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A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

By

Judy Scott Hensel

B.A., University of Montana, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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1982

Approved by:

  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

  
Dean, Graduate School

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## A Guide for School District Public Opinion Surveys

Director: Warren Brier **WTB**

This thesis examines what is involved in a public opinion survey for a school district. It provides a starting point for school administrators to help them recognize how a survey can obtain accurate results.

The thesis also shows that three separate disciplines--public relations, education, and social science research--can be integrated in doing a public opinion survey for a school district. Surveying is an important part of public relations because it provides for two-way communication with the public. A public opinion survey provides a means for educators to assess educational needs. Social science research provides the knowledge and skills to determine the attitudes and beliefs of the general public.

A school district opinion survey should follow several steps: define the problem to be studied, decide how the results will be used, define the population to be studied, choose a survey method, select a random sample, prepare the questionnaire, pretest the questionnaire, collect the data, and report to the public.

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## INTRODUCTION

More than 50 years ago, a pioneer in a new profession wrote a book remarkable for its time called Crystallizing Public Opinion. While unveiling the blossoming role of public relations in the United States, he pointed out a maxim he used throughout a long career, which earned him the title of "founding father of public relations in the U.S."<sup>1</sup>

Edward L. Bernays wrote: "[The public relations counsel] directs and supervises the activities of his clients wherever they impinge upon the daily life of the public. He interprets the client to the public, which he is enabled to do in part because he interprets the public to the client."<sup>2</sup>

In 1978, Bernays was quoted in a book published by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). His opinion of the essence of public relations hadn't changed. In Building Public Confidence for Your Schools, Bernays spoke specifically about school public relations:

Public relations is not, as some believe, a one-way street of dissemination of facts and opinions about public education. It functions as a two-way street, interpreting the public to the school system as a basis for its actions, as well as interpreting the public education system to the public.<sup>3</sup>

Interpreting the public to the client can be accomplished primarily, Bernays believed, by studying human behavior and learning what motivates human beings. He recognized that it is necessary to counsel clients on "behavior patterns and attitude patterns in order to

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<sup>1</sup>NSPRA (National School Public Relations Association), Building Public Confidence for Your Schools (Arlington, Va., 1978), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Edward L. Bernays, Crystallizing Public Opinion (New York: Horace Liveright, 1923), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>NSPRA, Public Confidence, p. 5.

more effectively meet their goals with the public, upon whom they are dependent."<sup>4</sup>

In 1923, the methods of determining behavior attitudes and patterns were subjective at best. Social science research and particularly survey research were not available to Bernays. Only within the last decade has survey research broken out of its stereotype of "illegitimate child" of social science research. Now, public relations practitioners have a valuable tool in reaching the various public they serve and in walking the two-way street of communication.

The use of scientific survey techniques to give an accurate cross section of public attitudes provides a double reward in public education. At the same time people in school public relations have begun to use the community survey as a valuable means of listening to their publics, so have public education administrators begun using "needs assessments" to determine educational goals through public participation.

A correlation exists among three aspects of three professional fields: community surveys in public relations, survey research in social science and needs assessment in education. The three can be integrated into a procedure that uses scientific survey research techniques to determine public attitudes and beliefs that can be used in educational planning. This thesis provides guidance to using such a procedure and includes reasons to involve the entire educational family, how to write as unbiased a questionnaire as possible and how to choose and use a survey method most effective for public schools in Montana.

The thesis enables a school administrator or public relations

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

specialist to understand how he can conduct a community survey that employs scientific survey techniques and determines educational needs. It guides the administrator in planning the survey, determining the best methods of doing it and understanding why scientific surveying is the best device for determining public opinion. In addition, it helps the administrator judge whether the people who do the survey are providing accurate results. As Backstrom and Hursh point out: "The amateur can ill afford to be less careful than the experienced pollster."<sup>5</sup>

The National School Public Relations Association stresses the importance of two-way communication and public opinion polling in determining a sound public relations plan for a school district. It emphasizes the importance of proper techniques: "Such a poll does not mean a few telephone calls to PTA presidents, leaders of local service clubs and friends of school board members. Rather, it means a scientific, systematic, random sampling of attitudes throughout the community--young and old, with or without children in schools, friendly and hostile alike."<sup>6</sup>

Stewart Harral in Tested Public Relations for Schools emphasizes the opinion poll's importance in more detail: "Public relations are based on facts. School leaders should make a choice of devices and procedures only after the facts are known. Every public relations situation begins with a careful study of all the underlying facts." Harral said:

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<sup>5</sup>Charles H. Backstrom and Gerald D. Hursh, Survey Research (Northwestern University Press, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

The school system is the largest undertaking in the community. It is owned by the people. Their knowledge of the aims and problems of the school system is a vital factor in their support or lack of support. That is why scientific polling can be of immense value to the administrator when he wishes to know how citizens feel toward the community educational program.<sup>7</sup>

Harral gives several reasons why a poll can be a fundamental tool of school administration. A poll:

1. Reveals areas of ignorance and misinformation, as well as the success of the public relations program in enlightening such areas.
2. Informs and instructs the community on educational issues.
3. Supplies the superintendent with essential information about opinions and attitudes on educational matters, both favorable and unfavorable.
4. Allows the administrator to see the extent of the lag between the program he is proposing and the one residents support.
5. Gives the community a sense of sharing in problems, philosophies and plans of the school system.
6. Often reveals clearly defined obstacles that the administration must overcome before the people are sold on certain ideas and proposals.
7. Can find out quickly and accurately the view of any group in a community.<sup>8</sup>

The April, 1981 Community Education Journal carried an article in which educational surveys are compared to marketing research. The

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<sup>7</sup>Stewart Harral, Tested Public Relations for Schools (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1952), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 13-14.

following is from "The Community Survey: A Multipurpose Tool:"

Proctor and Gamble, considered to be the world's most effective marketer, provides the ultimate model. Over the years P and G has worked diligently to establish and maintain a dialog with its customers. During the year, information flows from consumers who use the toll-free number on each product's package or label. The firm considers consumer inquiries in its marketing decisions and at least yearly conducts market research on each of its products. The company is simply tuned in to what consumers want and it does a good job of making products to satisfy those wants.

School people face the same challenges as Proctor and Gamble. They have to do a good job of identifying their clients' needs and designing programs and services to meet those needs. There are a number of tools school people can use to work on this job, but the starting point ought to be survey research. From a community education point of view, surveys provide valuable planning information--information that will help assure that offerings--products and services--are on target."<sup>9</sup>

Needs assessments differ little from what public relations people call community polling, except that a needs assessment helps school administrators plan programs. "Assessing needs simply means identifying the discrepancy between where we are now and where we want to be."<sup>10</sup> That quote is from the December 1977 issue of The Practitioner, dedicated entirely to needs assessment. It adds, "Needs assessment is not a one-shot deal. Some schools conduct needs assessments every year, others every two or three. In short, needs assessments should be ongoing and continuous."<sup>11</sup>

Needs assessment is a two-step process, for which a community survey satisfies the first step. First, a school district determines

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<sup>9</sup>William J. Banach, "The Community Survey: A Multipurpose Tool," Community Education Journal Vol. 8, No. 3 (April 1981), pp. 8-10.

<sup>10</sup>National Association of Secondary School Principals, The Practitioner Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 1977), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

what the public perceives to be strengths and weaknesses of the district and what programs should be given emphasis. Then administrators use their knowledge and experience to determine how to overcome the problems and meet future needs.

A community survey is the best tool for fulfilling step one. A booklet called Needs Assessment: A Guide to Improve School District Management tells why:

Is it necessary to actually engage in community validation? Why not use some other district's priorities? It should be remembered that ultimately an administration and board of education are going to implement a course of action based upon the gaps identified in their needs-assessment process. If all the groups, at that point, refuse to accept the course of action because they were not involved in the earlier steps, instead of the needs assessment leading to a viable and workable consensus, it produces its own resistance for action to close the gaps. Therefore, even though the organization's purposes have been identified, the absence of a partnership effort in defining goals will result in the lack of a broad base of support.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the third professional field provides the most accurate and worthwhile method to accomplish goals of community surveys and needs assessments. Although until a few years ago survey research was not regarded as "true" research, it has emerged as a valuable system and is employed with success across the nation. Books such as The Sample Survey: Theory and Practice, Survey Research Methods and Mail and Telephone Surveys point out that if scientific techniques such as random sampling and unbiased questionnaires are used, a cross section of public opinions, attitudes and beliefs can be determined accurately. Professional survey organizations use the methods daily as more and more

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<sup>12</sup>Roger Kaufman and Fenwick English, Needs Assessment: A Guide to Improve School District Management (American Association of School Administrators, Arlington, Va., 1976), pp. 29-30.

organizations, businesses and institutions understand the value of public opinion research.

NSPRA says professional survey teams can do the sampling for a school district that wants a community survey: "A good professional opinion research organization can scientifically survey a few hundred citizens in a school district and determine with great accuracy what a school district needs to do to improve or win over the confidence of its community.

"Or a school district can conduct such an opinion poll itself as long as it has the technical expertise to develop an accurate profile of the residents of its district from which to draw its random sample."<sup>13</sup>

However, at least one survey researcher disagrees. Maxine Johnson, head of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Montana, said that only professional survey researchers have the knowledge and experience to do a reliable community survey. School administrators should understand, she said, that survey research is a complicated process and attention must be paid to each essential detail.

The value of survey research is explained in the book The Sample Survey: Theory and Practice: "Survey research must be viewed not only as a fruitful method of scientific inquiry, but also as a form of social intervention touching sensitive personal and political nerves."<sup>14</sup>

The book also explains the merits of survey research, while understanding its limitations:

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<sup>13</sup>NSPRA, Public Confidence, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup>Charles A. Lininger and Donald P. Warwick, The Sample Survey: Theory and Practice (McGraw Hill, Inc., 1975), p. 34.

In one sense there can be no unbiased research with survey methods or any others, for a study will always reflect the predilections of the investigator[s], the research technology and guiding concerns of the relevant disciplines at the time of the study, the constraints imposed by sponsorship and various other influences. If we define "bias" to include such factors, the quest for unbiased research will be unending. At the same time, it is possible to provide a clear and open definition of a research problem, to draw up a sample meeting rigid standards of selection and to collect information on the problem which satisfies interested observers on all sides.<sup>15</sup>

#### SUMMARY

The value of integrating professional fields will become more obvious in future years. With the challenge of great and rapid change upon us, it seems in the interest of survival to be able to see how several fields pooled together can produce results beneficial to all.

Philip Meyer elaborates on how journalists can and should use social science research in their work:

The social sciences can help us here in two ways: Their findings in many fields provide a continuing check on the conventional wisdom. We can save ourselves some trouble, some inaccuracy and some lost opportunities by merely paying attention to what the social scientists are doing and finding out. More importantly and of more direct practical value, we can follow their example of abandoning the philosopher's armchair, giving up the notion that a few facts and common sense will make any problem yield, and make the new, high-powered research techniques our own.<sup>16</sup>

If building a solid school public-relations policy requires knowing community attitudes and beliefs, if a needs assessment for a school district is severely limited without public participation and if survey research can provide a means to find the data, why not incorporate the three? In developing a procedure to do so, all three must lend their

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Meyer, Precision Journalism (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1973), p. 13.



trade secrets. Public relations tells us how to involve the entire educational family and keep it informed. Educational needs assessments provide the questions that need asking. Social science research gives us the means to produce accurate results.

## Chapter One

### WHY SURVEY?

If there was a time when school districts could operate independently and rely only on the knowledge and opinions of their boards of education, superintendents and principals, it is no more. The 1980s have brought taxpayer revolt and close scrutiny of public school systems. At no other time, justifiably or not, has the American public had so little confidence in its public schools, not only to educate its young but to spend its tax dollars wisely.

