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A Study of Public Information Practices
Among Selected North Carolina School Systems

A Thesis

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Michelle G. Robinson

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Dr. Douglas Ramey

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A Study of Public Information Practices
Among Selected North Carolina School Systems

North Carolina school systems, like any organization affecting a majority of the public, must worry about their perceptions portrayed in the media and accepted by the public. In recent years, North Carolina school systems have fallen under much scrutiny in both the media's and public's eye. This scrutiny raises several questions about communication, especially one-way communication from the school systems to the media and public.

Since these systems' communications affect both administrators and educators a study of public information practices among selected North Carolina school systems is needed to gain insight on how educators use their knowledge of the mass communication theory in administering educational information through the mass media.

A plan to survey a sample of 60 out of 120 statewide public information directors or administrators with a questionnaire, validated in an earlier national study was used. After receiving twenty responses, data was tabulated and reported. Both findings from this study and a review of recent literature on the subject were used to offer recommendations to educators, the news media, and colleges and universities.

This study has several purposes. Its primary purpose is to determine the public information techniques used by the sample school systems' information programs. It also offers insight into

the functioning of these programs, the administrators' perceptions of the media coverage of schools' news and possible improvements and recommendations to enhance school's news coverage.

It also informs future Pembroke State University as well as other colleges and universities about their opportunities to aid our public schools' information programs in preparing and disseminating information to the public through the mass media.

PROBLEM AND ITS SCOPE

Since our public schools are supported by a tax-paying citizenry, it is necessary to keep them informed about public schools activities and current trends in education. This simple acknowledgement has allowed our public school, and their administrators to facilitate public information programs to meet the need to not only inform citizens about the schools, but to foster community involvement as well.

These goals could only be attained through mass communications. Since the mass communications media serve as the chief means of exposing large numbers of persons to a message in short time at a low cost per person. Their role in community relations is essential because educators and administrators lack the necessary channels of external communication.

A working relationship between educators and news media exists, because not only do educators have to communicate to their public through the news media, but the media cannot overlook schools' news worthiness; however, in this relationship, constant tension is present due to the roles both institutions play. Public information programs were created to build public understanding for the full range of activities going on within an institution. These programs focus on schools interacting with surrounding communities to produce "intended outcomes of goodwill, positive attitudes, respect, understanding, and basic support" from the surrounding community. They realize that "public confidence is essential if schools are to carry out their mission of producing educated

citizens" (Hanson & Henry, 1993). Journalists, on the other hand serve as both community watchdogs and unofficial representatives of the community, educating the public through "a portrait of reality on which the citizens act" (Bracey 1992).

According to a Journalism Quarterly article, tension exists because the media do not emphasize education properly. This article shows that education was one of the least reported stories throughout major metropolitan media, both print and broadcast media. Most of the stories reported did not focus on innovative long-term educational trends or aspects, but included more specific media events, like major sporting tournaments, violent crimes or unusual happenings. According to one journalist tension exists because "reporters possibly couldn't cover every interesting event or ignore sensational events like violent crimes in school, because then people would not buy their papers or watch their channels" (Carmen & Crook 1993). Under these circumstances the relationship between school administrators and journalists creates an interesting avenue of research necessary to understanding the larger educational picture.

Within the past decade our nation's schools have received unusually heavy coverage from the news media. Under normal circumstances, anyone would deem publicity as a plus for our schools; however, since the 1980s', report Our Nation at Risk, which evaluated American schools and their role in the projected decline of our nations economic competitiveness. Our education system has fallen, under rigorous scrutiny by the media, causing a

backlash of both low public confidence and even more dwindling financial support for our public school system. According to many critics the schools doing an adequate job; however, the media is painting on inaccurate picture of our educational system.

According to G.W. Bracey, author of Images of Education, "fair and accurate messages about America's schools, both good and bad aren't getting through." Instead of hard reporting and informed commentary about the imaginative, hope-inspiring solutions that are unfolding in cities and towns across the country, the media concentrate on tired stories about inept school boards, poorly prepared teachers, leaking classroom ceilings, overpaid custodians, drugs and crime in the stairwells and the playgrounds (Bracey 1992).

Throughout several studies about education and its impact on the public, alarming negative results have been measured. In these studies a majority of the respondents polled received a negative perception of public schools from the media, which are selective in their portrayal of nationwide educational system (Fox 1993).

One example, a random sampling survey of state education agencies throughout the nation, revealed the public expressing low confidence in several education areas.

The study identified eight issues with negatively generated messages. According to public feedback, "student achievement was poor and getting worse", despite actual test sources which show improvement in scores and newer standards of competency and requirements for students (Powers 1989).

