from stakeholders and creating policies based on that input, which would emulate the two-way symmetrical model. For the most part, schools deal in constant public information from the time the first bell rings until the last graduate walks across the stage.

One aspect of Excellence Theory that schools have difficulty with is the use of the two-way symmetrical model as the basis of the school's public relations activities. It is difficult for schools to gather input continuously and make decisions based on that input. There are certain things that must be done to maintain order during the school day, especially in a school where there are many students. It does not mean that schools should not attempt continuous two-way symmetrical public relations, but as stated earlier a school's main function in public relations is delivering public information.

Implications for Practice

It is imperative that during this time of public education neglect from the state legislature, school districts use public relations to showcase the amazing things going on in their school

districts. School districts need to emphasize not only the abilities and strengths of their students and staff but also public education as an institution.

Smaller districts could manage using the Excellence Theory as a model for their public relations by simply having the superintendent form a committee of one person per school site in the district. The committee would meet regularly to create and plan public relations materials that encompass both traditional and modern technology with the intention of utilizing the four models of public relations from the Excellence study. All four of the models could be discussed and a determinable plan could be acted upon utilizing each of the four models. Cost of this type of structured program would be minimal since it would utilize the resources that the school may already have in place, such as a student information system, emails, and a website. The social media sites are free and would just have to be managed. This small step could reap large benefits from the community served by making sure the community is aware and part of the events of their school district.

Larger districts could do the same thing, expend more funds and have persons dedicated to the position of public relations for the district. If that is the case, then it is important for those public relations persons to be accessible by the entire district staff, so that they can determine the information that needs to be out to the public. Larger districts also typically have more technology available for them to use and is attainable by their stakeholders. The larger districts would still need to plan, execute, and maintain those communications, utilizing and modifying the four models of education to fit their needs

Parents and stakeholders want to know what is going on in their community's school. It is very important that the information they receive is reliable and timely. Often in today's society, information and discussions get spun out into the social media realms, and it can be misleading

and occasionally wrong; therefore, school districts must be first to let their voices be heard to make sure that the correct information is being consumed.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research are provided as a means to expand this study. This study could be used to determine the effects of public relations on schools of the same size and demographics in different parts of the state. The schools studied in this research were of varying sizes, and with one exception, were from one part of the state of Oklahoma. It is possible that by expanding this study geographically, novel findings may provide a richer, more varied picture of public relations in schools.

This study relied on interviews of twenty-nine people, including school staff members, parents, and community members. Another recommendation would be to broaden the scope of those contacted using surveys via emails, school websites, or student information systems. A case study in which the researcher would contact only the stakeholders of the district to determine if there is excellence in communications between the school and stakeholders may yield a different result in terms of message reliability and positive perceptions.

This study observed the use of the four models of public relations in the way the school districts communicated with their stakeholders. Another study could focus on just the two-way symmetrical model, and what sizes of schools are more proficient at utilizing that model. This isolation study could be done with any of the four models.

Other theories a researcher could use to research the use of public relations by public schools could include systems theory, two-step flow theory, and framing theory to name a few. Grunig and his team used systems theory in their approach of their research which gave birth to Excellence theory. As stated earlier, systems theory calls for the organization and the public to

be interrelating parts, allowing each group's actions to affect the other (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2009). Systems theory would delve into the public education or the school's function within its environment and how it interacts with that environment.

Two-step flow theory is a theory created by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz in 1955, but was based on a study in 1944 by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gudet. The study was about how voters were going to choose the next president. It was found that the media had less influence than informal personal conversations. The theory from Katz and Lazarsfeld was that people react to what they hear in the media when it is told to them by someone in their social sphere. This person is called the opinion leader and the messages flow from the media through the opinion leader to the receiver. The messages, therefore, are filtered through this opinion leader's view and opinions and not the raw message sent from the media itself (Postelnicu, 2016). The school would have to be the opinion leader in almost every scenario. Using staff and other resources available it would be possible to have a multi-headed opinion leader to provide information to stakeholders that might be misconstrued by just listening to the media.