A 1981 Gallup Poll on education shows that the public gives its schools lower grades than it did in 1973, that 60 percent of those polled oppose raising taxes for public schools and that poor educational standards in public schools is the reason most frequently given for the increased number of private schools in many parts of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, Montana is a rural state and has few of the problems of large metropolitan areas. However, Montana is not escaping taxpayer demands that schools be run efficiently and that some be closed to offset declining numbers of students.<sup>2</sup>

In Montana and elsewhere, the schools' primary support group--parents--is a smaller percentage of the population than ever before.

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<sup>1</sup>George H. Gallup, "13th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1981, pp. 33-47.

<sup>2</sup>Phil Campbell, regional president of the Montana Education Association, said in an interview in September 1981 that although Montana has not yet had massive layoffs of teachers because of school closures, he expects that declining enrollments will make teacher layoffs the primary area of controversy in Montana schools.

About 30 percent of American adults have children of primary- and secondary-school age, compared with 50 percent in 1969.<sup>3</sup>

America's school system, once considered the best in the world, began to lose its credibility in 1957, when the Soviet Sputnik shocked the American public into questioning the effectiveness of its schools. Since then our school system has encountered other disturbances, such as forced integration and low standardized test scores, that have eroded public support. The baby boom that filled schools to capacity 20 years ago ended. Smaller families have become more popular, and school enrollments have begun to decline. Inflation eats into existing tax support, and taxpayers have begun to balk at paying more. Teachers have unionized to fight for more pay and better working conditions.

Those developments have forced schools to seek the public's opinion and convinced school administrators that they must communicate better with parents and the entire taxpaying public.

Edward L. Bernays recognized that 50 years ago: "The public today demands information and expects to be accepted as judge and jury in matters that have a wide public import. It asks questions and if the answer in word or action is not forthcoming or satisfactory, it turns to other sources for information or relief."<sup>4</sup>

Communication, by definition, must be both sending and receiving, Bernays wrote.<sup>5</sup> Many school districts have begun to realize that two-way

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<sup>3</sup>Gallup, "12th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, September, 1980, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup>Bernays, Crystallizing Public Opinion, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>NSPRA, Public Confidence, p. 5.

communication is vital for building a sound public relations program and for determining curriculum needs.

One of the most effective ways to win public support is to involve the public in decision making. And the most accurate method to discover public attitudes and beliefs is the public opinion poll. The quote by Stewart Harral is worth repeating:

The school system is the largest undertaking in the community. It is owned by the people. Their knowledge of the aims and problems of the school system is a vital factor in their support or lack of support. That is why scientific polling can be of immense value to the administrator when he wishes to know how citizens feel toward the community educational program.<sup>6</sup>

Public-opinion polling is becoming popular in school districts and for good reason. A poll conducted scientifically so it is a true representation of community beliefs and attitudes can solve problems in public support. First, it makes a school district accountable to its constituents. Disgruntled taxpayers cannot say that the school district does not listen to their views if public opinion is sought regularly through polls.

Difficult decisions about controversial subjects such as closing schools are met with less opposition if the public has a say in the process. Above all, polling allows all voices to be heard, not just the special-interest groups, who vie for the attention of school board members, and not just parents. If the confidence of the entire voting constituency is sought, efforts aimed only at parents miss almost 70 percent of the tax-paying public.

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<sup>6</sup>Harral, Tested Public Relations, p. 13.

Besides helping build a solid public relations program, public-opinion polling can fulfill another purpose for a school district. "Needs assessment"--determining public attitudes about educational programs--also is becoming popular in public schools. Before making major changes or plans in curriculum, school administrators are doing needs assessments to determine what the public believes should be emphasized. An accurate public opinion poll can tell them if the public believes students should be given more work in science or mathematics or if writing skills are perceived to be weak.

#### Why Do It Right?

If a school district decides to conduct a public-opinion survey, it must be done correctly. The purpose of such a poll should not be to make a school district look good. A poll should give a representative sample of public attitudes and beliefs, favorable and unfavorable. If the only means of distributing the poll is to send it home with children, only about 30 percent of the public will have a chance to respond, and only those who are particularly interested in school issues are likely to return the survey. A 25-percent-return rate on such a questionnaire is considered good. With such results, a school district would have found the attitudes and beliefs of 25 percent of 30 percent of the population.

Suppose a school district decided to conduct a poll by administering it only to widely-known and accessible people, such as school board members, friends of school board members, PTA presidents and prominent business people? Would the results give a cross section of public attitudes or would they exclude senior citizens, young voters, people who don't have children in school and people not actively

involved in the school system?

The three most important components of doing a survey "right," of writing and administering an accurate and valid questionnaire, are:

1. Striving to make the questionnaire unbiased.
2. Taking a random sample of the community so that everyone has the same chance to be heard.
3. Choosing a method that will ensure a high response rate.

Two states recently conducted public opinion polls to determine attitudes about public education. Although neither survey should be considered professionally done, one produced more accurate results.

In 1978 Connecticut wanted to find out the importance to the public of certain educational goals and the extent to which the goals were being met.<sup>7</sup> The state board of education prepared a questionnaire and found a sample of 6,064 that included people from big cities, small cities and small towns. The questionnaire was sent by mail and included a stamped return envelope. Eight days after the first mailing, a follow-up letter was sent. Final results showed a return of only 18 percent.

The surveyors were perplexed: "The response rate for the mail survey was much lower than had been anticipated. In fact, this was one of the most startling 'findings' of the survey."

They also noted the significance of their low response.

These return rates, particularly those for the general public, appear to limit confidence in generalizing survey results to the population from which the sample was drawn.... The results of this survey may be biased, and consequently, confidence in the findings may be diminished.

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<sup>7</sup>Francis X. Archombault Jr. and Robert K. Gable, "Using Needs Assessment for Educational Planning: Procedures and Results of a Connecticut Survey," presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, Mass., April 7-11, 1980.

Three reasons were cited for the low response rate: a somewhat confusing and long questionnaire; only one follow-up letter, which did not include a copy of the questionnaire and a general public attitude that the exercise was futile and that the educational system could be changed more effectively through other practices, such as lobbying the state legislature.

When Kansas decided to conduct an opinion poll to measure public attitudes toward education, it developed a procedure and questionnaire patterned after the Gallup Poll.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than mailing the questionnaire to a selected audience, the Kansas surveyors chose a random sample of respondents from state telephone directories, determined the number of responses needed to fulfill a 95-percent confidence level and completed 880 questionnaires by telephone. Besides 22 questions of opinion, the questionnaire contained eight demographic questions to establish whether the sample was representative of the state population.

Also, a letter to potential interviewees was mailed to 2,000 households. The letter explained the importance of the survey.

The Kansas poll, however, did not provide an accurate representation of the views of the population. The sample was drawn from telephone directories, which miss people with unlisted phone numbers and are out-of-date. Although the questionnaire was scrutinized by a task force before being administered, a professional surveyor should have checked the questionnaire for bias.

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<sup>8</sup>Jack Skillett and others, KATE: Kansas' Attitudes Toward Education: First Annual Public Opinion Poll, preliminary report, Emporia State University, Kansas, May, 1980.

## Chapter Two

### OBJECTIVES, DEFINITIONS AND THEORY

Before an opinion survey is begun, objectives and the specific information sought must be defined. The first advice a national research firm gives to school districts planning a survey is to define the problem:

This step looks obvious and simple, but unfortunately, it is neither. Many studies have been undertaken with the problem either undefined or poorly defined with the ultimate result being a confused mess of precise data and/or information that is of no value to anyone.<sup>1</sup>

Three objectives of the Kansas public-opinion poll were to "ascertain attitudes held by the populace of Kansas, 18 or older, toward selected educational issues, [to build] a basic foundation for ascertaining attitudes at the local level and to raise awareness of the public on issues and concerns in education."<sup>2</sup>

Determining specific information needed is more difficult than setting general objectives. However, a close look at what decisions will be made with the data collected helps narrow the field of inquiry. If decisions are pending on how best to reach various parts of the community, the public-opinion survey should include questions that ask how the community is informed and to what degree.

An example of such a question is one used in the Kansas study: "What is your best source of information about the local schools?"

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<sup>1</sup>G. M. Hoeltke, "An Overview of the Survey Process Used by Selection Research, Inc.," presented at the annual convention of the National School Public Relations Association, Phoenix, Ariz., July, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Skillett and others, KATE, p. 10.



Newspaper	School publications/newsletter
Radio	Word of mouth/personal involvement
Television	Don't know/no answer <sup>3</sup>

A school district public-opinion poll generally will seek information to fulfill one of two objectives or both: to build or strengthen a public-relations program or to determine curriculum needs (needs assessment).

#### Information Needed for a Public Relations Program

The two most important topics to be studied for a public relations program are: what is the extent of public knowledge about the school district and what are the strengths and weaknesses of public support? Discovering how the public perceives the schools is important even if the perceptions are not true. If public perceptions do not match reality, then the public-relations program needs to find better ways to communicate.

Topics that would determine the extent of public knowledge might include:

1. Does the public know how public schools are funded in Montana? Do people realize that yearly mill levies, unless increased, are renewals of the previous levy?
2. Which programs do people know the most about? Is the public aware of how the district is governed and the extent of citizen participation on school boards?
3. Do people who have children in school know more about the schools than those who don't? Do they believe that communication with

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

the schools is good? Do people who do not have school-age children understand their role in public education?

To find strengths and weaknesses in public support, the following topics could be considered for the survey:

1. How would the public grade our schools, A to F? Do people believe that educational standards are high enough?

2. What do people like best or least about the schools their children attend? If given an opportunity, would they send their children to a different school?

3. In time of financial crises, how does education stand in relation to other government services? Should education be funded before highways, social welfare and environmental protection? What are acceptable ways for school districts to cut back? Is school closure acceptable? Which special programs formerly mandated by the federal government and now left to the discretion of local districts should be funded? Should districts be responsible for providing pre-school education or child care for working parents?

4. Who should have the final authority in labor disagreements? Should an arbitrator be called? Should teachers be allowed to strike?

#### Information Needed for a Needs Assessment

A school district that decides to make its public-opinion poll also a needs assessment will have two goals: to determine public opinions about its present educational program and public wants for the future.

Although each district will have specific information about its curriculum, topics probably will fall into several broad categories:

1. Which school subjects does the public think most important? Should "basics" be stressed over subjects such as music, practical arts and visual arts? What does the public consider the most important educational need--college preparation or vocation training?

2. Do people think discipline is a problem in the schools? How should school administrators handle discipline problems?

3. Do people believe their children are adequately challenged in school? Do they favor more or less homework?

4. Should sex education be taught in the schools? Do the schools have the responsibility to teach values?

If objectives of a survey are hazy, the poll will fail. But even if the goals are clearly defined and specific needed information identified, the survey will not fulfill its purpose unless another step is taken. All members of the school community must be allowed to participate in the planning. NSPRA polling experts point out that if teachers, administrators, school board members and the public are involved in the process from the beginning and kept informed throughout, they will regard the survey as a management tool, rather than a threat.<sup>4</sup>

If staff members are not informed about the survey until results are announced, rumors will be their only source of information, and they will view the results with suspicion. Their participation and support are essential.

Gaining the support of every staff member is impossible; however, one group must agree about the survey's effectiveness. Before

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<sup>4</sup>NSPRA, Building Public Confidence, p. 17.

starting the survey, school board members should be given all the facts about the survey and asked if they support it. If not all members agree that a public-opinion survey is a vital part of an administrative plan or if even one fears what the results will show, serious thought should be given to not doing the survey.

#### How Will the Results be Used?

School district officials who plan to conduct a public-opinion survey should ask how the results will be used and provide an answer. Time, energy and money will be wasted if the results of a carefully planned survey sit on the superintendent's desk and finally are filed away. Also, the public is entitled to know how its public school officials will overcome problems.