Respondents believed "schools cost too much", even though schools' primary costs were instructional and deemed necessary by the legislature. They also perceived that "teachers were generally poorly prepared and ineffective". This message was also inconsistent with the actual content requirements and improvements found in educating teachers. Another message received from the public was that student discipline is lacking and "student behavior is unacceptable," even though the majority of students were not only behaving responsibly, but were participating in more challenging and demanding alternative programs (Powers 1989).

The study reported the public believed educational efforts and costs have not been worth it to society. This contradicted the many basic social, scientific, and technological advances resulting from investments in education. And most importantly the public perceived that the parents and other taxpaying citizens were not being kept informed about what the schools are doing and why (Powers 1989).

In the recent 1993 Gallup poll, over 1,100 respondents were questioned about the importance of education. When asked the question "In determining the America's strength in the future, say 25 years from now, how important do you feel each of the following factors will be very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important -- technological advancement, military development, or educational advancement (Elams & Gallop 1993). Even though eighty-nine percent of the respondents ranked education to be very important; throughout many communities,

schools receive low financial support (Hanson & Henry, 1993). According to Chew, Sanderson, and McCleary, American Demographics' writers, a frequent unwillingness of communities to pass bond issues and tax levies intended to support public schools is an indirect measure of low public confidence (Chew, Sanderson, & McCleary 1993).

This thesis examines the relationship between public school systems and the news media, especially the role public information practices play informing the public through the mass media. It will analyze public information programs' practices used in relaying educational messages to the public through the use of mass media.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

In any institution, quality communication within an organization and between the organization and its various internal and external publics is critical to the institution's success in accomplishing goals. This process of systematic two-way communication between an organization and its internal and external publics is known as public relations. Its practice, traced back to earlier colonial days, is mainly to inform the public. Public relations concepts have been used in school districts for a major portion of this century and were discussed by Moehlam as early as 1927 (Abrams 1988). The practice of such techniques in the schools has developed increased sophistication through the years as a result of media advancements and increased demands

placed on schools for community involvement (Toy 1987).

Educators now feel that citizens active participation and involvement in public school planning, operation, and support can only be sought through informing and educating the public. The mass communications media are necessary vehicles in community relations programs. The media serve as the primary means of relaying a message to a large number of individuals at a low cost per person. Due to complexity and expansion, educators like any other government agencies must work with the media who serve as unofficial representatives of the community.

This study examines the relationship between education and the news media. It focuses primarily on the practices of public school systems in using radio, newspapers, and television as channels of communication with the public. Utilizing both recent literature and data received from a sample of North Carolina school systems, this study notes improvements, expansions, and operations in public information programs. It also discusses the news media coverage of education and higher education's role in preparing school administrators in their working relationship.

This study, using the fundamentals of mass communication theory, surveyed existing North Carolina public school systems' public information practices and techniques in preparing, communicating, and disseminating information through the mass media to public groups. It also asked educators and administrators for suggestions on how colleges and universities can better prepare educational administrators to understand, communicate and work

effectively with the mass media.

This survey wanted to:

1. Determine information dissemination techniques about education being used by a statewide sample of North Carolina school systems.
2. Report educators perceptions of mass media's coverage of school news and possible improvement of its coverage.
3. Determine if educators think that colleges and universities could play a role in the preparation of administrators role in disseminating information to the public through the mass media.

METHODOLOGY/PROCEDURES OF STUDY

The primary purpose of the research undertaken in relationship with this study was to gather and analyze information to serve as a foundation in instituting any recommendations to administrators in both existing public information programs as well as future programs. A survey of techniques used by a statewide sample of public school systems, and a review of recent literature were the two principal forms of data collection used

Secondly, this research served to report administrators' recommendations to both colleges and universities possible training of various persons who interpret educational issues to public groups.

Primarily, a thorough review of literature related to this study was pertinent in supplementing the survey findings of public information practices by North Carolina school systems and establishing a basis for suggesting valuable public information techniques to public information officers and other educational administrators.

Research of printed materials included mainly periodicals and special publications. Since this study focused on recent and/or current school community relations, hardback publications were not viable due to timeliness in information.

Computer searches of the ERIC files, Academic Abstracts, and government publications were used to attain the recent writing and research necessary to complete this study.

Library Research was conducted on the historical development of school public relations, the nature and the findings of recent research in the field, the standards and the guidelines used for public information programs, and current trends and techniques found useful in conducting these programs.

The sample was limited to public school information programs in North Carolina. Of the 120 existing public school systems, 60 public school systems were randomly selected through a computer generated program of random numbers. The sample school systems', addresses, and telephone numbers were identified from a North Carolina's School of Public Instruction's list of school units.

Initial mailing of the questionnaire was completed in November, 1993. Only four questionnaires were returned from this distribution.

