

**Raising the Bar for School PR:**

NEW STANDARDS

FOR THE

SCHOOL PUBLIC

RELATIONS PROFESSION



**National School Public Relations Association... The leader in school communications™**

---

## Introduction

Every school, school district, and organization has public relations — just like everyone has a personality.

If the organization understands and tries to practice school PR as the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) defines it, chances are that the organization will foster productive relationships and effective communication with its employees, students, parents, and the broader community as well.

If the organization has no planned public relations, then chances of having effective communication and positive relationships with key audiences will be pretty much hit or miss — with a stronger emphasis on the “miss.” NSPRA, the leader in school public relations since its founding in 1935, defines school public relations this way:

**Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.**

**Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public support and understanding.**

In this publication, NSPRA sets forth some standards for:

- the preparation of school public relations **professionals**,
- comprehensive school public relations **programs**, and
- the **financial support** needed to implement good programs.

We recommend this publication to every school board member, superintendent, chief executive officer, and any individual who may have

responsibilities for education communication and public relations. It outlines what school public relations professionals believe and have successfully implemented in hundreds of school districts in the United States and Canada: It *is* possible for schools and districts to have good public relations! Make the commitment and look inside.

## **Acknowledgments**

*Raising the Bar for School PR: New Standards for the School Public Relations Profession* did not just happen overnight. For two years, an NSPRA Committee, appropriately titled the **Standards of the PR Profession Committee**, worked diligently with its members to hammer out the final document we have today. Special thanks to the committee chair Kathy Miller, APR, for her two years of work on leading, bulldogging, and inspiring her committee members to complete this task. Kathy, you and your committee have made a significant contribution to our profession.

Another major player in making these standards a reality is NSPRA Consultant, Dr. Ken Muir, APR. Ken, our resident scholar and historian on professional standards and assessment in school public relations, was instrumental in preparing and editing the standards and working with Kathy and the committee in reaching final agreement. Ken, often labeled the co-father of NSPRA's professional accreditation program, continues today to look at ways of taking a systemic approach to accrediting a school public relations program. Without Ken's steadfast approach to this project, it would not have happened.

One of the hallmarks of a profession is the standards it sets for itself. Now, thanks to the work of many diligent members, the leadership of committees, and the encouragement and insight of the NSPRA Board of Directors, NSPRA, too, can point to standards to be followed by school districts throughout North America.

We have truly raised the bar for school PR!



Rich Bagin, APR  
NSPRA Executive Director

# **Standards for Educational Public Relations and Communications Professionals**

A skilled school public relations professional performs essential communication functions to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. While qualifications can vary depending on the sophistication of the work required, all practitioners should meet certain minimum standards.

## **General Standards**

- An understanding of and commitment to the role and social responsibility of public relations and communications for all educational institutions, organizations, and agencies in a democratic society.
- A commitment to improving educational opportunities for all.
- A commitment to professional performance and ethical behavior as described in the National School Public Relations Association's Ethics for Educational Public Relations.

## **Professional Preparation**

- A bachelor's degree from an accredited university or — for department leaders — experience in the field is a minimum requirement.

## **Abilities and Aptitudes**

- A comprehensive working knowledge of internal and external public relations and communications programs for an educational organization.
- A mastery of communications skills.
- An understanding of the importance of two-way communication between an organization's staff and its many publics and audiences, and the ability to carry it out.
- A thorough knowledge and understanding of communications theory and research.

- An ability to provide expertise and advice to top management.

## **Professional Growth and Development**

Standards for professional growth and development require that educational public relations and communications professionals continue to refine their skills and expand their knowledge by:

- Maintaining membership and participation in the National School Public Relations Association and other professional public relations associations and societies.
- Pursuing professional accreditation.
- Participating in public relations seminars, conferences, workshops, and institutes.
- Pursuing additional study beyond a bachelor's degree.
- Reading, researching, writing, speaking, and consulting in education, public relations, and communications.

## **Educational Public Relations Program Assessment**

### **Purpose**

NSPRA's Educational Public Relations Program Assessment enables governing board members, superintendents, chief executive officers, and public relations practitioners to work toward achieving criteria that the Association believes are components of a comprehensive school district public relations program.

These criteria apply district- or system-wide, involving not just the formal public relations program, but the way in which every school and central office unit interacts with employees, students, parents, news media, elected officials and the community at large.

## Criteria

The following NSPRA-developed criteria should be evident in any organization that is working to develop and achieve a strategic and comprehensive public relations program.