Framing theory was introduced in 1974 by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. It stated that people see and interpret the world around them in a framework that they have created. In 1996 Gail T. Fairhurst and Bob Sarr published the book *The Art of Framing*. In that book, they highlight five language tools: metaphor, jargon/catchphrases, contrast, spin, and stories. The metaphor framed an idea through comparison; jargon and catchphrases framed ideas through a memorable phrase; contrast framed ideas to what they were not; spin framed ideas that gave ideas value; and stories framed ideas through a narrative (Fairhurst, 2005). Schools could find several ways to frame their ideas using the five language tools to create personalized messages to the stakeholders.

Summary

Public education has been under fire for nearly four decades. The advent of technology has allowed stories of public education to fire quickly and virally through the internet, causing some to demand the upheaval of public education. In the state of Oklahoma, there have been some budget shortfalls that required cuts to education that have crippled some school districts and caused those districts to go on the offensive. Stakeholders and parents want to know what is going on in their school districts, and it is up to the school district to give them that information accurately and in a timely manner through a variety of conventional and modern methods. Public relations in public schools are becoming a necessity to combat negative perceptions surrounding public education.

Chapter II presented a review of the literature pertaining to technology, accurate information and inaccurate information. The amount of technology available for schools to purpose as public relations tools is ever-changing, growing, and becoming more cost efficient. It is important for stakeholders to be able to receive information via any platform available to them. It is also imperative that they receive accurate and timely information. The downside to the ever-changing technology is that it may be used to spread inaccurate information that may be too difficult to overcome.

Chapter III described the qualitative case study methodology selected for this study. The four schools were selected based on the number of students in the school. The data was collected through interviews, observations of the physical buildings, artifacts, school websites, and social media sites. The data were collected during the fall of 2016. I interviewed 29 participants including staff, parents, and an at-large community member for each of the districts. The collected data were analyzed using Yin's (2010) five phases was used: 1) compiling, 2)

disassembling, 3) reassembling, 4) interpreting, 5) concluding (p. 176). Excellence Theory was the framework from which this study was conducted and provided the lens to analyze each of the four districts' use of public relations.

Chapter IV presented thick and rich descriptions of the four schools studied. They were presented in order from smallest to largest. Chapter V analyzed the data using the Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage model.. Chapter VI answered the research questions and provided the findings that confirmed that the schools did follow Excellence Theory in their use of public relations.

Commentary on the Process

Other thoughts from the study

The school districts studied all had the same public relations responsibilities but were unique in how they carried their missions out. This section will be some thoughts on each of the districts and what was found in each of them.

The themes that emerged from the research in Smallville, a very small community, were that public relations are done more as a one-to-one activity than a massive planned attack. The themes of personal connections, open door, and being involved in the community to help in the branding of your school allows for the advocacy of your school and the ability to debunk the negative perceptions of public education. I think the Smallville experience can be summed up in something that Pam, the secretary, said: "We encourage people to come by; we encourage people to call, they can respond on Facebook to the quotes, you know just an open door policy" (Pam, personal interview, October 11, 2016).

Community involvement and feedback is vital to the Star City school district. The many technologies used for getting their public relations out to the public and the desire to monitor and

receive input are only helping Star City's community become integrated with them. This integration provides support for not only Star City schools, but public education in general. Finally, I think it is clear to see that for this approach to be successful, it is necessary to have a respected, strong leader. Star City has that in their superintendent, Todd, who has managed to get his staff on board in creating this communal bond. It is best summed up by Karen, Todd's secretary. She said, "you don't get very many superintendents that will take the time out to talk to you, lots of times they'd say I'm busy, I can't visit, but he will" (Karen, personal interview, October 14, 2016).