Due to a restructuring of the courier system, some sample systems did not receive their questionnaires. So from January, 1994, to March, 1994, respondents were contacted by telephone. During telephone interviews, the remaining sixteen schools systems PIO's answered this study's questionnaires. All systems participating in the study were listed by counties in Appendix A.

The survey instrument was a modified version of an instrument established and tested in an earlier 1972 doctoral dissertation surveying the public information practices among school systems on a national level.

The frequency of responses to different sections of the survey instrument was tabulated, and comments of the respondents to open-

ended questions were noted. Data from the survey were combined with research of related literature to suggest recommendations for public information procedures and techniques used in various school systems.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Certain terms important to this study have been defined as follows:

Mass Media. Newspapers, radio stations and television stations, independently owned, controlled and operated to serve as channels of communication for large numbers of citizens within a community or region.

Public Information. Primarily a one-way informational system transfer from an organization and its programs to the public, usually involving the print or electronic media. It included either received prepared materials from an organization or an institution cooperating in media-initiated coverage.

Public Information Officer. An administrator responsible for the conduct and directions of a school system's public information.

Public Relations. A program of systematic two-way communication between a school systems' internal and external publics, involving both formal and informal contacts and interpersonal and impersonal communication fashioned to promote public understanding of and support for education.

Publics. Different target groups the schools want to communicate a message to. This includes both internal publics like teachers, pupils, and administrators and external publics, such as

parents, taxpayers who do not have children attending schools, governmental agencies, and community organizations.

Public School Systems. Tax-supported school systems listed in the Department of Instructions list of school units.

Techniques. School communicative procedures used in providing print and electronic material for the mass media.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study of public information practices. A sample of 60 out of 120 school systems was drawn. Twenty schools, or 33 percent of the schools contacted, replied.

A summary of the responses to open ended questions on the survey instrument appear in Appendix D.

Data on school public information programs and practices and respondents' recommendations to journalists for their improvement of educational news coverage and to college and university officials for needed improvements in training educators in interpreting and communicating issues in the mass media, are all reported in this chapter. Data are reported in both numerical and anecdotal forms. The number of responses to different parts of the questionnaire are given, along with the percentage of responses related to the total sample.

Approximately 40 percent of the 20 systems in the state sample had full-time PIO's. Another 55 percent reported they had part-time PIO's. The remaining five percent did not have either a full- or part-time PIO working with the media. Table I shows this information.

Responding systems with full- or part-time PIO's were asked to indicate the volume of written news releases they prepared and disseminated to the news media on a local, regional, or national basis.

All of the school systems, including the ones without an established information program, submitted news releases to the mass media; however, most indicated that they worked with the media more on a personal basis, providing the necessary information daily to journalists who report and write the articles. In the total state sample, all of the respondents reported distributing news releases to the local media, 25 percent to regional media, and 25 percent to national media. The above information is presented in Table II.

Systems were also asked to indicate the average number of articles prepared by the public information officer each month and the average number of copies of these articles duplicated and distributed. These data are presented in Tables III and IV.

Of the 20 respondents, 15 percent of the respondents' stated that their systems prepared an average of five or fewer different articles each month, 45 percent averaged writing between five and 14 different articles each month, 30 percent of the respondents averaged 15 to 24 different articles monthly, and 10 percent of the respondents averaged 25 or more.

Among the average duplicated copies distributed to the news media monthly, 35 percent of school systems sent six to 24, 35 percent between 25 and 99, 15 percent 100 to 499 copies per month and five percent sent 500 or more.

The mass media were also provided with various other forms of information services. These included few articles tailored to the needs of the broadcast media. Suggestions and tips for stories

also were telephoned to journalists. Agendas and minutes of school board meetings, printed background material on local schools and trends in education, and still photographs were distributed. No film clips or radio station audio taped releases were used. In these cases, the broadcast media provided their own coverage of events. The nature and extent of media services provided by participating school systems are reported in Table V.

Printed background materials on both school personnel and state and national education associations and advanced agendas of board meetings were the information services most often reported. Smaller systems disseminated information provided by the national and state organizations. Eighty percent of the respondents distributed background materials on personnel and 60 percent on educational trends. While systems having larger enrollments not only provided background materials, but also distributed advanced agendas of board meetings (20 percent) and board minutes (20 percent).

All of the systems provided telephone story tips for journalists. Only 20 percent of the 20 systems public information officers surveyed tailored releases especially for broadcast needs. A majority of the respondents stated that the broadcast media preferred either to be given information necessary to produce their own reports, rather than receive already prepared information.

Seventy percent of the respondents distributed still photographs; however, many respondents re-emphasized the media's

preference of producing their own pictures for stories. 4

Participating school systems were also asked to indicate any radio or television programs for which they provided guest speakers, scripts, or other assistance. Only 30 percent of the school systems aided any regularly broadcasted programs. Results are given in Table VI.