**Governing Board** — The governing board of the organization understands and models its policy-setting responsibilities on actions that are in the best interests of students and their learning.

- The board has adopted and ensures periodic review of a mission, goals, and objectives that have been developed with stakeholder involvement.
- The board has a code of conduct that includes modeling respect, civility, and integrity.
- Board members work with the superintendent and staff in relationships that are built on mutual trust and respect.
- The board understands and practices its role of setting clear policy direction and helps build a culture that supports the staff in its role in implementing and administering those policies.
- The board seeks input from organization stakeholders before developing policy and clearly communicates its actions and the reasons for them.

**Communication Policy** — The governing board of the organization has adopted written policies to guide its communications/public relations efforts. They include:

- A policy that commits the organization to providing comprehensive communications/public relations in an open and honest way that meets the needs and desires of all internal and external publics.
- A policy regarding the release of information about individual staff, students, or clients.
- A policy that describes public involvement in the organization's decision-making.
- A policy that enables employees, parents, and others to appeal policy or administrative decisions.

- Policies that require the organization to learn what employees and patrons want to know and to provide that information in various ways.
- A community involvement policy that encourages interested citizens to review the district’s mission, goals, and objectives; and to become educated about and offer opinions on issues that may require action in the future.

**Communication Procedures** — The organization has written procedures to implement the governing board’s policies and to provide clear direction for various staff roles in public relations.

- Procedures are in place that outline various communication responsibilities in crisis situations.
- Procedures clarify a policy of openness and honesty in interacting with the news media. Job descriptions clarify staff responsibilities in communicating with and through the news media.
- Procedures exist describing formal and informal methods of communicating with organization employees.
- Procedures are in place describing formal and informal methods of communicating with parents and the broader community.
- Procedures have been developed describing how the organization will seek the views of employees and patrons on a regular basis.

**Organizational Positioning** — The director of the public relations effort is a member of the superintendent/chief executive officer’s cabinet and is directly accountable to the superintendent/chief executive officer.

- The person with public relations responsibilities is involved with the strategic management processes of the organization.
- The strategic management process includes communication programs for interacting with key publics, especially those who might be affected by a decision.
- The person with public relations responsibilities provides leadership for an issues management process to ensure that potential problems and issues are identified and dealt with in a strategic fashion.

- The budget for communications/public relations is sufficient to achieve program goals.
- The public relations leader ensures that educators and the community are aware of trends and other forces that may impact the school system, students, and the community at-large.

**Professional Preparation** — The public relations effort is headed by a strategic leader, rather than a technician or an administrative manager.

- The director of the public relations effort is accredited by the Universal Accreditation Board.
- All public relations staff are appropriately trained for their responsibilities.
- The director and other staff are members of the National School Public Relations Association and an NSPRA chapter (if one serves their area). They regularly attend NSPRA seminars, workshops, and other professional development opportunities.
- Members of the organization’s governing board and its executive leadership demonstrate an understanding of the basic principles of good communication.

**Counseling and Training** — The job description for the person with public relations responsibilities includes counseling the governing board, the superintendent/chief executive officer, and other administrators and staff in public relations strategies.

- Regular opportunities are provided for administrators to obtain training in effective public relations practices, including interaction with the news media.
- Regular opportunities are provided for teachers and other staff to become effective public relations ambassadors for the organization, and to deal with students, parents and others in ways that promote their involvement, understanding and cooperation.

**Research** — Before major communication/public relations efforts are initiated, staff determines relevant factors relating to the demography and opinions of the community and its various components.

- The organization's goal setting is based on research and direct involvement with stakeholders to determine their educational priorities.
- The organization's public relations/communication efforts are research-based (i.e., its planning and strategies are based on research that indicates various audiences' perceptions, desires, interests, opinions and needs for information and involvement.
- The organization regularly elicits both quantitative and qualitative information through means such as formal and informal surveys, advisory councils, and focus groups that involve both internal and external publics.

**Planning** — The public relations/communication efforts are planned on a systematic (often annual) basis to support the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives.

- The plan has the approval of the superintendent/chief executive officer.
- The plan focuses on meeting the goals of the organization and ultimately improving education, and to the extent possible, enhancing student achievement.
- The plan identifies the needs of target publics and uses research data to identify key messages and strategies for delivering those messages.
- Communication plans for specific program changes or initiatives are developed in conjunction with the staff responsible for them.
- Communication plans identify the various publics who will be affected and the strategies for reaching them.
- To the extent possible, communication plans include measurable goals for behavior change or accomplishment, deadlines, responsibilities, resources, and strategies.
- Plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that communication efforts remain relevant and are on schedule, and are adjusted whenever necessary to reach planned goals or to deal with emerging needs and opportunities.