Before beginning a survey, administrators and school board members must accept the possibility that the results may be negative. Such a survey should not be done to make a school district look good, but to uncover the data needed to make responsible decisions. If the district wants to advertise its strengths (as it should), other methods should be used. If the public is to be asked its opinion and told it will be involved in decisions about its schools, it must be told about the results of the survey.

Administrators should be committed to addressing problems uncovered by the survey, but should remember that the survey is intended to provide direction, not answers. For example, in a hypothetical poll 65 percent of those polled say they believe there is a problem with discipline. Does that mean there is a discipline problem or only that the public perceives one? The administrator must discover if there is

a problem or why the public thinks there is. If there is not a problem, he must convince the public that there is not one.

### Theory

Throughout the rest of this thesis information from the book Mail and Telephone Surveys will be quoted and paraphrased because it is one of the most up-to-date studies of public opinion surveys and is based on the experience of its author, Don Dillman.<sup>5</sup> Dillman divides the process he uses, the "total design method," into a theoretical view and an administrative plan. His theoretical view is described in this chapter because it identifies "each aspect of the survey process that may affect either the quality or quantity of response and . . . shape[s] each of them in a way that the best possible responses are obtained."<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical view explains why people respond to questionnaires and guides the surveyor in writing questions and framing the entire survey.

Why people respond to questionnaires is based on theories of social exchange, Dillman says: "It is assumed that people engage in any activity because of the rewards they hope to reap, that all activities they perform incur certain costs and that people attempt to keep their costs below the rewards they expect to receive.

"Thus there are three things that must be done to maximize survey response: minimize the costs for responding, maximize the rewards for doing so and establish trust that those rewards will be delivered."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Don A. Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

Dillman admits that researchers can offer few rewards to respondents, but those that can be offered should be. He suggests that the surveyor can "express positive regard for the respondents by telling them that their response is needed if the survey is to be successful. An explanation of this sort given prior to the actual survey questions also provides another reward; the person feels that he or she is being consulted.

That suggestion was used by the Kansas surveyors. Since the Kansas respondents were chosen randomly from telephone directories, addresses were available. A letter to 2,000 of the potential interviewees was mailed before the telephone survey. The survey team thought the letter, which explained the purposes of the survey and the need for cooperation from respondents, was valuable.

"Experience with this phase of the poll indicates that the pre-interview contact was instrumental in making each calling session productive and may have been the single most important factor contributing to the successful completion of the poll."<sup>8</sup>

However, drawing a sample from telephone directories usually is not an acceptable method to get accurate results. The advantage of having addresses from a directory for an advance letter do not outweigh the disadvantages. Another method to inform potential respondents and produce the reward of being consulted is advertisements in the local media.

Positive regard for the respondent can be expressed in a mail survey with typed personal letters and in a telephone survey by a warm

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<sup>8</sup>Jack Skillett and others, KATE, p. 16.

tone of voice and by using names frequently.

With so little to offer the respondent as a reward, surveyors must make the act of responding a reward in itself. If the respondents find the questionnaire interesting, they often will complete it for their own gratification. Some people enjoy answering questionnaires, but questions that are ambiguous, hard to understand and poorly written will not be answered.

Five "costs" that a respondent may incur in a survey can be avoided, according to Dillman. The first is time. If the respondent receives a questionnaire that looks imposing, he may not respond. If an attractive layout with effective use of white space and a shorter questionnaire is sent, the respondent will be more likely to respond. In a telephone questionnaire, the interviewer can tell the respondent exactly how long the survey will take and can call at a convenient time.

People with little education are the least likely to return questionnaires.<sup>9</sup> But if the questions are not complex, confusing and full of technical jargon--not intimidating--all respondents are more likely to cooperate.

People often are embarrassed by questions that they believe reveal too much about their personal life, even if respondents never are identified by name. This is a cost, Dillman says, and if such questions cannot be softened, perhaps they should not be asked. Such questions might ask about a person's financial situation.

"For us to help you solve your community problems, it is necessary for you to complete this questionnaire." Such a statement,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

Dillman says, should not be used because it makes respondents feel that the surveyor has power over them, another cost.<sup>10</sup> Rather, statements that put the respondent in a position of exercising power, such as "we need your response," are less likely to incur costs.

The final cost is money. Dillman says that with few rewards of completing a survey, respondents should not be expected to return the survey without a stamped return envelope.

Developing trust is the third element of positive social exchange discussed by Dillman. Some surveyors have given small financial incentives, such as note pads, the chance to win a turkey, a packet of instant coffee, a pencil and war savings stamps, as a symbol of trust that the respondent will accept an offer made in good faith. They might also lead the respondent to believe that other promises about what will be done with survey results will be fulfilled. The stamped, self-addressed envelope also might be an incentive that builds trust. If the survey instrument or surveyor is identified with a respected institution (such as a school district), more trust will be built.

In telephone surveys the respondent must decide instantly whether to respond and whether the rewards outweigh the costs.

Dillman says: "Under these conditions it is likely that many respondents act according to conventional norms of behavior for dealing with strange callers rather than a quick evaluation of what they expect the interaction to provide. For some respondents this means hanging up. For others it means continuing the conversation even though

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 9.



they would really prefer not to and expecting that it will be an awkward or unpleasant experience."<sup>11</sup>

But, Dillman says, that does not mean that costs, rewards and trust are not important in telephone interviews. Some respondents recover quickly from the surprise of the phone call and are able to listen and ask questions about the usefulness of the survey. A letter or a newspaper advertisement can help eliminate the element of surprise, and a skillful interviewer can convince the respondent that the survey is important.

Dillman notes that telephone surveys usually have a higher response rate than do mail surveys. Use of the telephone involves accepted social behavior. Simply hanging up is not accepted as proper. Most people might not like the initial contact, but they will not hang up immediately, giving the interviewer time to establish trust and point out the rewards of answering the survey.

School districts that conduct a survey will have individual problems, different research objectives and a variety of financial resources. For that reason, the procedure outlined is a guideline only and cannot incorporate the needs of every school district. Dillman says his total design method is not a "mechanical routine":

"Implementing the TDM for both mail and telephone surveys is less similar to a game of monopoly, in which moves are made one at a

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

time, than to army maneuvers in which one must move several elements together usually choosing from among several options and constantly making adjustments because the anticipated moves of others did not materialize as expected."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

## Chapter Three

### DEVELOPING THE STUDY DESIGN

". . . Social research seeks to find explanations to unexplained social phenomena, to clarify the doubtful and correct the misconceived facts of social life."<sup>1</sup>

The principal methods social scientists use in opinion surveys to find what the public believes are: defining the population, choosing a survey method and finding a sample.

#### Defining the Population

When a school district decides to conduct a public-opinion survey, administrators, after determining what they want to know and what they will do with the results, must decide whom they are going to survey--they must define the population.

The population to be surveyed will depend on what information is sought. If the district wants to know what the local media think about the district's public-relations program, for example, the population will be small and each member of the population can be questioned. But if it wants to know what the taxpayers think about the district's programs, the population will be large and a sample must be surveyed.

In most cases, school districts want to know what taxpayers think about the school system. The population would be defined as adults 18 or older who live in the district and pay taxes to support

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<sup>1</sup>Pauline V. Young, Scientific Social Surveys and Research (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 30.

the district.

After defining the population, the surveyors must decide which survey method best suits their purposes.

### Choosing the Survey Method

Although person-to-person interviewing was once the most used and considered the best process for reaching respondents in opinion surveys, it is no longer. Because of increased costs of transportation and labor, face-to-face interviews have become expensive. Moreover, it has become increasingly difficult to locate respondents, resulting in lower completion rates.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, mail and telephone surveys have become more popular.

Mail surveys once were considered almost worthless because of low response rates. Telephone surveys were considered unrepresentative because so few people had telephones. However, new techniques with mail and telephone surveys and the increased number of phones in the United States (94 percent of the population) have made both methods respectable in recent years. In fact, Dillman has shown that "a response rate of nearly 75 percent can be obtained consistently in mail surveys of the general public."<sup>3</sup>

The face-to-face interview was used by the first systematic pollsters, such as George Gallup and Elmo Roper.<sup>4</sup> Interviewers go door-to-door, and samples are drawn from random selection of city blocks

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<sup>2</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>4</sup>Meyer, Precision Journalism, p. 144.

or other geographical units, then from random selection of dwelling units. This method permits complex questionnaires. Almost any type of question can be asked because interviewers can clarify misunderstandings by answering questions or showing visual aids. The interaction between interviewer and respondent allows for increased interest and cooperation from the respondent.

Face-to-face interviewing is more costly than mail or telephone methods because of transportation and personnel expense. Although more detailed information can be obtained, interviewer bias can cause misleading responses and inaccurate recording of answers. Such interviews are time-consuming and difficult to monitor for accuracy.

Dillman points out that although response rates of 80 to 85 percent were once common with face-to-face interviews, there is evidence that completion rates now average 60 to 65 percent. With the increased number of working couples, it is difficult to find respondents at home. Having to make one or more calls back has driven up the cost of face-to-face interviews.<sup>5</sup>

Mail surveys can be sent to a wide geographical area and to remote places for the price of postage and printing the questionnaire. Interviewer bias is nonexistent, and the respondent is likely to give honest answers. Dillman points out the hazards of "social desirability bias," in which a respondent gives an answer he thinks is most acceptable, whether or not it represents his beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

Respondents are more likely to give answers that are socially acceptable in face-to-face and telephone interviews than in mail questionnaires. Respondents may be more likely to respond to a mail survey if allowed to do so at their leisure, rather than when an interviewer comes to the door or when the telephone rings.

Mail surveys have many disadvantages. They are time-consuming, accurate mailing lists often are not available, and returns may not represent the group being surveyed. From the time questionnaires are mailed, a second questionnaire and reminder are mailed and responses received, two or three months may pass. Mailing lists usually are taken from telephone directories, which exclude from the sample people without phones and with unlisted numbers and always are out-of-date.

Research has shown that people who are educated are most likely to return mailed questionnaires. Dillman: "Verbal response to oral questions is usually less difficult than having to read questions, follow directions and write answers. People who have less education are thus likely to be under-represented among those who respond. Older persons also seem likely to be under-represented, partly because of lower educational attainment, but also because of more difficulties with their seeing and writing capabilities."<sup>7</sup>

Mail surveys usually have low response rates, especially with polls of the general public. Questionnaires sent to members of a homogeneous group, such as school administrators, usually have higher response rates. Dillman's "total design method," in which three

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

follow-ups or more are used, has raised response rates.

Other disadvantages of mail surveys: Length must be limited to ensure completion, questionnaires might not be completed by the person intended, and respondents might not answer questions in the order given.

Telephone surveys only recently have been used more because of the large percentage of people who own phones. They can be done quickly--usually within a week--and they are inexpensive. Phone costs are small if no long-distance calls are made.

According to a survey starter kit developed by the McComb Intermediate School District in Mt. Clemens, Mich., telephone interviews are "best suited for well-defined, basic concepts or specific questions."<sup>8</sup> But, as Dillman points out, open-ended questions also work well, sequence can be controlled and response to all questions is likely.

The main disadvantage of telephone surveys is that the questionnaire cannot be complex. The respondent's understanding of questions depends on listening to the interviewer's voice, and clarification with visual aids is not possible. Also, too many questions tire respondents, who give less thought to their answers.

One of the best reasons for using a telephone survey is that response rates for the general public usually are higher than those for mail surveys and nearly equal to the more expensive face-to-face surveys.<sup>9</sup> Response rates for Dillman's telephone surveys average about 85 percent.<sup>10</sup> Respondents not at home or busy can be called back.

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<sup>8</sup>McComb Intermediate School District, Survey Starter Kit (Mt. Clemens, Mich., 1981), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

If random digit dialing techniques are used, a representative sample can be drawn.

The Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Montana uses telephone surveys exclusively. The cost savings of telephone surveying far outweigh its disadvantages, according to Susan Wallwork, professional survey researcher and faculty affiliate at the Bureau. The Bureau avoids mail surveys because response rates are low, and if several follow-ups are used to increase the response rate, mail surveys can become expensive.

The Bureau can reach most of the general population with telephone surveys because Montana has a high percentage of phones--94 to 95 percent of the population--and because the random digit dialing allows surveyors to reach unlisted numbers.

Which method is best? As Dillman says, "Decisions as to which method is best, or at least adequate, cannot be made in the abstract; they must be based on the need of the specific survey. The avoidable fact is that the final decision requests the subjective weighing of one consideration against another."<sup>11</sup>

The task of surveying a large heterogeneous population is difficult. Mailed questionnaires generally do not work well in surveying large segments of the general public because mailing lists usually are inaccurate and unrepresentative of all segments of the population, respectable response rates are difficult to obtain, and people who are young and educated are more likely to return questionnaires.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.



Left with a decision between face-to-face and telephone surveys, telephone surveys are the most reasonable choice. Because Montana is a rural state, a school district may encompass many square miles. Trying to interview people in person would be expensive. However, a phone call--even long distance--is less expensive than paying an interviewer and an interviewer's transportation to make trips to remote places.

School districts usually need to know immediately what taxpayers think about controversial issues so decisions can be made. Two or three evenings on the phone can produce results quickly. Face-to-face interviews can take weeks.

Monitoring is easier in telephone surveys. Since phone calls are made from a central location, a monitor can answer questions. Respondents can be called back to make sure the questionnaire was administered properly. Such checks for accuracy are difficult to make with face-to-face interviews.

The most important reason to choose the telephone survey is that it is the best method to find a representative sample.

#### Finding a Sample

Because it usually is impossible to question every member of a group, social scientists must survey a sample, or small portion, and extrapolate the results. To be a valid means for measuring the total public's attitudes and beliefs, the sample must represent the entire group studied.

Obviously, the most important consideration is selecting a sample to see that it is closely representative of the universe. The size of the sample is not necessarily insurance of its representativeness. Relatively small samples properly selected may be much more reliable than large samples

## Table I SURVEY METHODS--ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

## FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

<u>Advantages:</u>	<p>Questions can be complex; misunderstandings can be clarified.</p> <p>Personal interaction between interviewer and respondent allows for interest and cooperation.</p> <p>Visual aids can be used.</p>
<u>Disadvantages:</u>	<p>More costly than mail or telephone.</p> <p>Interviewer bias can cause inaccurate recording of answers, misleading responses.</p> <p>Time-consuming.</p> <p>Difficult to monitor for accuracy.</p> <p>Respondents hard to find at home.</p>

## MAIL INTERVIEWS

<u>Advantages:</u>	<p>Has wide geographical range.</p> <p>Less expensive than face-to-face.</p> <p>No interviewer bias.</p> <p>Respondent most likely to give answers that do not have "social desirability bias."</p> <p>Respondents can answer at their leisure.</p>
<u>Disadvantages:</u>	<p>Time-consuming.</p> <p>Accurate mailing lists often not available.</p> <p>Less educated and older people likely to be under-represented.</p> <p>Low response rates from general population.</p> <p>Length must be limited.</p> <p>Impossible to control order of answering.</p>

Table I Survey Methods--Advantages and Disadvantages (Continued)

## TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Advantages:

Administered quickly.

Inexpensive, compared to personal interview; not much more costly than mail.

Works well for specific questions, but open-ended also work well.

Response to all questions likely.

Best method for finding a representative sample of the population.

Disadvantages:

Questions should not be complex.

Questionnaire should be limited in length.

poorly selected. The actual selection of a sample should be so arranged that every item in the universe under consideration must have the same chance for inclusion in the sample.<sup>12</sup>

Finding respondents who represent the population is called random--or probability--sampling. The method might be compared to drawing names from a hat, although it is more complicated. Meyer explains its usefulness:

The advantages of probability sampling should now be evident: it takes the choice of persons to be interviewed out of the hands of the interviewer or anyone else involved in the research project. Their biases, conscious or unconscious, cannot tip the findings one way or another. In theory, it eliminates the self-selection problem, that is, certain kinds of people do not select themselves into the sample simply by being more available than others. How close it comes to eliminating this potential problem in practice depends on the response rate. Finally, it enables the investigator to make the law of chance work for him. Through careful management of his sampling procedure, he can gauge its accuracy to a known error allowance at a known level of confidence . . . . But the basic advantage of probability sampling is simply that it gives you a better chance of tapping a representative selection than any other method. It gives you a better chance of being right.<sup>13</sup>

The problem caused by not using a random sample is illustrated by the Literary Digest presidential poll in 1936. The Digest mailed 10 million ballots using names from automobile registrations and telephone directories. In 1936 few people owned cars or telephones, and those who did were in the upper socio-economic classes. When the Digest received 2 million ballots, which gave Alfred M. Landon 57 percent of the vote, the tally did not represent the views of the lower classes, which voted overwhelmingly for Roosevelt.

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<sup>12</sup>Young, Scientific Social Surveys and Research, p. 326.

<sup>13</sup>Meyer, Precision Journalism, p. 30.

A good sample, besides being representative, must be the right size. The more people in a population are alike, the smaller the sample can be. In heterogeneous groups, the sample must be large.

To determine sample size, two variables must be decided: sampling error and confidence level. Sampling error is the discrepancy between results obtained from a sample and results if the entire population had been surveyed. Confidence level is the probability that the sample will fall within the tolerated error range. When using a 95-percent confidence level, researchers can be confident that in 95 of 100 cases the true value of the findings lies within the tolerated error. For example, the results of one question might show 67 percent in favor of a certain point and 33 percent not in favor and the confidence level is 95 within plus or minus five percentage points. In 95 of 100 cases, if all the population had been surveyed, the range of results would fall within 62-72 percent yes and 28-38 percent no.

How much sampling error can be tolerated depends on the survey. In nationwide presidential polls, a sampling error of five percentage points can produce results with little meaning if the poll is close. If a poll shows one candidate has 52 percent of the vote, and the other 48, the first candidate can have as low as 47 percent and the second as high as 53 percent.

Size of the polling sample can be determined by consulting a table such as Table II which incorporates statistical calculations. However, in Table II the highest confidence level is 95 percent and the lowest sampling error is five percent. Other tables should be consulted if more precision is required.

Table II SAMPLE SIZE TABLE

Universe	95	90	90	Universe	95	90	90
10	10	10	9	440	205	168	59
15	14	14	12	460	210	171	59
20	19	19	16	480	214	173	59
25	24	23	18	500	217	176	60
30	28	27	21	559	226	182	60
35	32	31	23	600	234	187	61
40	36	35	25	650	242	191	61
45	40	39	27	700	248	195	62
50	44	42	29	750	254	199	62
55	48	46	31	800	260	202	62
60	52	49	32	900	269	208	63
65	56	53	33	1000	278	213	63
70	59	56	35	1100	285	217	64
75	63	59	36	1200	291	221	64
80	66	62	37	1300	297	224	64
85	70	65	38	1400	302	227	65
90	73	68	39	1500	303	229	65
95	86	71	40	1600	310	238	65
100	80	73	41	2000	322	238	65
110	86	78	42	3000	341	248	66
120	92	83	43	4000	351	254	67
130	97	88	45	5000	357	257	67
140	103	92	46	10000	370	263	67
150	108	97	47	20000	377	267	67
160	113	101	48	30000	379	268	68
170	118	105	49	50000	381	269	68
180	123	108	49	1000000	384	271	68
190	127	112	50				
200	132	115	51				
210	136	118	51				
220	140	122	52	95/5 =	95% CONFIDENCE		
230	144	125	52		5% SAMPLING ERROR		
240	148	127	53	90/5 =	90% CONFIDENCE		
250	152	130	53		5% SAMPLING ERROR		
260	155	133	54				
270	159	135	54	90/10 =	90% CONFIDENCE		
280	162	138	55		10% SAMPLING ERROR		
290	165	140	55				
300	169	143	55				
320	175	147	56				
340	181	151	57				
360	186	155	57				
380	191	158	58				
400	196	162	58				
420	201	165	58				

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If more precision is sought, the size and cost of the sample will increase. But a survey that yields data too general to make decisions is useless. A confidence level of 95 percent generally is used by survey researchers.<sup>14</sup> If the universe is 100,000 or more, a sample of 600 would be needed to bring the sampling error to 4 percent. A sample of 1,067 would be necessary for an error margin of 3 percent.

If the population is 10,000 or more, the sample size does not vary much. In fact, if the population were as much as 500,000 or more--to infinity--the sample size for a 95-percent confidence level and an error margin of five percent remains at 384.<sup>15</sup>

Why the sample size remains the same for a universe of 10,000 or 1,000,000 is one aspect of survey research misunderstood by the general public. Meyer paraphrases a statement by pollster George Gallup:

Consider the illustration that Dr. Gallup uses when asked why a statewide sample of 700 is not as good or better than his national sample of 1,500. Suppose, he says, that you had two barrels of marbles. A small barrel contains 500 white and 500 black marbles. A larger barrel contains 50,000 white and 50,000 black marbles. If you draw 10 marbles blindfolded, it doesn't really make any practical difference from which barrel you draw. The odds of getting 5 black and 5 white are about the same in either case.<sup>16</sup>

The surveyor next must determine how to draw the sample and find the people to be surveyed.

For face-to-face interviews, area probability sampling randomly selects geographical units such as city blocks and households within the units. However, face-to-face interviews are prohibitively expensive and

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

are not recommended for school districts.

Mail surveys rely on published lists of names for samples but no list includes all members of the general population. Telephone directories do not include unlisted numbers and do not have numbers that have changed recently.

Telephone directories are used in surveys of the general public, such as the Kansas survey, but such a practice is not recommended. The procedure involves dividing the population size by the size of the sample to determine the "skip interval." Then a number (n) that is smaller than the skip interval is chosen from a table of random numbers. Starting from the beginning of the list of names, the nth name is chosen. The skip interval determines the rest of the names.

The remaining alternative to drawing a sample is just as accurate but less involved than area probability sampling and requires that the survey be done by telephone. It also is the best reason for school districts to use the telephone rather than the mail for surveys of the general public. The method is called random digit dialing.

All telephone exchanges, or three-digit prefixes, in use in the area to be studied are identified. The telephone company is the best source for such information. A list of the remaining four-digit numbers for each exchange are put in a random table or programmed into a computer. The randomly generated numbers are called for the survey.

Dillman points out what he thinks is the most important disadvantage of random digit dialing: reaching numbers that are nonresidential or not in use.<sup>17</sup> However, a professional survey

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<sup>17</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 239.



research operation that uses random digit dialing exclusively finds that the nonresidential and unused numbers are not enough of a problem to make the system unworkable.

According to Susan Wallwork of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Montana, such numbers can be identified immediately. The number of successfully completed calls is about 60 percent for surveys done by the Bureau; 40 percent of the numbers reached are business phones or are not working. Although the percentage is high, only a few moments are needed to identify the number as nonresidential and to end the call.

Another possible disadvantage to random digit dialing is that people with unlisted numbers are less willing to participate than those with listed numbers. However, Wallwork has found that negative reactions from respondents are no more numerous from unlisted numbers than from listed. The unlisted numbers in her surveys average between 13 and 18 percent.

An important advantage of using random digit dialing in Montana is that the Bureau has computer lists for the state.

After the sample has been drawn and the number of responses determined, a list of materials, people and financial help should be compiled. Also important is a timeline. A table that shows each task and when it needs to be accomplished keeps the survey moving and delivers results when promised.