The survey sought to determine if administrators were collecting, analyzing, and reporting feedback from their publics. Respondents were asked to describe the nature and frequency of feedback collection to administrators. Responses varied from systematic formal polls and clipping services to informal personal contacts. A majority of the schools handled feedback informally through "word of mouth" contact. Both the nature and frequency of feedback collection are reported in Table VII.

Eighty percent of survey respondents said the mass media could improve their coverage of education. The most frequent was that the media was that they emphasize "good news" more. Eighty percent of the sample respondents said that positive aspects of education are not emphasized enough.

Secondly, administrators felt that media representatives should visit schools more frequently. Respondents also stated the local news media should take more initiative in developing stories about education.

Last of major reported concerns dealt with the media regularly assigning education reporters. Most public information officers in smaller communities felt that regularly assigned

education reporters was necessary, but impossible because the nearest publications usually consisted of a small town paper not only with a limited circulation, but also a limited staff.

Most importantly, the administrators stated that there is always room for improvement; however, overall, the media were seen as doing an adequate job. One PIO even claimed that the media's handling of school news coverage was outstanding and no improvements in his district could be made. School administrators responses are reported in Table IX.

Forty percent of the total respondents felt that schools could improve their public information services to the mass media. A majority of those believing they could provide better service to the media indicated the need to provide a full-time PIO to work with the media and/or more writer/editor assistants on present staff. Many of the respondents felt that more effective internal communication and better informed internal staff and people would serve the mass media better as possible information outlets or unofficial spokesmen for institutions. All the responses can be found in Table X. Additional comments from respondents can be found in Appendix D.

In this study, eighty percent of respondents felt that colleges and universities could aid in the training of school administrators' handling of the media. Eighty percent of the respondents felt that special survey courses taught by journalism professors would be the most helpful in training future school administrators work more effectively with the media.

The next recommendation for educators involved training educators to recognize media problems.

Eighty percent of respondents felt that institutions of higher learning could offer special courses taught by journalism professors to educators. Seventy percent participating in the survey felt news writing courses for educators was necessary. Forty percent of the study participants felt short-term, on campus workshops or seminars would be an effective tool in preparing administrators for working relationships with the media.

Other suggestions favored by respondents are as follows:

1. "How to" manuals for educators, 40 percent.
2. Guidelines for improving local public relations programs, 35 percent.
3. Special in-service programs held in local districts, 20 percent.
5. Special survey courses taught by education professors, five percent.

The respondents suggestions are presented in Table XI. A number of other suggestions are given in Appendix C.

TABLE I
SCHOOL SYSTEMS EMPLOYING PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
Full-time PIO* -	8	40%
Part-time PIO* -	11	55%
No established PIO+ -	1	5%

*Public Information Officer

TABLE II

AVERAGE NUMBER OF NEWS RELEASES PREPARED MONTHLY BY SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding

Average Monthly Total
of Releases

Local	20	100%
Regional	5	25%
National	5	25%

TABLE IV

AVERAGE NUMBER OF NEWS RELEASES PREPARED MONTHLY BY SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
Average Monthly Total of Releases		
Fewer than 5	3	15%
5 to 14	9	45%
15 to 24	6	30%
25 or more	2	10%
No response	--	--

TABLE III
AVERAGE NUMBER OF RELEASE COPIES DISTRIBUTED MONTHLY
Number and Percent of Systems Responding

Number of Copies		
Fewer than 5	2	10%
6 - 24	7	35%
25 - 99	7	35%
100 - 499	3	15%
500 or more	1	5%
No Response	---	---

TABLE V
SPECIAL SERVICES PROVIDED MEDIA BY SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
<u>Service</u>		
Broadcast Releases	4	20%
Telephone Story Tips	20	100%
Still Photos	14	70%
Tapes for Radio	2	10%
Film/Tape For TV	---	---
Slides	---	---
Beeper Reports	---	---
Board Agendas	5	20%
Printed Background (local)	16	80%
Printed Background (national)	12	60%
Board Minutes	5	25%

TABLE VI
SYSTEMS PROVIDING ASSISTANCE FOR RADIO/TV PROGRAMS*

Number and Percent of Responded		
<hr/>		
Program Frequency		
Daily	---	---
Weekly	5	25%
Monthly	1	10%
Other		
<hr/>		

TABLE VII
SYSTEMS COLLECTING AND REPORTING FEEDBACK*

Number and Percent Responded		
Feedback Treatment		
Systematic Collection	9	45%
Reporting to Administrators	20	100%

*Systems reporting feedback to administrators were largely the same as those collecting feedback. these systems taken together do not equal the total systems in a given category.