**Communicating** — A variety of channels that are based on research and planning, and are appropriate to the communication goals, are employed in communicating with all publics.

- Communication by the organization and its units is planned and includes opportunities for target publics to obtain further information or to respond.
- All communication is timely, meets the needs of the target publics, and uses language and formats that are appropriate for particular audiences.
- The language, format, and general presentation of all efforts are planned so that they communicate successfully.

**Employees** — The organization has procedures and strategies that stimulate regular, two-way communication with all employees. Those procedures and strategies might include:

- A regularly scheduled communication vehicle from the organization that provides information employees need to be well-informed and to do their jobs effectively.
- A communication vehicle might be printed or electronic, or a combination of these possibilities, but the distribution system ensures that it is conveniently available to every employee.
- New programs or initiatives are planned with staff input and are communicated in appropriate ways to each employee group.
- E-mail, voice-mail, intranet, or other electronic systems that facilitate communication with and among employees, accompanied by procedures for the appropriate use of the system(s).
- A crisis plan for the district and for each unit that is up-to-date, comprehensive, and available to the employees who need it. It states responsibilities for all staff during a crisis, including communication.
- A systematic and ongoing program that recognizes the efforts of individual staff and organization units and thanks them for their contributions.

- An up-to-date manual of district policies and procedures that is conveniently available to all employees.
- A directory — available to all employees — which contains the organizational structure; names, titles, and telephone numbers of personnel in each unit; and how to access needed services.
- A variety of vertical and horizontal two-way communication opportunities within the organization structure.
- Regular meetings of employees with supervisors where a spirit of openness encourages questions and suggestions for improving education and/or dealing with other work-related issues.
- Orientations that acquaint employees with the organization's goals, structure, and culture; their specific job responsibilities; and their public relations roles.
- Systematic (generally annual) plans for each unit of the organization, spelling out strategies for communicating with employees and with the organization's many constituents.
- Regular opportunities for employees with similar responsibilities to meet and discuss issues of common interest.
- Regular training for various employee groups addressing their public relations roles in the organization and within the community.
- Regular (perhaps quarterly) meetings of the superintendent/chief executive officer with representatives from various organization units to discuss matters of mutual interest.
- Formal and informal methods for asking employees, at least annually, to evaluate the organization and its units on the availability, relevance, and responsiveness of communication efforts.

**Students** — The organization has policies and procedures that encourage sound communication with students and encourage their involvement in their school. These procedures and policies might include:

- Student handbooks, focused on each school or each level, that are distributed to and reviewed with every student to help them

understand school rules as well as academic, behavioral, and other expectations.

- Involvement of students in ways that will make it possible for them to contribute to the organization's strategic goals and initiatives.
- Information that is communicated to students and their parents or guardians about safe practices in getting to and from school.
- A safe, welcoming learning climate, with staff who encourage students in both academic and extra-curricular activities.
- A principal and teachers who communicate regularly with students about the school environment and issues of concern to both students and staff. Whenever possible, reasons for school policies and procedures are explained to students.
- A student government organization in each school that encourages students to become appropriately involved in decision-making about issues that concern them.

**Parents** — The organization has policies and procedures that encourage regular, two-way communication and help to develop appropriate mutual expectations between parents and their schools.

- Each school has a handbook, distributed to each student/parent, that describes district and school rules, and ways that parents can work with the school to improve their child's education.
- Parents are involved with the staff in establishing school goals, and these are communicated regularly.
- A regular school communication vehicle or vehicles exist to communicate important events, dates, and news about the school, staff, and student accomplishments. It is transmitted using methods to ensure that it will be received by parents. District news of importance to parents is communicated to the school so that it can be easily incorporated into this parent communication. The school's parent organization contributes to and assists with school-to-parent communication.
- Regular opportunities are provided for the principal and teachers to meet face-to-face with parents.