Two final important facts are related: A well-done survey will cost money and a professional survey team should be hired to produce accurate results. If the price of hiring an outside agency is too high,

administrators should consider the costs of doing the survey themselves and the risk of failure.

## Chapter Four

### PREPARING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

"The heart of any survey is the questionnaire."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important and difficult tasks in a public opinion survey is preparing the questionnaire. If it is poorly designed, doesn't ask the right questions or asks them improperly, survey results will be inaccurate.

Telephone surveys are the best choice for polls of the general population. However, as Dillman points out, the underlying principles of mail and telephone surveys are the same. If a school district decides to poll a homogeneous group, such as local doctors, the principles outlined in this chapter also would apply to such a survey.<sup>2</sup>

Before preparing questions, the surveyor must have a clear idea of what to ask.<sup>3</sup> School administrators who have defined the survey problem probably will have a long list of topics. Time and money will require deciding which are the most important. No survey can ask all the questions at one time.

#### Question Types

The four main question types determine 1. attitudes and beliefs, 2. behavior, 3. what the respondent knows and 4. respondent attributes. It is important to understand each question type, Dillman says, because

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<sup>1</sup>Backstrom and Hursh, Survey Research, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, pp. 230-231.

<sup>3</sup>Backstrom and Hursh, p. 68.

the surveyor must write questions depending on the type of information sought.<sup>4</sup>

Attitudes are how people feel about life and are developed over several years, based on experience. Beliefs are what people believe to be true. It often is not easy to distinguish between attitudes and beliefs in people's answers and both might be evident in one answer. For example, if a question about taxes is designed to find a person's beliefs on whether school taxes are too high, attitudes about paying taxes are likely to influence the response.

Questions about behavior ask what people have done, what they are doing, and what they plan to do. Such a question would determine if respondents voted in the last school election and if they plan to vote in the next.

Finding what the respondent knows often is an important part of a school public opinion survey. Administrators want to know how well-informed the population is about the schools. This type of question also can determine how or where the informed respondents get their information.

The fourth question type determines the respondent's attributes. Such demographic questions about age, sex, education and employment help the surveyor analyze results. It might be important to know if female answers differ from answers by males. Or, there may be significant differences in answers from different geographical areas.

Demographic information can be used to compare the survey sample with the entire population. For example, if a survey's demographic

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<sup>4</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 80.

questions in a sample of the general population reveal a 60 percent female response and a 50 percent male, the surveyor knows the sample does not represent the entire population. The ratio in Montana is 50 percent female, 50 percent male.

Other demographic information can be determined annually. A school administrator should examine the demographics of the survey to determine if it represents the population.

### Question Forms

Six question forms generally are used in survey research. They are open-ended, dichotomous, closed response, multiple choice, rating scales and ranking. The question form used will depend on the type of information sought and no formula tells when to use which. However, the administrator can ask, "Does this question provide the best means for finding the information I want?"

Open-ended questions allow the respondent to answer freely and at length. They are useful when the surveyor is not sure what answers might be forthcoming, the number of answers might be many, the surveyor does not want to prompt answers, and respondent motivations are sought in depth.<sup>5</sup>

An example of an open-ended question: "The Board of Education would like to improve your schools. Suppose for a moment that you were on the Board of Education. What one thing would you do to improve our schools?"

The disadvantages are formidable, however. The interviewer must record answers verbatim, which takes time and allows inaccuracies

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<sup>5</sup>Backstrom and Hursh, Survey Research, p. 73.

In addition, the respondent might not know how to respond, be embarrassed or tire of difficult questions. Coding the answers for data processing also is difficult, especially with a wide range of response. The method generally is time-consuming and unwieldy.

Jacobs suggests a procedure to reduce open-ended questions to more workable questions with closed responses. He suggests administering an open-ended question to a small number of respondents (preferably randomly selected) to find the range of possible answers. Then the question could be reworded into multiple choices.<sup>6</sup> Or, the question could remain open-ended and the interviewer could check categories on the questionnaire without offering the respondent a choice.

A respondent can answer a dichotomous question in one of two ways, and the possible answers are opposite (yes-no, right-wrong, true-false). This type of question can be a preface to more detailed questions, is easy to answer and provides specific responses that are simple to tabulate and code. However, it forces the respondent into a yes-or-no position and provides no explanation. It might also be difficult to word properly.

Example of a dichotomous question: "Would you like to know more about the Missoula elementary schools?"

Yes       No

Closed response questions ask for a specific, factual answer from the respondent. Such a question might be, "List those school

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<sup>6</sup>T. O. Jacobs, Developing Questionnaire Items: How To Do It Well (Alexandria, Va., Human Resources Research Organization, 1974).

publications with which you are familiar."<sup>7</sup> Or, "Which newspaper do you usually read for information about the schools?" This type of question is easy to understand and can be tabulated and coded quickly. But lists of answers can become unwieldy and multiple-choice questions can do a better job since all possible responses to such questions are easy to determine.

Multiple-choice questions allow the respondent to choose from several fixed choices. For example, "Which of the following kinds of school information do you want most? \_\_\_ curriculum, \_\_\_ finance, \_\_\_ child's progress, \_\_\_ other."<sup>8</sup>

The advantages of multiple-choice questions: They do not challenge the respondent, are easy to administer and code, can quickly cover many topics and can be used to evaluate knowledge and attitudes. However, it is difficult to include all alternatives, and qualitative responses are not allowed. Sometimes the answers are not mutually exclusive and may overlap, and the order of the answers may result in biased responses.

The primary problem with structured question forms, such as dichotomous, closed response and multiple choice, is that the degree of intensity in a person's response is impossible to determine. However, questions with rating scales overcome the problem. Such a question might ask about the importance of teaching the arts. A rating scale question might give the choices: very important, important, unimportant or very

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<sup>7</sup>McComb School District, Survey Starter Kit, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>McComb School District, Survey Starter Kit, p. 7.

unimportant. One disadvantage of this type of question is that the scale choices might not provide clear distinctions for each respondent.

The final question form is one in which the respondent is asked to rank certain items in terms of importance. The list for a school survey might include fine arts, transportation, sports and hot lunch. This type of question quickly provides information about a respondent's priorities. However, the question is difficult to administer, particularly over the phone, and must be short. Ranking also does not indicate degree of preference.

### Preparing the Questions

"Strive for balance." That is the advice of professional surveyor Susan Wallwork. An unbalanced question might be, "Do you think schools in our community put too much emphasis on sports?" A balanced question might ask, "Some people think our schools place too much emphasis on sports, while other people believe sports are an important part of the curriculum. What do you think? Should our schools put more emphasis on sports, less emphasis or maintain the present emphasis?"

Questionnaires must avoid bias. The first question in the example on sports is biased because it offers only one side of a question and gives the respondent no means of comparison. It also is threatening. Many people would give the most socially acceptable answer. Even questions with alternatives may be biased if the alternatives are not dichotomous: "Some people think closing schools is a poor solution to economic hard times. Others think it will do until enrollment increases again. What do you think?"

Emotionally charged words should be avoided. Words such as



motherhood, abortion, communist, boss, justice and bureaucrat should not be used because they impair the respondent's ability to answer honestly. Names of school officials or prestigious members of the community or country also should not be used. For example, "What do you think of Superintendent Zilch's plan to integrate the schools?" is likely to elicit a different response from "What do you think of the plan to integrate the schools?"

Ambiguity is another difficult problem in writing survey questions. Ambiguity can take many forms, but some of the most common are questions that are incomplete, imprecise or too precise and indefinite in time, have complicated words or are generalizations.

Examples of each:

Incomplete: Did you vote in the last election?

Better: Did you vote in last April's school election?

Imprecise: How often do you visit school during the year?

\_\_\_ never, \_\_\_ rarely, \_\_\_ occasionally, \_\_\_ regularly.

Better: How often did you visit your child's school last year?

\_\_\_ not at all, \_\_\_ a few times, \_\_\_ once a quarter, \_\_\_ once a month,  
\_\_\_ once a week.

Too Precise: How many books did your child read last year?

\_\_\_ number.

Better: How many books did your child read last year?

\_\_\_ none, \_\_\_ 1-5, \_\_\_ 5-10, \_\_\_ 10-20, \_\_\_ more than 20.

Indefinite in time: Do you regularly read newspaper stories about school activities?

Better: Did you read any stories about school district activities in yesterday's newspaper? Which ones?

Complicated Words: What are your perceptions about the resolution to preclude adolescents from extra-curricular activities?

Better: What do you think about the plan to cut after-school activities for seventh and eighth graders?

Generalizations: Do you think most low-income people are Democrats? The words "most," "low-income" and "Democrats" are too general without explanation.

Each question should address only one topic. For example, "Are you in favor of our schools providing breakfasts for qualified students in the lunchroom, rather than in the classroom?" should be two questions: "Are you in favor of the schools providing breakfasts for qualified students?" "If so, do you think the meals should be served in the lunchroom or the classroom?"

Assuming too much knowledge also can be a problem. A question with no explanation can embarrass the respondent or prompt an answer that is merely a guess. The better version cited under "complicated words" above assumes too much knowledge. The best version would be: "The school board is considering a plan that would cut funds for after-school activities, such as sports and clubs. Would you support or oppose such a plan?"

The school administrator must make sure the questions are technically accurate. Obviously inaccurate questions can affect the survey's credibility. The survey team is likely to be unfamiliar with school issues.

The administrator also should make sure the questions sound all right. A telephone questionnaire must be easy to understand, even at the expense of perfect grammar.

### Questionnaire Design

The researcher must determine exactly who is to be interviewed. Will the respondent be male or female? What if there is more than one male or female 18 or older in the house? Random selection tables are used by survey researchers to ensure that respondents chosen from each household represent the entire population. If the person to be interviewed is always the person who answers the phone, there would be a disproportionate number of female respondents. Dillman has found that women tend to answer the phone more often than men, even in the evening.<sup>9</sup>

The Bureau of Business and Economic Research uses eight different random selection tables. When using one of the tables, the interviewer might ask how many females and males 18 or older live in the household and list them from youngest to oldest. Then the interviewer would consult a table to determine which person should be randomly selected to respond. If the oldest male in the household is selected as the respondent and is not available, the interviewer would have to hang up and try the next number or call again.

Most terminations come after the respondent is selected.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the introduction must explain who is calling, what the survey is for and why it is important to respond. Backstrom and Hursh suggest

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<sup>9</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 248.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

several facts to keep in mind when writing the survey introduction: It should be nonthreatening, realistically worded, short, neutral and firm.<sup>11</sup>

The introduction should point out that the survey is for the community school district. This lends credibility and helps convince respondents that the survey is not a sales gimmick. Interviewers should be prepared to answer questions about how the respondent's phone number was obtained.

The sequence of questions is important. Surveyors should strive for an order that makes responding easy and reduces resistance to answering. Questionnaires that group questions by topic are less confusing than those that skip from one subject to another. Also, it is less confusing if question format does not change with each question.

The first two or three questions are as important as the introduction in getting respondents to continue with the interview. A well-written first question should set the tone of the survey and convince respondents that they are able to answer the remaining questions. It should be easy to answer, interesting and relevant to the rest of the survey. Such a question might ask if the respondent has children attending the local schools and, if so, how many.

Questions that seek the most needed information should be placed in the middle. Any that are objectionable should be closer to the end. A rapport between interviewer and respondent must be established before the respondent will feel comfortable answering

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<sup>11</sup>Backstrom and Hursh, Survey Research, pp. 92-93.

questions about political views, for example, or family income.

Demographic questions also should be saved for the last because they inquire about personal qualities such as the respondent's age, income and education. Survey specialists advise use of categories. For example, "Was your total family income last year more than \$5,000?" If the answer is yes, the interviewer continues to ask by category, such as \$10,000, \$15,000, \$25,000, until the answer is no. This is a less threatening method of asking for income than saying, "How much was your total family income last year?"