TABLE VIII
RELATION OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND MASS MEDIA AS PERCEIVED
BY EDUCATORS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
Response		
Media can improve school coverage	16	80%
School can improve information pro- grams	8	40%

TABLE IX
ADMINISTRATORS' SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING COVERAGE
OF EDUCATION BY MASS MEDIA

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
<u>Suggestions</u>		
emphasize "good news"	16	80%
FULL-TIME Education Reporter	4	20%
More Visits by re- Reporters to Schools	14	70%
More media Initiative in Covering Education	12	60%
Newsmen Better Informed About Education	8	40%

TABLE X
ADMINISTRATORS' SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING
SCHOOL PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAMS

Number and Percent of Systems Responding		
Suggestion		
Add Full-Time PIO	6	30%
Add writer/Editor Assistants	4	20%
Provide More Photos, Broadcasting	3	5%
Add Part-Time PIO	--	--

TABLE XI
EDUCATORS SUGGESTIONS FOR TRAINING ADMINISTRATORS
IN SCHOOL PUBLIC INFORMATION

Number and Percent of systems Responding		
Suggestion		
Survey Courses in Education	1	5%
Survey Courses in Journalism	18	80%
University Seminars On-Campus Workshops	8	40%
In-service in Local Districts	4	20%
"How to" Manuals	8	40%
Guidelines for Local Districts	7	35%
News writing courses for Educators	14	70%
Insights into Media Problems	17	85%

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to survey the public information practices and techniques of a representative sample of North Carolina public schools in disseminating information to newspapers, radio, and television. Its findings together with an extensive review of recent related literature were the basis for any recommendations to expand and/or improve public school public information programs in North Carolina.

The study also resulted in recommendations to the news media in improving their coverage of education, as well as helpful suggestions to colleges and universities training school administrators in the theory of mass communications. The theory identifies the major elements of the mass communications process as the sender of the message, the message itself, transmitting the message, intended audiences, feedback from these audiences to senders of the message.

Schools' public information programs are the sender; messages are among others, press releases, the mass media are channels for transmitting the message, and various groups, mostly external, are intended audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

For the purpose of this study public information was essentially a one-way means of communicating between schools and different publics.

After an extensive review of related literature, a statewide study was undertaken to examine public school public information programs in North Carolina and recommend necessary improvements to school administrators and the news media.

A basic assumption of this study was that as the population increases educational issues grow more complex and resources more limited, public schools rely more on community support and public confidence, sought through mass media, who provide educators a means of communicating with large numbers of persons in a short-time and at a low per-person cost.

In conducting this study ,the question of whether, "North Carolina public school systems were not using generally recommended techniques in communicating with public groups through the mass media", would be answered.

The study used a previously validated survey instrument to:

1. Determine the present status of North carolina public school public information programs.
2. Recommend public information officers' suggestions to aid in the improvement of public information programs in North Carolina public schools.
3. Determine administrators' recommendations to the news media on educational issues in the news.

4. Recommend any suggestions to colleges and universities in better train current and future school administrators in handling the news media.

Sixty surveys were distributed, 20 questionnaires were received, quantified and displayed in a series of tables. Based upon findings of these twenty respondents and the review of recent literature on school public information programs, the following was concluded:

1. A majority of the systems' public information officer interviewed had an established program. All of the systems participating in the study prepare and distribute news releases. All of the responding systems also have adequate working relationships with the media. Administrators provide story leads, gathered information, and continuously contacted journalists.

2. The majority of systems participating in the survey concentrate on the print media, sometimes neglecting the special needs of the broadcast media.

3. In schools with enrollments under 12,000, administrators found it difficult to communicate to a small, rural population widely dispersed. Both access to media and skilled staff was limited.

4. The duties of the public information officers ranged from being key personnel responsible for reporting daily happenings and for crisis management. Schools with larger enrollments had public information officers with vast experience in both the education and mass communications. Some schools with smaller enrollments had less

experienced public information officers who provided a minimum programs necessary to inform the public through the mass media.

5. A majority of the schools had a working relationship with the media; however, respondents felt that this relationship was hampered due to "ill-informed internal relations that made communication difficult".

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, recommendations based upon both the findings of the study and a review of current literature will be made to superintendents and chief administrators of public school systems with or without established public information programs to the news media, and to colleges and universities whose interests include training educators.

Below are a few recommendations to aid all involved, directly like educators and the media, and indirectly, like the college and universities:

1. A skilled practitioner knowledgeable in journalism and education should be employed by school systems to help schools better inform the public through working with the media.

2. School systems should use the mass media as channels for communication between the schools and different publics.

3. School systems, especially rural districts, should generate staff involvement in the distribution of news releases. If staff is not provided recruit teachers or volunteers to aid in any duties.