- Any major change in school rules, procedures, or educational programs is discussed at an early stage with interested parents. Interested parents help contribute to the decision, and the decision and the reasons for it are communicated clearly and promptly to all parents.
- All communication and interaction with parents is based on mutual respect and an attitude of true partnership in their children's education.
- Parents and others in the community are encouraged to volunteer at the school in ways that are important for students. There is a handbook of guidelines for volunteers and for school staff, and schools regularly recognize the contributions of volunteers.
- Teachers and parents receive guidelines for holding productive parent-teacher conferences. Conference times are flexible to meet parents' needs and schedules.
- School staff are accessible to respond to parents' questions, inquiries, or ideas.
- In schools where parents are not fluent in English, special efforts are made to communicate with them and to seek their involvement in school affairs.
- A parent-complaint procedure exists to facilitate the resolution of problems at the lowest possible level.
- Parents are encouraged to serve and have leadership roles on school and district-wide committees that study and propose solutions to identified problems.
- In addition to regular report cards, teachers are encouraged to communicate regularly with parents about each student's educational progress. A well-established, effective procedure exists for communicating and resolving concerns about a student's behavior or education progress.
- The school gives support and encouragement to related parent and community organizations.

- Parents are invited annually to evaluate the school climate, program and communication efforts.
- A district that must seek public support for referenda, bond or millage issues, works closely with parent leaders on election efforts.

**Community** — The district has regular, two-way communication with various segments of the community.

- School and district administrators are encouraged to belong to and participate actively in civic and service organizations.
- The superintendent/chief executive officer maintains regular, two-way communication with business, civic and religious leaders, and other influential members of the community.
- A key communicator program facilitates regular communications with its members and invites them to contact the organization for information or to alert it to misinformation and rumors.
- Community members are regularly sought to serve on school district advisory committees.
- The district uses multiple channels of communication to reach citizens who do not have children in the schools. Opportunities are provided for citizens to ask questions or seek further information. The person with public relations responsibilities is accessible to and visible to the community.
- The organization has an Internet website that is well-constructed, user-friendly, and contains timely information of use to staff, parents, and community members, and helps to recruit future employees and parents/students for the district.
- The district makes regular efforts to communicate with citizens of various cultures who are not fluent in English in ways that seek their involvement, input, and support.
- The organization seeks partnerships with local businesses that provide mentors and other assistance to students and their schools.
- Community views and opinions are sought in periodic public opinion surveys.

**News Media** — The organization has policies and procedures that promote good communication with the news media, responsiveness by school officials, and honesty and openness in providing information to reporters.

- Personnel in the public relations office have a complete list of local and regional news media outlets and reporters, and make information about the organization available to the news media on a regular basis.
- District policies and procedures support responding to news media inquiries in a timely fashion, designation of a spokesperson or spokespersons (such as during a crisis), confidentiality as well as the public release of information, publication of student names and photographs, and notification of all public meetings and events.
- Personnel in the public relations office conduct periodic in-service training for staff in news media relationships, including forums with reporters.
- The staff alerts the news media promptly in the event of any crisis or other newsworthy situation.
- The superintendent/chief executive officer and the director of public relations/communication periodically meet with newspaper and other news media editorial boards to alert them to the background and the organization's position on issues that have the potential to become controversial.

**Elected Officials** — The organization recognizes the political leadership exercised by elected officials and makes regular efforts to communicate with them.

- The superintendent/chief executive officer maintains regular, two-way communication with elected officials.
- The organization communicates regularly with local and regional governments and their officials, especially when an educational issue is likely to have an effect on their scope of responsibilities.
- The organization communicates regularly with state legislators and the state education agency to ensure that these officials are well-

informed about the district, its goals and objectives, and any issues that may arise before these groups.

**Evaluation** — Every major communication effort is evaluated to determine whether planned goals were met and objectives achieved.

- The organization and each of its units engages in both formal and informal evaluations of its communication practices and the levels of satisfaction with its performance.
- Overall personnel evaluations of district administrators and staff include a component addressing the need for effective internal and external communication practices and the levels of satisfaction with their performance. Job descriptions and regularly developed goals and objectives also include a focus on communication responsibilities.
- Whenever possible, evaluation methods are built in to each element of the organization's annual communication plan. These evaluations are used to create, modify, or discontinue practices or projects.
- Each of the organization's regular communication channels and vehicles is evaluated at least every two years to determine its relevance, interest, and ability to communicate important information.

## **Standards for Educational Public Relations and Communications Program Budgets**

The public relations and communications budget for staffing, services, and programs will vary according to an organization's size, needs, and availability of resources. Budgets can be based on a fixed percentage of the total organization's budget or allocations can be based on projects planned for the year.