The administrator should check the questionnaire for ease of use by the interviewer. Is the questionnaire easy to follow? Will the interviewer get confused about how to proceed? Are interviewer instructions easy to see and understand? Is there adequate white space to record answers? Do transitional phrases lead the respondent smoothly from one question to another?

#### Precoding the Questionnaire

Another important aspect of questionnaire design is coding for tabulation by the computer. Survey answers can be counted by hand, but the method is time-consuming. And, if cross tabulation (simultaneous counting of several factors at once) needs to be done, hand tabulation would take more time than most school officials have. For example, school people might want to know if there is a correlation between living in certain sections of town and voting yes on mill levies.

A numeric value is assigned to each variable in each question. Then, computer cards that contain 80 columns of numbers are punched according to the questionnaire codes and fed into the computer. Answers

can be tabulated any way the surveyor wants. However, such coding must be built into the questionnaire design if results are to come quickly. Assigning numeric values before the survey is administered makes the keypuncher's job easy. He or she can type the information into the computer directly from the questionnaire.

Precoding the questionnaire requires forethought and experience and should be left to the professional surveyor. Closed-response questions are not difficult to code, but more care must be taken with open-ended responses.

The survey team will need to know before the questionnaire is designed what school officials want to receive from the data. Earl R. Babbie in Survey Research Methods advises coding in more detail than needed. Categories can be combined later, he says, but original detail cannot be recreated if not coded at the beginning.

For example, a male respondent might be assigned the number 1 and a female the number 2. School officials might not plan to need a breakdown by sex, but a use for such information might be found later.

The professional surveyor can advise school people exactly what can and cannot be done with the survey results. The computer program will dictate what flexibility there is in programming and will require that room be left on the questionnaire for coding. Many professional surveyors use a program called SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science), which is a compilation of many programs that compute statistics needed by social science researchers.

After the questionnaire is precoded, the survey team often will transfer the information from the questionnaire in numbers onto a coding

sheet. This sheet provides instructions for the data processor on how the questionnaire was coded and makes the job of data processing easier and quicker.

### Pretesting

After the questionnaire is completed, the surveyor must ask, "Will it work?" The best way to find out is to pretest it.

The best way to pretest is to draw a miniature version of the sample. It should be random and from the general population and should be about 10-20 percent of the total sample.

Pretesting will show which questions are confusing, hard to understand when pronounced over the phone or objectionable.

The administration and board of trustees should be shown the questionnaire before it is administered. However, they should be told that each question and the manner in which it is asked has a specific reason for being that way. Staff and teachers of the school district also should see the questionnaire in advance so they feel they are part of the planning process.

## Chapter Five

### COLLECTING THE DATA

Collecting the data must follow strict guidelines to assure that accurate information is obtained.

Three major steps should be taken:

1. Advance notice to prospective respondents should be given;
2. Interviewers should be screened thoroughly before being hired and trained in proper collection techniques; and
3. Interview sessions should be monitored, and completed questionnaires checked for accuracy.

Details in making the questionnaire ready for interviewers should be completed before interviewer training sessions begin. The professional survey team should know exactly what those tasks are and is likely to ask school administrators to complete details such as printing the questionnaire. Color coding various parts of the questionnaire and other materials, such as interviewer instructions, helps keep all in order.

#### In Lieu of the Advance Letter

An advance letter to respondents explaining the survey--its purposes, sponsors and use of the results--is one of the most helpful tools in survey research. It alerts respondents that they will be called and helps prove the survey's credibility and importance. It is highly recommended for surveys of the general public.

Unfortunately, when a telephone survey uses random digit dialing, as recommended in this thesis, it is impossible to determine respondents'



addresses. But school districts can use other advance notices. In-house publications should keep staff and parents informed about the survey from the beginning.

Most respondents will be from the general public, and all people within the population to be surveyed should be told in advance that they might be called. News releases in the local media will help. A "tip" to the education reporter might produce a feature. Free public service announcements can remind the public when the survey calls will be made and why the survey is important. The school district might decide to place advertisements explaining the survey.

#### Interviewer Recruiting

If a school district hires a professional survey team, it is likely to bring its own interviewers. However, the team may decide to recruit volunteers or paid interviewers from the local area and train them.

The surveyors will look for interviewers who have voices easy to understand over the phone, who can respond well to questions asked by respondents and who can read questions well. If the school district helps recruit interviewers, it should avoid hiring people who have strong opinions about school issues. If they should react to a respondent's answers--even by only a small gasp--they can distort the responses.

To save money, a school district may need to use volunteer help for the survey. University students often are willing to do such work, especially if it coincides with their studies in social science research. Senior citizen groups often have volunteer teams that work on community

projects. Telephone interviewing is tiring work, and senior-citizen volunteers should be scheduled for shorter shifts than other interviewers.

### Training Interviewers

Training interviewers should be left to professional surveyors, who have the knowledge and experience to know what to expect when conducting a survey. They will teach interviewers how to interpret phone signals and determine if the number reached is nonresidential or nonworking. Interviewers will be taught to keep a record of calls.

Interviewers will learn about the survey's objectives and how to answer questions about the survey. A sheet of likely questions and how to answer them will be given to each interviewer.

A rule book that summarizes all the do's and don't's of interviewing will be given to each interviewer. It contains instructions such as:

1. Talk slowly
2. Use a friendly tone of voice
3. Read the questions exactly as written
4. Don't react emotionally to answers
5. Never suggest an answer or interpret feelings
6. Record answer exactly.

Interviewers will practice administering the questionnaire first with the trainer and the group, then alone. They will edit each questionnaire immediately after completing the call to elaborate on cryptically written answers and to check that all answers are recorded.

### Central Location

The professional survey team probably will ask that calling for the survey be done from a central location, such as the school district administration building, where there are many phones. When interviewers are together they can be supervised and a knowledgeable person can answer both interviewer and respondent questions. Also, completed questionnaires can be looked over immediately and errors, inconsistencies or omissions can be brought back to the interviewer quickly.

The survey team may ask that all phones be in one room. The phone company cost is minimal.

In surveys of the general public, interviewing should be done from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.<sup>1</sup> However, calls during the day might have to be made to reach some respondents. Several call-backs often are required.

After the necessary number of calls are made, the questionnaires will be checked for accuracy and given to the data-processing specialists, who will tabulate the results.

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<sup>1</sup>Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys, p. 255.

## Chapter Six

### ANALYZING AND REPORTING THE DATA

When the survey team presents the results to the school administrator, he must convey them to the board of education and to the public.

The National School Public Relations Association advises that support of parents who respond to opinion surveys usually is not as strong as school administrators would like or expect it to be.<sup>1</sup> The survey might show that the public sees weaknesses in the school program or that people are poorly informed about school issues.

The results likely will be in tabular form, showing the percentage of answers for each question. If asked before beginning the survey, the team can provide stratified data, such as by male and female or by particular regions. Since results are counted by computer, the survey statistics given can take many forms.

Analysis of the data should be the responsibility of both the survey team and the administration. If the team has done similar surveys for other school districts, it can comment on how the results compare. It also can explain to the public and board of education the statistical data, such as what the results mean in terms of confidence level and sampling error.

The administrator must be prepared with other comparative data. National, state and local trends concerning educational issues should be available. One source for national statistics is the Gallup Poll's

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<sup>1</sup>NSPRA, Building Public Confidence, p. 18.

yearly educational poll, published in the September issue of Phi Delta Kappan magazine.

After the results are available, but before they are made public, the administrator should analyze the data thoroughly. Why are low scores low? Why are high scores high? Why is the public poorly informed or well informed on some issues? What are the causes behind the results?

A plan or strategy to begin solving the problems must be determined and built into the school system's management plan. Policies should be modified and unfavorable parts of the program eliminated or reversed. If some problems concern public relations, the public-relations officer should help plan a program to change public opinion.

These decisions or discussions about them should be done quickly after results are available so the public does not have long to wait. If administrators keep the survey outcome to themselves for too long, people will wonder why the results are being kept from the public. Announce when the data will be released and meet the deadline.

Release of results to the public should involve a presentation to the board of education at an open meeting and press releases given to the media at the same time.

The survey team and administrators should be present at the meeting to discuss the results and provide interpretation. Both tabular and descriptive interpretations should be given to each board member. An open and honest attitude about the results is important.

Management response to the results is as important as the results themselves. Administrators should admit which results are unacceptable

and describe how the problems will be resolved. The figures should be viewed as an impetus for change, not as embarrassing statistics to hide from public view.

School administrators should capitalize on positive results. If program strengths are evident, they should be brought to the attention of the board and public.

The information presented to the board also should appear in news releases describing the results, management response and emphasis on strengths. School principals and administrators other than the superintendent should be given the same information and kept informed. Their support is necessary, and they are likely to be interviewed by the media.

## CONCLUSIONS

"No school, regardless of its size, can afford not to study public attitudes and use opinion surveys as the basis of sound planning in public relations."<sup>1</sup>

Survey research for school districts is likely to become more important as more school officials try to be accountable to their publics. They must be aware of the attitudes of all rather than only the accessible and loud opinions of a few. When school officials become aware of what their constituents expect, they can plan programs accordingly and develop public-relations programs to fill the gaps in public knowledge.

Surveys should be done regularly--perhaps yearly. Comparisons can be made to determine if plans to educate the public work and if school programs meet with public approval.

"A one-shot survey is helpful," according to Gretchen D. Shilts, president of the Board of Governors of the Fairfield-Suisun (Calif.) Unified School District, "but a district that truly listens, listens annually. You might feel that such a procedure is expensive. Perhaps. But isn't it better to find out your opinion-changing strategy isn't working in the first year, than to go on and discover it five years later?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harral, Tested Public Relations, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>NSPRA, Building Public Confidence, p. 19.

Stewart Harral agrees. "Moreover, school executives must not rely on occasional surveys. Rather, they should pattern themselves after industrial leaders and others who follow trends in public opinion in a wide variety of continuing studies."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Harral, Tested Public Relations, p. 14.



## APPENDIX

The following analyses of literature further explain public relations and school public relations and how social science and journalism can be integrated.

Each book is listed in the bibliography and has been referred to in the thesis. The books were chosen for further comment because they are especially pertinent to the thesis and could be read by anyone interested in more detail.

### PUBLIC RELATIONS: ACTS OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Edward L. Bernays, Crystallizing Public Opinion (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923).

"In America words are as fragile as lace or a soap bubble. The words and their meanings get kicked around."

When Bernays first put together in print two of America's most abused words, one of his aims was to explain that "public relations" does not mean press agency or propaganda. He did an admirable job in 1923 in the first book written on public relations, Crystallizing Public Opinion, yet was quoted more than 50 years later still trying to debunk the myth.

True to course, the words press agent and propagandist have lost their meaning in American language and seldom are substitutes for public relations counsel. Today, "ad man" and "publicist" are the sinister synonyms. This "semantic tyranny," as Bernays called it, has kept the public from realizing what public relations people do and their true effect on each member of the populace. The "public relations person" is seen as manipulator of the public mind, someone who convinces the

unwitting to buy a product or believe a politician or support a point of view.

Actually, public relations people--or at least the ethical ones--perform acts of social responsibility by counseling their clients to be responsible to the public. The organization that does not believe it important to keep other people's interests in mind will neither successfully espouse its cause nor sell its products.

Bernays developed the concept of public relations after World War I by combining publicity with the need for social responsibility. He was invited by President Wilson during the war to work on the U.S. Committee on Public Information and served in New York and Paris in 1918 and 1919. When he arrived home after the peace talks, he looked back at what he had been doing, which was called publicity direction, and saw the power of public visibility.

But he realized that public visibility could not keep clients from doing harm to themselves and others. A manufacturer might give a million dollars to a hospital, but then refuse to hire black people in his plants. It was important for the client to act as a "consistent human symbol," Bernays decided. Public visibility would gain nothing without considering public "hopes, demands, aspirations and desires."