4. Public information officers should always be accessible to the media and provide as many services necessary to the media to establish a working relationship and good press relations. This will be explained later in this chapter.

5. Colleges and universities should cooperate with educators in designing and administering training programs for both PIO's and journalists. These colleges should also coordinate with public school systems on planning and instituting short-term campus and local programs to teach administrators basic media and communications skills.

6. In dealing with public information practices, a plan utilizing the theory of mass communications as a foundation, should be used.

7. School systems should examine and establish a system of feedback from public groups. Efforts to evaluate and determine the success of information programs and to assist in planning for future public information programs should be conducted. If time and resources permit, surveys addressing specific aspects of the community, logs of phone calls or visits to the schools, a clipping service, or community coffees could help administrators establish the community's attitudes.

8. Additional research on the effectiveness of the public information program should be conducted. It should include an

analysis of cost effectiveness in planning and disseminating the message.

9. A joint effort between educators and the mass media should be made in providing more in-depth reporting on positive educational issues or effects of educational trends in the schools.

10. PIO's should conduct internal workshops or programs to better inform and train personnel to extend themselves as informal spokespersons and recruiters for the school systems.

11. A study evaluating the media's practices and perceptions toward educators should be conducted. It will offer better insight into their perceptions. This information could be compared to the present study to make possible recommendations which PIO's and media can agree upon.

12. Establish a communications advisory group with news media representatives or an educational council involving community members and key school personnel to discuss educational trends, problems, and possible solutions.

In larger districts, where funds are available and media is present and accessible, public information programs are expected to thrive. However, in North Carolina, an agricultural state with a majority of rural school districts, effective public information programs are less involved. "Lack of personnel skilled in public relations practice may be the major cause of minimal public

relations efforts (Abrams 1988).

Both extensive research and this study show that public information programs are necessary in public school systems, especially rural districts.

Assuming that personnel are available for public information programs, there are some techniques suggested in this study which may be helpful to smaller schools using the mass media to communicate with publics. Since many public relations practices are virtually cost-free, requiring only skill and knowledge, the following recommendations are made:

1. Assign someone to full or part-time public information responsibility-- superintendent, administrator, teacher, or lay person volunteer.

2. This person should serve as a member of a team of top administrators to ensure his/her position as the key communicator in the system.

3. Set up a program of "What to Do" newsletters and media releases for both scheduled events and possible crisis situations.

4. Public Information programs should plan the methods of communication that will be used-- print media, broadcast media, other media, or advertising.

5. PIO's should maintain a file of background information on personnel, photographs of teachers and administrators, background

information on educational trends, on both the state and national level, as well as board minutes and advanced agendas.

6. Advantage should be taken of broadcasting stations need for a growing number of talk show guests. Regularly scheduled shows serve as continuous visibility for a school's district.

7. News media should receive follow-up reports after the completion of events. PIO's should be aware of all their corresponding media deadlines, especially newspapers and television stations. Appropriate methods of information transfer should be established for information needed for possible stories.

8. PIO's should meet with news representatives, if possible. Hand delivering information usually increases chances of a publication being used. This only happens if attractive well-written news releases and public service forms are distributed.

9. A good rapport with the media is essential. Administrators should respond promptly to journalists' calls. They should also assist reporters in covering stories with a non-defensive attitude and honest intentions and submit timely and newsworthy information to reporters. This will establish the credibility needed in a working relationship.

10. Public Information officers should encourage the media to do more in-depth background stories about educational innovations, trends and issues.

11. In enhancing use of releases, school PIO's should avoid educational jargon and describe information in simple, understandable language.

12. PIO's should attempt to define and reach various publics through the mass media. Target particular audiences with stories that would peak their interest.

13. News conferences should be limited; however, they should be scheduled when important information is needed to be announced.

14. The regional media should not be overlooked. Information officers should establish a working relationship with regional media, because the possibility still exists for a limited amount of coverage.

15. Public Information officers should offer aid to any understaffed media, usually in smaller hometown publications, by writing or distributing releases.

16. Information distributed to the media should be done on an objective basis to all eligible media. Public Information officers should avoid exclusivity and bias when dealing with competitive news media.

Realizing that all public information programs are different, these recommendations only serve as possible guidelines in improving or expanding more effective public information practices and techniques.

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APPENDIX A

SYSTEMS PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY BY ENROLLMENT

Systems enrolling 12,000 or less

Anson	Polk	Vance
Alexander	Newton/Conover	Watuaga
Alleghany	Scotland	Yancey
Beaufort	Pender	
Burke	Martin	

Systems Enrolling 12,000 to 24,999

Guilford	Harnett	New Hanover
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Systems Enrolling 25,000 to 49,999

Cumberland	Winston/Salem Forsythe
Durham	Guilford

Systems Enrolling 50,000 to 99,000

Charlotte - Mecklenberg

APPENDIX B

LETTER DISTRIBUTED TO SURVEY RESPONDENTS

November 5, 1993

Dear Superintendent:

Effective school public information programs are becoming increasingly important. With growing public concerns, rapidly increasing school populations and limited budgets, it is important that all school systems have public information programs that regularly disseminate information to the media.