It is obvious from the moment you drive into Gotham City that there is a great relationship between the community and the school system. From the large colored LED signs that flash pictures of elementary students working on projects, to high school athletics, and teachers interacting with students. The abundance of Knights logos visible around town and in all of the buildings is another example of that relationship. Students saying the school's mission statement daily create the culture at the high school. The volunteers at the elementary schools, as well as the hard work of those in administration, have helped to create the Gotham City Knight brand. Gotham City, being a larger city, has a small town feel due to it's out of the way location in the state. I believe, Jake, high school teacher, sums it up best about the students and community always willing to help each other out by saying, "it's really cool what we have here" (Jake, personal interview, September 27, 2016).

Metropolis is a very large district and has the ability to do things the majority of the other schools in the state wish they could do. Despite this, public relations still fell into personal community involvement and branding of the message. It is overwhelming to see the resources

that Metropolis has at its disposal, but they are utilizing all of them in a way that promotes the successes of those mighty Dragons.

Personal thoughts on the process

I have learned many things on this journey. I have learned how to be a better researcher in that, I know what and where to look for the current peer-reviewed data and research concerning the ever-evolving issues in education. I have used this knowledge in my current position as a middle school administrator. There have been many discussions concerning grading, discipline, and attendance issues where I have tasked myself to find useful and reliable data to support changes or uphold beliefs and traditions in these particular areas.

I have learned that one must not stop, no matter how slow the process is going. I spent a year and a half researching a topic that ended up being scrubbed for lack of enough research on the matter. I would get stalled during the dissertation process and just stop because I was unsure of where and how to get back on track. I realized late in the game that communication with one's advisor is important, because in those long lulls of frustration, when I spoke with Dr. Harris, I was really never that far off of the beaten path and that would inspire me to move forward. Those lulls caused me to not finish this when I wanted, and it made me almost quit completely.

I have learned that editing is a process that can continue forever and is extremely difficult to do. It was difficult to choose which quote should go where and to determine if it might fit better in another chapter or section

My favorite part of the process was interviewing. I really enjoyed meeting so many educators, parents, and community members from the districts I visited. It was through these meetings, whether a school was large or small, that I realized we are all fighting the same battles day in and day out to ensure that the students of Oklahoma are receiving the best possible

education, regardless of what the legislature and media may say. There are many good people doing excellent work in many buildings across the state, and it is a shame that most of the stories that we hear publicly are negative ones.

My hope for this study was, that in speaking with someone, I could plant a seed in their hearts or minds that allowed them to speak out and tell their positive stories and shine a light on the interactions that teachers and students have on a daily basis. Hopefully, we, the educational community, realize that it is up to us to stand and share our story. I always say in faculty meetings, “if not us, then who, and if not now, then when?”

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APPENDICES

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Thursday, August 25, 2016
IRB Application No ED16120
Proposal Title: The role of public relations in reshaping the image of selected Oklahoma public schools: A case study

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 8/24/2019

Principal Investigator(s):
Don Amon Edward Harris
308 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078 Stillwater, OK 74078

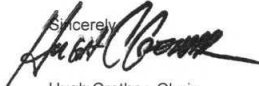
The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI advisor, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Dawnett Watkins 219 Scott Hall (phone: 405-744-5700, dawnett.watkins@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Hugh Crethar, Chair
Institutional Review Board

EMAIL AND HARD COPY TO VARIOUS SCHOOLS

My name is Don Amon. I am a Doctoral Candidate from Oklahoma State University and I am seeking approval to use your school for a research project concerning the use of public relations in public schools to bolster the perception of public education. Your school has been chosen because of its ADM on the 2015-2016 OSSAA website. I am seeking permission to request your input. Please understand your participation is completely voluntary. I am looking to interview a few members in your district: Superintendent or Public Relations Designee, Two Teachers, Two Parents, A Community member with no students in school, and a front office person at any of your schools in the district. The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes. All interview participants will be given pseudonyms for anonymity and all data and information collected will be kept secure and confidential.

Thank you for your consideration and any help you are willing to provide.