In 1978, when Bernays was in his 80s, the National School Public Relations Association interviewed Bernays and recorded his answers on tape. He spoke again about the importance of social responsibility in public relations.

Democratic society is based on the concept of adjustment, he says on the tape, which involves people having confidence in each other and in

group interests. Without adjustment, or social responsibility, which provides continuity of our government, private groups could gain control through revolution.

"Everything in public relations is based on people power," Bernays says. Social science should be the primary emphasis in teaching the profession, rather than communication. "Communication is important," he says, "but only as a tool in the adjustment process" between what a client does and what the public expects.

Bernays believed that public opinion cannot be generated by the public relations counsel. "The sympathy between the orator and his audience is not one which the orator can create. He can intensify it, or by tactless speaking he can dissipate it, but he cannot manufacture it from thin air."

This idea, which he first wrote about more than 50 years ago, is as unusual today as it must have been in 1923. How many people outside the profession would claim that the public relations person is not responsible for public opinion? Isn't the snake-oil salesman able to captivate his audience and coerce the ignorant to buy his product?

Was Jerry Falwell able to amass money and followers at an amazing rate simply by coining the crowd-catching phrase "moral majority"? Were his public relations tactics so powerful that an unsuspecting public was taken in? No, Bernays would say if asked today. The public will accept nothing, he said, without the predisposition to accept it. The public, or part of it, was ready for a Jerry Falwell or he would not have become the leader he is today. The public is not totally malleable, Bernays said, but neither is it totally stubborn.

Public relations takes advantage of the middle ground.

In his book Bernays points out the difference in opinion about whether the public mind is passive or active, whether institutions such as the press alter it or are a product of it. H. L. Mencken wrote in Atlantic Monthly in 1914 that the educated person does not take his opinions from newspapers:

On the contrary, his attitude toward them is almost always one of frank criticism, with indifference as its mildest form and contempt as its commonest. He knows that they are constantly falling into false reasoning about the things within his personal knowledge--that is, within the narrow circle of his special education--and so he assumes that they make the same, or even worse, errors about other things, whether intellectual or moral. This assumption, it may be said at once, is quite justified by the facts.

But others believe the opposite, Bernays wrote. Everett Dean Martin said in The Behavior of Crowds:

The modern man has in the printing press a wonderfully effective means of perpetuating crowd movements and keeping great masses of people constantly under the sway of certain crowd ideas. Every crowd group has its magazines, press agents and special "literature" with which it continually harangues its members and possible converts. Many books, and especially certain works of fiction of the 'best seller' type, are clearly reading mob phenomena.

Bernays knew that both men were right although they might not have agreed if asked to debate the subject. Bernays believed that the public interacts with the press or any other force that modifies public opinion. Every day, newspapers make judgments about what to print. Constraints of decency and privacy guide some of the decisions, while space and news "importance" control what other stories will be run. The editor keeps in mind what the public will accept as decent and newsworthy while making those decisions. He or she forms public opinion by choosing what the public reads, but at the same time, is

guided by what the public wants to read. "The truth is," Bernays said, "that while it appears to be forming public opinion on fundamental matters, the press is often conforming to it."

Public relations practitioners who realize that the public not only influences the media, but also is molded by them, will enlist the medium that best reflects the public that needs to be reached.

But the public relations person must go one step further.

Bernays explains:

The public relations counsel cannot base his work merely upon the acceptance of the principle that the public and its authorities interact. He must go deeper than that and discover why it is that a public opinion exists independently of church, school, press, lecture platform and motion-picture screen-- how far this public opinion affects these institutions and how far these institutions affect public opinion. He must discover what the stimuli are to which public opinion responds most readily.

Knowing what motivates people to join groups or the "herd" is necessary to understand public motivation, Bernays wrote. Belonging to a group is no small matter. Individual freedom must be sacrificed to keep the group alive, therefore its code is guarded carefully. Bernays quotes Martin again: "What has been so painstakingly built up is not to be lightly destroyed. Each group, therefore, within itself, considers its own standards ultimate and indisputable, and tends to dismiss all contrary or different standards as indefensible."

The crowd mind, as Bernays and Martin called it, is not limited to the ignorant. It permeates all classes and all degrees of education. Also, it does not pertain to just a physical mass of people. People who live in opposite areas of the country can belong to the same group and possess the same crowd mind.

Ideas and habits of the people with the group are standardized, Bernays said, and they gain strength through group support. No one in the group wants to feel left out and so all members are suggestible, Bernays said, to ideas that are part of the standards of their group.

"The public relations counsel is not needed to persuade people to standardize their points of view or to persist in their established beliefs. The established point of view becomes established by satisfying some real or assumed human need," he said.

If a public relations person wants to reach a particular group, he or she must appeal to the standards of that group. The represented cause must mesh with the group's traditions. Exactly which groups to reach and what medium to use depends on knowing about the group's behavior and what channels of communication it listens to.

Groups overlap, also, and thus the public relations person can use several means to publicize its cause. If a women's organization wants to raise money to support the Equal Rights Amendment, it would be wise to make its appeals in several places. A woman who works in a professional job belongs to a group. She could be reached through a professional journal. But she also might have a family and home and could be reminded of the appeal in a housewife's magazine or in the daily newspaper. At the same time, the magazine and newspaper would reach other groups of women.

One issue Bernays could not address in 1923 because the public relations profession was so young. He could not predict if people who adopted the profession in years to come would follow his lead in ethics. Is it semantic tyranny alone that has given the profession a bad name,

or is it because not all practitioners understand or believe in their social role? Those who do not are the least likely to be accepted by at least one of their public: the media.

The public relations counsel is both supplier and creator of news, Bernays wrote, and both are important roles. But to be successful, he or she must comply with the moral and technical requirements of people in the media. The editor will look upon a public relations person with favor only if he or she provides "truthful, accurate and verifiable" news, Bernays wrote. In the last chapter of his book he even explains what "news" is. The public relations person who understands that news is a departure from the established order and often depends on an overt act of some kind, will not expect coverage of non-newsworthy events.

The general public, however, is not as "cynical" as the typical newspaper editor, Bernays said. And rather than learning about and judging each issue individually, people tend to reject or accept new ideas based on crowd reaction. Public relations people who know that are in an enviable position. They can bring ideas of value to the public through group endorsement that might not otherwise be acceptable. They also can advocate socially harmful points of view.

Bernays elaborated on the moral ramifications of this power:

The standards of the public relations counsel are his own standards and he will not accept a client whose standards do not come up to them. While he is not called upon to judge the merits of his case any more than a lawyer is called upon to judge his client's case, nevertheless he must judge the results which his work would accomplish from an ethical point of view.

Perhaps Bernay's most useful advice is that beginners learn about human behavior; not to manipulate it, but to protect it and change it for the better. The main contribution public relations people can make to their client and to the public, Bernays said, is the "capacity for crystallizing the obscure tendencies of the public mind before they have reached definite expression."



## SOCIAL SCIENCE: A USEFUL TOOL FOR JOURNALISTS

Philip Meyer, *Precision Journalism* (Bloomington and London: Indian University Press, 1973 and 1979).

Journalism and social science used to be much alike. Both reporters and social scientists gathered information by talking to people, observing behavior and noting trends. They then used their intuition and common sense to draw conclusions.

In the last 20 years, however, social scientists have broken out of the mold. The computer and other technological advances have made it possible to analyze large amounts of information previously too unwieldy to manage. Statistical tools that were invented decades ago are workable now because countless hours of tedious manual work no longer are required. Social scientists have abandoned the "philosopher's armchair" and left journalists far behind in discovering what people think about politics and other issues and how and why people behave as they do.

Social science has experienced what Philip Meyer calls a revolution, while journalism has stayed much the same. "There is no new journalism," he writes, "although there is a growing awareness in the profession that the old journalism is no longer adequate in a world of swift and sometimes quiet change, and there have been scattered attempts to search for new approaches."

Meyer discusses one of the new approaches in his book, Precision Journalism. He writes that his fellow journalists must not only catch up with the social scientist, but use their skills to write in understandable English what social science methods uncover. In one of

the most readable books that discusses social science research, he explains just how journalists can use the tools social scientists have refined. And, he makes a substantial case for doing so.

The old adage every reported learned in journalism school "be objective" in recent years has been replaced with "be fair," and for good reason, Meyer notes. Reporters of this generation realize they must do more than report quotes from opposing viewpoints on issues they know nothing about and let the readers interpret for themselves. The reporter must research a situation, understand it and then decide how to report it. Reporters have become interpreters, Meyer says, but they interpret poorly.

He cites several instances in which journalist analyses of national situation were wrong. For example, during race rioting after the Watts explosion in 1965 until about 1968, newspapers across the country carried stories about how relations between whites and blacks were getting worse. However, social science surveys taken at the time showed that the opposite was true and that whites and blacks were becoming more tolerant of each other. "As newsmen," Meyer writes, "preoccupied with the rioters and the noisy militants of both races, we failed to notice."

If reporters had gone to the social scientist for information and if they had accepted the fact that not all is as it seems, the stories would have been written differently. However, people who work for newspapers are no different from most other people in that they base their interpretations of events on such unreliable sources as their own thoughts or ideologies or conventional wisdom.

Meyer advocates giving up the unreliable sources for "intensive and systematic fact-finding efforts. Such a suggestion may seem to be a plea for reactionary return to the old ideal of objectivity, but it has this difference: instead of reporting competing viewpoints for what they are worth, we could make an effort to determine just what they are worth. It is not necessary to turn our backs on interpretation. It is necessary to reduce the size of the leap from fact to interpretation, and to find a more solid base of fact from which to leap."

Understanding social science methods and learning how to use them and a computer are what Meyer recommends for reporters to bridge the gap between fact and interpretation. The task sounds formidable, and to be sure, he doesn't claim that understanding social science statistics is easy. But Meyer leads the reader through the complicated maze easily and his clear English and appropriate examples can calm even the most number-nervous writer.

The concepts of probability theory, game theory and statistics are covered in detail as background to what a reporter needs to know about survey, experimental and record research. Simply put, the chapters explain how numbers can be used to measure such "slippery" concepts as human behavior and attitudes.

Another chapter explains how computers can simplify it all. Meyer strongly recommends that reporters learn not only what a computer can do for them, but how to program. Not knowing computer language can add to the difficulties of analyzing data, especially if all has to be explained to a programmer who knows nothing about the project.

Of prime interest to a reporter will be the chapters on surveys, political polls and public polls. They explain what must be done to ensure that a poll is accurate and what a reporter should look for when handed results of a poll done by someone else. For example, a reporter should know the difference between an accidental sample and a systematic sample. In accidental samples, people who walk by a certain street corner might be questioned, or perhaps other accessible people such as cab drivers or shoppers in a nearby mall. If their views represent those of the entire general population, it is only by accident.

Systematic samples, however, require that the population to be surveyed be clearly defined, that every person have the same chance to be heard and that every member of the sample be asked the same questions. The second criterion is the basic underpinning of survey research. It requires that members of the population to be questioned be chosen randomly. If chosen randomly, it is possible to determine the probability that the sample will be representative of the entire population within a certain margin of error.

Suppose that mayoral candidate Bob Jones or his agent brings to the newsroom results of a private poll showing that Jones is far ahead of his opponent. A reporter who does not want to write a distorted view of the mayoral race should ask several questions: who sponsored the survey, what is the exact wording of the questions asked, what population was sampled, what is the sample size and response rate, what is the sampling error, which results are based only on part of the sample and how were the interviews collected and when.

Meyer cautions about a deceptive polling practice. Sometimes politicians will release only part of the results, obviously those most favorable to their candidacy. Therefore reporters should ask, what else did the survey show? "Do not expect a straight answer," Meyer says. "A quotable evasive answer will, however, tip off you and your readers."

