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SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS: A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the school as a microcosm of the larger society that interacts with the public in an inclusive manner. It presents a conceptual insight into the role of school public relations as an effective tool in the hands of the school administrator in forging an enduring and mutual relationship with the public.

Introduction

In our complex society, the improvement of mutual understanding is not an easy task. According to Moore and Canfield (1973), the dependence of people on one another in their social economic, cultural and spiritual lives have created problems of human relationship in contemporary life. Organizations, whether governmental, industrial or non-commercial (like schools, hospitals) grow larger everyday. An organization's reputation, profitability, and even its continued existence can depend on the degree to which its targeted "publics" support its goals and policies.

The school is a co-operate body with life of its own. It's main function is to provide a conducive setting within which the learners are guided to develop their innate potentials. The school does not exist in isolation. The school is a microcosm of the society, which is expected to take care of the needs of its immediate society. In the light of this it is necessary that the school should have good school public relations since the inputs of the school are form the society and the outputs are expected to contribute their quota to the development of the society.

According tot eh institute of public relations London, public relations practice involves the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public. The school therefore is expected to maintain a cordial relationship between it and

The public. The public as used here refers to parents, churches, the media, the ministry of education, State Primary Education Board (SPEB) Local Government Education Authority (LGEA) philanthropic bodies, old boys association, the general public and all other stake holders in education.

School public relations used to be about getting positive messages out; it was a one-way communication street designed to showcase the best of a school to gain community support. Today, public relation is more about creating partnership in communities and sharing information that is useful to all parties. With intense media attention on everything from the rare but sensational school ground violence to examination malpractice, cultism and school funding, schools need plans to ensure that stake holders get the information they need, that a crisis communication plan is in, that image problems, are anticipated and that partnership are forged in the community. The difference between the old days, public relation and now is that people today want to be part of any change that are planned at their local schools. Today's public demand accountability, and educators need to provide detailed information about their schools. But schools must also actively engaged the public in decision making. Seeking input from outsiders, on such things as designing new assessments, approving new graduation requirements, setting standards and planning new construction, is a crucial component of school public relation. The bottom line in school public relation is not about letting everyone make decisions, it is about letting them feel that their input is valued and considered seriously and they are welcome and needed.

FUNCTIONS OF SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS

With the overall goal of forging partnerships and providing value to parents, employees and the public, school public relations help to establish the confidence of the public in the school and rallying support for proper maintenance of the educational programme.

Jones (1960) stated that, the functions of school public relations are to

1. Quicken sense of responsibility in all citizens for thoughtful participation in schools affairs;

2. Keep people informed concerning the purposes, accomplishments, conditions and needs of the school;
3. show the public that they are getting full value for their money;
4. Provide an agency whereby the public may identify and support the vital issues of education;
5. development and understanding of what is possible in education;
6. Build public confidence in the school system;
7. Develop and co-ordinate school activities with community activities in order to bring the school, the home and the community closer together and further good ideals of the society;
8. Improve partnership concept in school administration through active parental participation;
9. Establish confidence in the functioning institution; and
10. Develop continuing public consciousness of the importance of the education process in a democratic school organization.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL/PUBLIC RELATIONS

Some factors can influence school/public relations. These include:

1. Formation of Parent – Teacher Association (PTA). A lot of benefits are derived if there is mutual understanding between the teachers and parents. According to Odor (1995) the advantages of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) include:
 - ❖ It promotes better acquaintance and working relation between teachers and parents.
 - ❖ It is a channel of communication of educational views and ideas to and from the school and various public organizations in the community.
 - ❖ It promotes public understanding of school needs and enlists public opinions in support of a sound educational programme.
 - ❖ It provides leadership for local association of parents and teachers through its well-developed organizational structure and policies.

- ❖ It helps to co-ordinate the joint efforts of local school systems in securing better educational support from state and national sources.
- ❖ It aids in awakening parents to their responsibilities in educating their children.
- ❖ It advises the school staff and education board on the educational needs of the community as viewed by parents.
- ❖ It studies educational issues and trends and informs lay men on these matters.

Apart from the aforementioned functions it also provides security for the school. It is easier to enforce discipline amongst the students if there is cordial relationship between the teachers and parents.