Resources can be allocated to a single department, be included in the budgets of several departments or be a combination of the two approaches. However, in every situation, the individual directing the public relations efforts should be involved in the preparation of the communications program budget. To operate a solid communications program provisions should be made for the following:

- salaries and benefits
- internal support/professional and clerical assistance, as needed
- external assistance, support and counsel, as needed
- ongoing professional development opportunities for the public relations staff and professional development in communication for district staff and other key publics
- office materials and supplies
- equipment — telephone with voice mail or answering machine; office furniture; file cabinets; computer with desktop publishing and word processing software; fax machine; scanner; laser printer; 35 mm camera and digital camera; CD burner; copy machine (or immediate access to one), etc.
- Internet access with e-mail
- contracted technical services or in-house staffing and equipment, where appropriate (printing, advertising, video taping, graphic design, crisis communications, web page, research, etc.)
- subscriptions to professional publications, newspapers, media guides
- professional growth and development, including membership fees to professional organizations, conference fees, travel, meals and other reasonable expenses
- research and evaluation
- publications — printing, design, photography, postage
- operating expenses/equipment repairs
- community relations — membership and participation in identified community/civic organizations
- special events, publications; or other communication efforts that will not be included in other departments' budgets.

## **Code of Ethics**

Another hallmark of professionalism is a Code of Ethics that guides the behavior of professional members. The NSPRA Board over the years has refined its code of ethics and also participated with the North American Public Relations Council, a council of leading national and international public relations associations and societies.

The NSPRA Code of Ethics and the Code of the North American Public Relations Council are both included.

### **NSPRA Code of Ethics**

The National School Public Relations Association shall have a Code of Ethics for members, as follows:

#### **The education public relations professional shall:**

1. Be guided constantly by pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste and fairness; follow good judgment in releasing information; not intentionally disseminate misinformation or confidential data; avoid actions which lessen personal, professional or organizational reputation.
2. Give primary loyalty to the employing organization, insisting on the right to give advisory counsel in accordance with sound public relations ideas and practices; cooperate with other groups while avoiding conflicts with primary responsibilities; object to untenable policies or activities.
3. Be aware of personal influence, avoiding promises or granting of unprofessional advantages to others; refrain from accepting special considerations for influences on organizational decisions; avoid unauthorized use of organizational facilities, resources or professional services for personal gain or for promotion of the candidacy of aspirants to elected offices; forego derogatory acts or utterances against other professionals.
4. Recognize that effectiveness is dependent upon integrity and regard for ideals of the profession; not misrepresenting professional qualifications;

give credit for ideas and words borrowed from others; cooperate with professional colleagues to uphold and enforce this Code.

A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code.

*Adopted: July 1981*

## **North American Public Relations Council Uniform Code of Ethics**

### **A member shall:**

1. Conduct his/her professional life in accord with the public interest.
2. Exemplify high standards of honesty and integrity while carrying out dual obligations to a client or employer and to the democratic process.
3. Deal fairly with the public, with past or present clients or employers and with fellow practitioners, giving due respect to the ideal of free inquiry and to the opinions of others.
4. Adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others.
5. Not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information and shall act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he/she is responsible.
6. Not engage in any practice which has the purpose of corrupting the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.
7. Be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made.

8. Not use any individual or organization professing to serve or represent an announced cause, or professing to be independent or unbiased but actually serving another or undisclosed interest.
9. Not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control.
10. Not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those concerned, given after a full disclosure of the facts.
11. Not place himself/herself in a position where the member's personal interest is or may be in conflict with an obligation to an employer or client, or others, without full disclosure of such interests to all involved.
12. Not accept fees, commissions, gifts or any other consideration from anyone except clients or employers for whom services are performed without their express consent, given after a full disclosure of the facts.
13. Scrupulously safeguard the confidences and privacy right of present, former and prospective clients or employers.
14. Not intentionally damage the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner.

*Adopted: July 1988*

---

**If you would like to know more about school public relations and improving communication between schools and the communities they serve,** NSPRA publishes a 273-page handbook *entitled School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education*, (ISBN 0-87545-100-4). Order stock #418-13977, \$54.95 (\$49.45 for members) plus shipping and handling.

**If you would like more information about NSPRA,** its products and services, contact: National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)  
Website: [www.nspira.org](http://www.nspira.org) E-mail: [nspira@nspira.org](mailto:nspira@nspira.org)  
Telephone: 301-519-0496 Fax: 301-519-0494

**NSPRA / 15948 Derwood Road / Rockville, MD 20855**

## **Raising the Bar for School PR:**

### NEW STANDARDS FOR THE SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSION

---

© 2002 ISBN 0-87545-120-9

#### **National School Public Relations Association**

15948 Derwood Road  
Rockville, MD 20855

301 / 519-0496 *phone*

301 / 519-0494 *fax*

[www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org)

---