What of reporters who want to do surveys themselves? Perhaps what the community really thinks about building the proposed new hospital would make a good story. Or maybe the editor would like to know what sections of the paper are read most often. Professional surveyors could be hired to find the answers, but their rates are high. Dare a reporter take on such a project?

Meyer says it can be done and lays out the details in fine form. His instructions include everything from persuading the editor that the paper can afford it, to finding the sample in a random fashion, to training interviewers, to data processing. He advises that a professional surveyor could be hired to consult for a day or two to check that procedures are correct.

His best advice, however, comes in the following chapter on how to analyze and report results. Decisions must be made, for example, about whether or not to drop don't-know or no-answer responses. Percentages can change drastically if some of the responses are eliminated. Meyer gives the best method to follow.

He also recommends validity checks, such as noting if the distribution of male and female responses is about 50-50 or if age distributions fit census reports. If the checks do not mesh, either the sample is not representative or there is another problem in data gathering.

However, if the data show something not expected, something that goes against conventional wisdom, it should not be regarded automatically as an error, Meyer says. Clarification should be sought, of course, on whether or not the surprising data are the result of a clerical error. But new discoveries that challenge "common sense" should be believed if the data were collected and analyzed properly.

After the reporter's survey is complete, it is not enough to simply display the results in tabular form, Meyer says. Perhaps the fact is not earthshaking that 68 percent of the community teenagers complained of a lack of indoor recreational facilities. But if data are available from previous surveys, comparisons can be made. If only 43 percent of the teenagers were distressed about having nothing to do indoors a year ago, the community might have a problem on its hands.

Comparison with other questions in the survey should be made. Another question might have asked teenagers to rank what is most important to them. Having indoor recreational facilities might have ranked low, when compared to being able to find a summer job or skiing. The results of the first question, then, become less important.

Interpretation thus does not escape the reporter. If reporters are not to simply display results in tabular--and undoubtedly confusing--form for the reader to decipher, they must be prepared to dig for all answers and interpretations. They must also be able to "collapse" the tables, Meyer says, into more readable form without infringing on accuracy. Above all, reporters must write about the survey in clear English and avoid the jargon that usually hinders public notification of social science research.

The need to dig should always supersede time restraints, especially when the survey has been done elsewhere than in the newsroom. Meyer cites the example of a three-part series CBS television did in 1969 on the generation gap. It used results from a professional surveyor that showed parents and their children holding opposite points of view. One question asked if it is worth having a war to fight for our country's honor. Forty percent of the parents said yes, while only 25 percent of their children said yes, a difference of 15 percentage points.

Further back in the survey results was an important fact. When college-educated adults were separated from noncollege-educated adults, only 35 percent of the college-educated thought fighting for honor would justify a war, while 67 percent of noncollege-educated adults thought so. The difference between adults--32 percentage points--was greater than the difference between parents and children. The significant fact was that there was a considerable gap between college-educated and non-college educated. Unfortunately, and probably because of lack of time, CBS missed an important part of the survey results.

Meyer's advice extends not only to survey research, but also to field experiments and records research. He explains methods to make field experiments valid, such as using a control group, and what can and cannot be done with census data.

In his final chapter he discusses new developments in survey research, such as telephone interviewing, and reduces finding confidence level and sampling error to simple formulas. The chapter was added in the second edition and shows that in a span of only six years, new and

easier methods of social science research have sprung up. Responsible reporters should try to keep abreast of the new developments and bolster their news-seeking abilities with proven scientific methods. Meyer's book is a good place to start.

As he says in the preface to the second edition, "As the specialty grows, better handbooks will be written. This one was intended to be half handbook, half mild-mannered polemic to get the show on the road."



## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE SCHOOLS--AN OVERVIEW

NSPRA (National School Public Relations Association), Building Public Confidence for Your Schools (Arlington, Va., 1978).

Stewart Harral, Tested Public Relations for Schools (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1952).

American democracy hinges on public education. "Every school system has the social responsibility to educate free men and women for maintenance of the American democracy," according to Edward L. Bernays, one of the founders of public relations in the United States.

However, public education will continue to meet the needs of children only as long as it is supported by the people who pay taxes to fund it. "As long as education justifies itself in the minds of those who are instrumental in financing it, the financing will continue," according to Stewart Harral, author of Tested Public Relations for Schools. School public relations provides the justification.

Harral wrote his book in the early 1950s. Although some of the problems he cited have changed, his advice is similar to that given by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) in its book Building Public Confidence for Your Schools, published in 1978. Both books set down the basic components of a quality school public relations program and allow people in school public relations to learn and then build on the fundamentals.

Such books are useful, especially in small- and medium-sized school districts. Only large metropolitan districts can afford to hire public relations staffs that include directors, media specialists, editors, artists, etc. Most school districts have one public relations officer or a half-time person.

Handbooks such as these can guide school public relations people in their duties, which involve more than only communicating with the public. Bernays elaborated in a tape interview made by NSPRA in 1981: "You [school public relations practitioner] are not merely a communicator of words, distributing them to media to gain public visibility. You advise your school systems of misconceptions, ignorance, apathy or wisdom of their publics. You advise your chiefs of policies or practices at variances with sound educational policies or programs. You interpret the school system to the public. You strengthen favorable attitudes. You negate negative attitudes. You convert those on the fence to support you."

The books deal in specifics. They describe how to set up and maintain a school public relations program and how to solve public-relations problems.

How secretaries greet visitors and answer the phone, how the superintendent answers questions from the media and how principals deal with parent organizations are part of a system's public relations. Whether public relations are effective or disastrous depends on a well-planned program that should include eight steps: goal setting, research, reorientation of goals if impossible to reach, strategy, appeals to the public, organization of personnel, planning and timing, and budgeting. Bernays called these methods "the engineering of consent."

Goals should be divided into immediate, intermediate and long-term and should be specific. They should:

1. Involve "two-way" communication, in which schools listen to the public as well as inform the public.

2. Be for all people, both internal and external publics, such as the general populace, students, teachers and support staff.

3. Call for systematic communication involving all media and methods of informing the public.

4. Require that the public relations program be continuous.

The school board should be part of the goal-setting process. A committee of board members, administrators and the public should write board policy that includes reasons for adopting a public relations policy, what the policy will do, how it will be implemented, delegation of responsibility and ways to evaluate it.

After goals are set and approved by the board, research will determine whether plans are realistic. The only way to know is to determine what the public knows and feels about the school system. This important step often is overlooked by administrators and school boards who think they know what the public wants. Without research, which includes a community survey, they rarely know for sure. Community surveys should incorporate the services of people who know how to prepare unbiased questionnaires, obtain a random sample and gather information in a systematic manner.

If the community survey reveals that plans are unrealistic, they can be changed and no time will be wasted in practices that are not effective. Each school system should rely on research conducted in its own community, because each is different. "Every community has its own pulse, its own heartbeat, its own likes and dislikes, different feelings

and emotions, different causes for agitation and alarm and different reasons for being satisfied with the status quo," NSPRA says. "And each community, almost without exception, has some very strong feelings, both pro and con, about its schools."

After research has revealed what the public needs to know, how available resources will be used should be determined. Strategy should incorporate what Bernays called the four "M's": mind power, man power, mechanics and money. The resources then can be used to carry out themes and appeals, which must meet public needs uncovered by research.

The themes and appeals should be directed at individuals, groups, subgroups and the overall public and can be made singly or in combination. They might take written, spoken or printed form and need to be reiterated frequently. Community newsletters, staff bulletins, radio announcements, speeches, television interviews and brochures are some ways to communicate themes and appeals.

Organization involves soliciting personnel from both inside and outside the public relations office and administration building. Volunteers can be used.

Three charts are recommended to organize planning and timing--one for each type of goal: immediate, intermediate and long-term. Activities and timing should be scheduled by weeks and months. And, the last step--budgeting--should follow the same divisions. What monies will be needed to achieve each goal should be determined and allocated before starting a public relations program.

If this organizational structure is followed, school public relations people can be sure that their programs will move in logical

order and produce results. But the Harral and NSPRA books guide the public relations person even further into problems that are bound to appear and concepts that might be overlooked.

For example, a school administrator might be well attuned to the needs of parents and other members of the general public and communicate effectively with them. However, he might at the same time overlook a vital part of the process: teachers and other staff members. Uninformed staff people will do a poor job of answering questions from friends and neighbors if the district has not informed them about activities. They should be given as much information as possible for two reasons: They can tell the public about the school system, and they will be happier and more productive if they know the administration wants to keep them informed.

Both books point out that districts should find "key communicators," or people who are respected and listened to in the community. They can be vital in squelching rumors and can keep the administration informed about feelings of the community. Parents, churches, business and industry, volunteers, senior citizens, students, new residents and legislators also are audiences that must be reached. Suggestions are given in the books on how to do so.

The books describe how to start a community newsletter. Advice includes what's newsworthy, how to get the message across clearly and succinctly and how to get the newsletter printed. Also explained in detail are annual reports, district calendars, television and radio, telephone newslines, making speeches, writing letters, special publications and advertisements.

The media and how to work with reporters, broadcasters and editors cannot be overlooked in an effective public relations program. The books advise that public relations people understand that positive school news seldom makes front-page headlines. Cooperation with the media is essential if school news is to be reported fairly. NSPRA explains: "Most media, if treated frankly and honestly when test scores go down, or a teacher is assaulted or a student is arrested for selling drugs, will reciprocate with positive coverage of a successful reading program, an outstanding science project or a drive by students to provide food and clothing for the underprivileged."

Although producing a community newsletter takes much time, school public relations people will find that several other assignments keep them busy each year. These include advisory committees, the basic instructional program, school board meetings, and the budget and financial campaigns.

Citizen advisory boards have become so commonplace within the past several years that school systems no longer ask if they should have such boards, but how to form one. Questions that need answers are how should members be named, what tasks should the committee undertake, how can the most value be gleaned from its work, how can it best serve the school district.

The committee should not be expected to act as a rubber stamp for board and administrative actions. It should not be expected to promote district policies or bail out a school system in trouble with the community, teachers or students.

NSPRA advises school systems not to direct their media efforts just to programs that attract attention, such as an exceptional library exhibit or an outstanding music program. Rather, schools should be concerned that members of the community know how their children are educated day-to-day.

School board meetings are another time-consuming concern that the books say "cry out" for better public relations. Instead of being used as an effective way to communicate with the community, school board meetings often leave the audience angry, bored, frustrated or disgusted with fighting among the trustees. The problems can be avoided if there is adequate planning before the meeting, if procedures are streamlined, if students and curriculum are highlighted and if personal comfort and convenience are given to all.

Budgeting time often is the low point in school public relations. But it doesn't have to be. If the community is involved in actually setting the budget and is invited to participate before figures are set, it is likely to understand better what can and cannot be eliminated or added to the budget.

Decisions about the budget can be shared with the community, teachers, principals and parents. Budget figures can be reworked to make sense to people not involved in school finance. All such measures will work together to build credibility, an absolute must in bond issues or tax levies.

Without such levies and bond issues, most school districts could not afford to operate. Often drastic measures would be required without the additional funding. Teachers would be fired, schools would close,

educational standards would drop. However, school systems cannot go to the taxpayer each year two weeks before the vote on finances and expect automatic "yes" votes. What NSPRA calls a "12-month process; a 12-step program" tells in detail the fundamentals of conducting an effective campaign, from voter registration to what to do on election day.

Each school district has its own problems, needs and idiosyncracies, and no school public relations person can expect to find in any book specific instructions that will work for every school system in the country. But, as Bernays said on the NSPRA tape, school public relations people can "do what good lawyers, good doctors and good certified public accountants do; that is, study the best literature about the subject."

The NSPRA and Harral books should be high on the reading list.



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