2. Accessibility to parents and members of the community. Some school heads are not easily accessible to parents and other members of the public who may desire one thing or the other from the school. This will definitely hinder positive school public relations. On the other hand, an approachable school head creates avenues for positive school public relations.
3. Participation of parents and community members in some school activities. Parents and community members can participate in some school activities such as inter-house sport competitions, graduation ceremonies, cultural day celebrations etc. such participation provides an avenue for the public to identify with and support vital school programme.
4. Encouraging the study of certain aspect of the community life in the school curriculum. This makes the public to feel that the school places some importance on their way of life or cultural life. For example, the JSS III scheme stipulates that local crafts men from the environment can be co-opted to teach such skills to the students e.g. pottery.
5. Visiting important places in the community by the student. These visits could be in form of excursion or field trips. They expose the

- students to the environment of their school. These forms of excursions will definitely bring the school and the community closer.
6. Establishing of advisory committees among the citizens of the community. Such committees liaise with the school to handle some problems that could emerge in the school system. For example cultism, truancy, disciplinary issues and so on. These committees represent the community in school affairs.
 7. provision of leadership that is needed by the public. In most rural communities the school teachers represent the elite class. The community members look up to them as role models. Such expectation makes it necessary for them to exhibit exemplary leadership qualities as situations may arise. For example they could act as community public relations officer, secretary etc.
 8. Identifying and solving community problems. School heads can cultivate and sustain friendly relationship with the local community by identifying and helping to solve some community problems.
 9. Parents' interference in school administration. Excessive negative interference of parents in school affairs especially as it relates to discipline of their children can create a frosty relationship between the school and community.
 10. The disposition of the school administration to the public can also influence school public relations. A friendly and empathetic school administrator will foster a positive relationship between the school and community while a hostile and aggressive administrator will scare people away from the school.
 11. The teacher's commitment of his job, his utterances and his attitudes to the values and culture of the community. When the teachers show dedication and commitment to their job it will reflect on the quality of the school in general and students academic performance in particular. This will make the parents and members of the community to be happy whereas if the teachers are not committed and

dedicated to their jobs, it will also reflect on the general school tone and communities assessment of the school.

Negative utterances of the teacher in public about the values and culture of the community can hinder good school community relationship (Okokoyo, 2004).

SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES

Only when a school has determined its community's concerns, formed an answering strategic plan, and developed a public relations strategy will its public relations output find its best mark.

- ❖ The school and the community must be honest and transparent in dealing with one another so as to build that confidence and trust that is required for good public relations.
- ❖ There should always be regular communication between the school and community which will help to remove rumours. This is why all the stake holders of the school should meet regularly to deliberate on matter affecting the school.
- ❖ The academic performance of the school is another avenue of making the community have friendly feeling towards the school. The school has to live up to its expectation of training the child both academically, socially, morally and so on. Once the academic performance of the school is not questionable, of course the school will always receive adequate support from the community.
- ❖ Encouraging the study of certain aspects of the community life in the school curriculum will definitely enhance school public relations.
- ❖ The school should always invite prominent members of the community to the school programmes and activities such as Inter-house sports competitions and graduation ceremonies. This also should be reciprocal, such that the school should strive to honour any invitation given to them by the community by sending representative to such functions.

Schools can use media of all types Newspapers, magazines, newsletter, televisions, radio and the Internet to target various groups in the community.

For effective public relation management, it is essential that schools within their level should design a public relations plan to enhance their image. Schools should know the aim or purpose of the public relations programme. Is it to increase enrollment? To generate support for school reform? To help parents learn how to help their child succeed? Or to contract negative media publicity? However for the school to be able to do this effectively, it must feel the pulse of the public. What impressions does the public hold of the school? What issues are people concerned with? It is only after all these issues have been considered that the school can design an effective public relations plan.

CONSTRAINTS OF SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Negative news media reports of the disappointing academic performance to shocking violent acts by student cultists, schools have had an over abundance of negative publicity in the past several years. Some of these stories have been legitimate, fair and carefully reported, others' unfair, poorly done and sensationalized. Nevertheless schools are left to deal with the resulting images and impressions justified or not.

Unfortunately schools of education do not provide training in public relations and most school heads, administrators and teachers have little or no communications and public relations training. Many are uncomfortable in "selling" themselves or their series. But the fact is, schools must promote themselves because in the absence of the facts, people will create their own information and it won't be right (Bradley 1996). Schools must take it upon themselves to tell their own stories and to listen better to their partners, the public, so they can provide the value the public wants.

The absence of school public relations department in most secondary and primary schools makes it relatively difficult for them to sell themselves to the public particularly in this era of increase competition among schools in Nigeria.

General disenchantment, distrust and hostility for a system that is already loosing it's quality as identified in the non-performance of her products coupled with the poor physical state of public schools with inadequate and dilapidated buildings, uncompleted and unwanted classrooms, lack of or inadequate laboratories and libraries etc.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion an organization's reputation, profitability and even its continued existence depends to a large extent on the degree on which its targeted 'public' supports its goals and polices. Schools must promote themselves because in the absence of communication with the public, people will create their own information and this may be misleading. Schools must tell their own stories to counter any negative publicity and to listen to the public, their partner, to enable the school provide the value the public wants, and this is the main trust of the school public relation.

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