Don Amon

918-306-1587

don.amon@okstate.edu

ADULT CONSENT FORM
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

PROJECT TITLE: The Role of Public Relations in Reshaping the Image of Selected Oklahoma Public Schools

INVESTIGATORS: Don Amon

Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education, Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Maryland 1987

Master of Arts in Speech (Theatre), Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma 1989

Doctoral Candidate, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to explore the planning and creating of communication relationships between public schools and their respective publics to bolster public perceptions of public education. You will be interviewed in relation to your knowledge of the use of your school's use of public relations to create better public perception about public education. The interviews will 45 minutes in length.

PROCEDURES: Your interview will take place at your school sites and/or a place that will allow confidentiality and privacy during the interview. An interview protocol will be used with the interview questions being scripted and prepared to be as neutral and open ended as possible. You will be informed beforehand that interviews will be recorded for accuracy. You will be sent a reminder before the interviews begin. You will be provided a pseudonym, and information will be provided to you through the signed informed consent forms approved by the IRB. You can stop the interview at any point. All interviews will be transcribed verbatim as a naturalized transcription. You will be shown transcripts of the interviews in order to verify and ensure that all interview information was captured correctly. Following the conclusion of the research

process, all documentation, recordings and notes from the interviews will be destroyed.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There are no benefits to you in this research other than contributing to the research on public relations in public schools. There are several studies and suggestions concerning the “how-to’s” approach to public relations in schools, whereas, this study will focus on the public relations process and how it affects public perception. If you are interested, I will send a copy of the results of the study when it is finished.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All interview information will be kept confidential throughout the process. All recordings of interview and associated notes will be kept confidential and secure for the duration of the research process. The interviews will take place at a site that will allow for confidentiality and privacy during interviews. Pseudonyms will be provided to you and at no time will your real name be associated with the interview data. You will be shown transcripts of the interviews in order to verify and ensure that all interview information was captured correctly. Following the conclusion of the research process, all documentation, recordings and notes from the interviews will be destroyed. All research information, survey results, and interview data will be kept on a password protected computer. Data will be reported in the aggregate.

COMPENSATION: None

CONTACTS:

Don Amon 517 S. Harmony Rd. Cushing, OK 74023 (918) 306-1587 don.amon@okstate.edu	Dr. Ed Harris (Advisor) 310 Willard Hall Oklahoma State University Stillwater, OK 74078 (405) 744-9445 ed.harris@okstate.edu
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Your suggestions and concerns are important. Please contact me or my advisor with any questions. For information on subjects' rights, contact Dr. Hugh Crethar, IRB Chair, 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or send an email to irb@okstate.edu

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS: As a participant in this research, you are entitled to know the nature of my research. You are free to decline to participate and you are free to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty, prejudice or consequence of any kind. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the research and the methods I am using.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:

I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements: I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

SIGNATURES:

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What is your definition of public relations?
- Do you think public education is viewed positively or negatively? Why?
- How could public relations maintain or change those views?
- How is public relations used in your school?
- What types of information do you or your school put out as a form of public relations?
- What is the process of crafting and disseminating public relation material?
- Are the messages your school sends out perceived in a positive or negative manner? Why?
- In what ways do you inform the public about the state of affairs in public education?
- What, if any, technological platforms are you using for public relations?
- How do you solicit feedback from stakeholders?(School personnel)
- How does the school solicit feedback from you?(Parent/Community)
- Using these definitions: Press Agent: propaganda; Public Information: Passing along information; Two-way Asymmetrical: Policy changes disregarding feedback from stakeholders; Two-way Symmetrical: Policy changes utilizing stakeholder feedback. Which of these describe the majority of your school's public relations activities?
- What else can you tell me about your school and the way they use public relations?

- Is your perception of the messages you receive from your school positive or negative? Why? (Parent/Community)

VITA

Donald L Amon

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Dissertation: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN RESHAPING THE IMAGE
OF SELECTED OKLAHOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

Major Field: Educational Leadership School Administration

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational
Leadership School Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater,
Oklahoma in December, 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in your Speech (Theatre) at
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 1989.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in your Secondary
Educatoin at Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Maryland in 1987.

Experience: Magoffin Middle School, August 1993 – 1994
Cushing High/Middle School, August 1994-Present

Professional Memberships: Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School
Administraton (CCOSA)