Since good public information/public relations programs are based on knowledge of how to work with the news media, our study seeks to identify effective public information techniques used by North Carolina school systems and share them with interested administrators.

Your system is therefore invited to participate in a selective study of North Carolina schools' public information practices, emphasizing effective techniques for working with the media, both broadcast and print. This study also seeks educators' views on how the mass media can improve their coverage of school news and on how colleges and universities can better prepare school administrators in the public information field.

Enclosed is a short questionnaire which we hope that you or the proper person in your system will complete and return by December 1993. It has only 11 questions and should require just a few minutes to complete. Thank you very much. (Results will be shared with all interested participants).

Sincerely Yours,

Michelle G. Robinson, Member
CHANCELLOR'S SCHOLAR'S PROGRAM
PEMBROKE STATE UNIVERSITY

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE DISTRIBUTED TO SURVEY RESPONDENTS

A Study of Public Information Practices Among North Carolina School Systems

If enclosed envelope is misplaced, please return this instrument to M. Robinson, 4805 PO Box 581 Pembroke, NC 28372. Thank You)

1. Name of responding school system _____

2. Location of superintendent's office _____

3. System's net enrollment (Please check one)

___ 100,000 or more ___ 25,000-49,999 ___ under 12,000
___ 50,000-99,999 ___ 12,000-24,999

4. Please give the name and office telephone number (including area code) of a person who may be contacted for additional information in connection with this survey

Name _____

Office Phone _____

5. (a) What is one of the principal newspapers serving your school district?

Newspaper _____

City Published _____

(b) What is one of the principal radio stations serving your school district?

Station _____

City (Site of Studios) _____

(c) What is one of the principal television stations serving your school district?

Station _____

City (Site of studios) _____

Note: We will appreciate your enclosing any copies of representative news releases sent by your system to the mass media, or other material, which may be of value to this study. Please use extra pages for additional comments on any part of the questionnaire or other phases of school public information programs. If you wish a summary of the findings from this study, please give the address to which it should be mailed:

PUBLIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Does your district have a system-wide public information officer or coordinator assigned to work with and through the news media (newspapers, radio, and television stations) in keeping the public informed about local education:

- (a) on a full time basis? (b) on a part-time basis
yes _____ no _____ yes _____ no _____

Respond to the remainder of Question Number 1 and Questions 2 through 4 only if your system has a full- or part-time public information officer (PIO). Everyone should respond to Questions 5 through 12. Thank you very much.

- (c) If part-time, approximately what percentage of the PIO's work time does he/she devote to the news media?

- (1) _____ less than 25 percent (3) _____ 50-74 percent
(2) _____ 25-49 percent (4) _____ 75 percent or
more but less than 100
percent

- (d) What is his/her formal title _____

- (e) What other duties, if any does the PIO perform in your school system?

- (1) ___ Superintendent (2) ___ Supervisor of instruction
(3) ___ Attendance teacher (4) ___ Journalism teacher and/or
student publications advisor
(5) Other (please specify below)

- (f) How many assistants does the PIO have for his duties involving the news media?

	Full-Time	Part-Time	% of Time
Writers, editors	_____	_____	_____
Clerical, secretarial	_____	_____	_____
News media specialists (Radio, TV, etc.)	_____	_____	_____
Others (please specify in space below)	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

(g) Please include as much of the following information as possible about your system's PIO. (Answer only those questions which apply.)

- (1) Bachelor's degree in _____
- (2) Master's degree in _____
- (3) Doctorate in _____
- (4) Year's experience in news media _____
- (5) Year's experience in education _____
- (6) Year's experience in other public information positions
(please specify type of company or institution)

2. Does the public information officer (PIO) prepare written news releases for:

(a) Local News Media? (b) Regional News Media (c) National news media

____ yes
____ no

____ yes
____ no

____ yes
____ no

3. (a) What is the average number of news stories written by the PIO and his assistants (if any) each month?

(1) ____ fewer than 5

(3) ____ 15-24

(2) ____ 5-14

(4) ____ 25 or more

(b) On the average, how many copies of releases are sent to news media each month (Can include multiple copies on one story.)

(1) ____ fewer than 5

(4) ____ 100-499

(2) ____ 6-24

(5) ____ 500 or more

(3) ____ 25-99

(c) Are separate stories written especially for broadcast media to conform to their time limitations and style?

____ yes

____ no

(d) Does the system PIO and his/her staff regularly telephone to the news media information which can be developed into stories by reporters?

____ yes

____ no

4. In what other ways does the PIO assist the news media?

(Please respond to the following items. Thank You.)

5. Please check of the following items which your system provides to local news media on a regular basis:

- ☐ Still Photographs
 - ☐ Radio tapes
 - ☐ Motion picture film or video tapes for television
 - ☐ 35 mm. color slides
 - ☐ Beeper telephone reporters for radio news
 - ☐ Advanced agendas of school board meetings
 - ☐ Printed background material on local schools and personnel
 - ☐ Printed background material from state and national education associations
 - ☐ Minutes of School board meetings
 - ☐ Others (Please specify.)
-
-
-

6. Please indicate the approximate number of times during the past school year that your office invited representatives of local news media to cover events in your school system.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> None | <input type="checkbox"/> 7-12 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-6 | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 12 |

7. Please indicate the broadcast schedule of any radio and/or television programs for your system regularly provides speakers, scripts, or video tape.

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily | <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly | <input type="checkbox"/> No regular programs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify schedule.) | |
-

8. (a) Does your system regularly collect and analyze feedback from its different publics?

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

- (b) If so, are trends and implications of public opinion usually reported to your superintendent and other interested administrators?

- (c) Please indicate the method and frequency of any feedback collection.
-
-
-

9. (a) Do you think news media can improve their coverage of education in your system?

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

(b) If "yes" in what way(s) do you think the media can improve their coverage?
(Please check as many as appropriate.)

- ☐ Emphasizing "good news" more
 - ☐ Regularly assigned education reporters
 - ☐ More frequent visits by media representatives to schools
 - ☐ More initiative by local media in developing stories about education
 - ☐ Newsmen who are better informed about education in general and local school problems and progress in particular
 - ☐ Others (Please specify in space below)
-
-
-

10. (a) Do you think your system can better serve and assist local news media?

☐ yes

☐ no

(b) If "yes", in what way(s) do you think your system can help the news media?
(Please check as many as appropriate.)

- ☐ Providing a full-time PIO to work with media
 - ☐ Adding writer/editor assistants to present staff
 - ☐ More news releases
 - ☐ More photographs, film clips, slides
 - ☐ More emphasis on broadcast media
 - ☐ A system representative assigned to work with media on a part-time basis
 - ☐ Others (Please specify in space below.)
-
-
-

11. How, in your opinion, can colleges and universities help present and future school administrators learn to work more effectively with the news media? (Please check as many as appropriate.)

- ☐ No help needed; administrators doing adequate job now
 - ☐ Special survey courses taught by education professors
 - ☐ Special survey courses taught by journalism professors
 - ☐ Short-term, on campus workshops or seminars
 - ☐ Special in-service programs held in local districts
 - ☐ "How to" manuals for educators
 - ☐ Guidelines for improving local public relations programs
 - ☐ Special Courses in news writing for educators
 - ☐ Providing insight into problems faced by news media
 - ☐ Others (please specify)
-
-
-

APPENDIX D

TYPICAL COMMENTS OF RESPONDENTS IN CONNECTION WITH OPEN-ENDED SECTIONS OF THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Below are statements and recommendations that respondents made to any open-ended questions stated in the questionnaire. A majority of responses were generated in phone interview and they may not serve as exact quotes:

4. In what other ways, besides writing and distributing press releases, does the PIO assist the news media?

- A. Provide articles for educational columns in the newspapers.
- B. Create and distribute public service announcements for radio and television stations.
- C. Provide communications workshops to educators to meet the needs of the media.
- D. Provide help in any special requests or programs instituted for the media.
- F. Provide media with calendars and special reports

10. Do you think the news media can improve their coverage of education in your system?

- A. "Report all the positive aspects of education."
- B. "The media are doing an adequate job, now. They are very supportive".
- C. "They could take the time to visit the schools more frequently".

11. Do you think your system can better serve and assist local news media news media?

- A. "Provide more informed personnel to meet the needs of the media."
- B. "Add more personnel to staff, so the time of community relations director can be used for other community related programs."
- C. "We are doing an outstanding job. We provide the news media with anything they need or request".
- D. "Our problems are not with the media, but with the ill-informed staff and personnel."
- E. "Allocate more responsibility to the community relations coordinator, you hire a PR person, let him/her do the job".

12. How, in your opinion, can colleges and universities help present and future school administrators learn to work more effectively with the news media?

- A. "Public Relations courses should be offered to any student planning to enter any education administrative field."
- B. "Teaching interpersonal communication skills would be a plus for both educators and administrators."
- C. "Educators need to be exposed to what's involved with public relations, so they realize its importance".
- D. "Administrators need to learn basic media skills, especially writing".