1989

# The Establishment of an Effective Communication System in Schools

Graeme Lock
*Western Australian College of Advanced Education*

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte

 Part of the Education Commons

## Recommended Citation

Lock, G. (1989). The Establishment of an Effective Communication System in Schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 14*(1).
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1989v14n1.5

# THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN SCHOOLS

*Graeme Lock*
*WACAE*

One of the emerging trends in Australian education in recent years has been the increasing amount of interaction between schools and their communities. Such a trend is no better exemplified than in the establishment of school-based decision-making groups. The closer relationship which has begun to exist between schools and their communities necessitates an improvement in communication. As part of an investigation into increasing community participation in school decision-making processes, the issue of school-community communication procedures was examined, and its importance ascertained. This article will suggest methods by which school-community communication can be improved and briefly outline the implications that these suggestions have for classroom teachers.

The establishment of an effective communication system in schools can be discussed in a number or respects. These include the need for communication channels to be effective; evaluation of current communication practices; and the restructuring of communication practices, which involves the identification of the characteristics of an effective communication system and the implementation of effective communication practices.

The need to establish effective communication channels has been identified by Foley (1970), Doherty (1970), Goble (1972), Bedley (1977), Rogers (1978). Goldaber (1980), and Daresh (1986). These writers all stated that communication needs to be two-way between the school and the community, each providing information to the other and receiving feedback from each other.

Initially, schools should evaluate the effectiveness of their current communication practices. Long (1985) has briefly discussed the two forms which communication practices usually take — written and oral. Written communication normally involve disseminating and soliciting information via newsletters, news releases or questionaires. Oral communications involve speaking directly to community members at meetings, dinners or other public forums.

An evaluation of current communication practices will probably uncover weaknesses. Gorton (1983) outlined three likely criticisms of communication practices. First, dissemination procedures are not reliable in many instances, for example, school newletters not mailed directly home are frequently lost or destroyed by students. Second, insufficient use is made of additional communication methods such as radio, television, newspapers, and regular parent and community visitations to the school. Third, according to Gorton (1983), the school has not tried hard enough to ascertain the extent to which its messages are being received, understood and acted upon by parents and the community as intended by the school.

In addition to the weaknesses discussed by Gorton (1983), other criticisms of the existing communication practices may include the use of inappropriate vocabulary; a lack of clarity and conciseness in written and oral communications; insufficient notice being given for events or meetings; inattentiveness to personal inquiries; the unavailability of staff members on visits during school hours; and an inadequate number of parent-teacher evenings. The criticisms and weaknesses which the evaluation process has uncovered should receive attention within the restructuring phase of communication practices.

The discovery of any or all of the weaknesses previously outlined necessitates action by schools. In undertaking a restructuring of communication practices Byrne and Powell (1976) discussed the need for a planned effort and suggested criteria which the plan should demonstrate. Included among these criteria were the definitions of responsibilities of the individuals involved; energetic implementation; objective evaluation; and, where necessary, changes to the plan.

To ensure that the issue of communications is thoroughly reviewed, schools, before initiating any change, should establish the desired characteristics of an effective communication system. In conducting the review schools may consider the work of Andrews (1987) who outlined the inclusion of a system of routine, purposive information acquisition and techniques for scanning the relevant environment in order to keep abreast of issues which could contribute to decreasing the distance between schools and their communities. Such a system, according to Andrews (1987), is essential to an effective communication network and in developing an effective communication system, openness (the degree to which a school has linkages with its community) is the key component. Wheeler (1974) provided further support for the contention of an open communication network when he discussed the need to establish both formal and informal links between the school and its community.

While alluding to the need for openness in communication procedures, Ryan (1976) is specific in detailing the characteristics of an effective communication system. The use of mass media, school publications, involvement of the public and encouragement of direct contact with citizens by all school personnel needs to occur to ensure effective communication. Ryan (1976) also stated that efforts should be made to obtain feedback by such means as analysing questions and complaints, monitoring circulating gossip or using public opinion polls.

Gorton (1983) not only discussed the need for communication to be regular, but also identified the need to obtain feedback. He suggested that one method to improve communication effectiveness was to develop a better understanding of the communication needs of the community. Byrne and Powell (1976) supported the need for feedback as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of communications between the school and its community. The also agreed with Ryan's (1976) idea of involvement and indicated that the support of innovative and creative ideas and practices will contribute to the establishment of good school community relations. Further ideas on communication effectiveness could be obtained by research at tertiary institutions, liaising with media companies, and meeting with representatives of other schools and organizations which have developed effective communication practices.

The essentials of an effective communication system can thus be described as being regular, and including relevant and purposive information. The communication network should be open, and establish formal and informal links between the school and its community. Simultaneously, issues which are likely to increase the distance between the school and its community need to be identified and avoided. Community involvement, the use of mass media and school publications, direct contact with school personnel, and supporting creative and innovative practices further enhance communication procedures. Feedback on methods and impact of communicated messages needs to be obtained, thus ensuring continuing evaluation of the methods being used. Consequently, evaluation should result in further refinement and improvement to the school-community communication network.

Implicit within these general characteristics is the necessity for the school to give attention to both qualitative and quantitative aspects of communication. While a school may have recognised and regular modes of communication, the content of the communications may be trivial and ignore issues which require attention. Therefore, although the school's communication channels may be technically sound, the quality of the information being communicated could require improvement.

The characteristics of an effective communication system having been established, schools need to determine specifically how to achieve these characteristics. Available literature provides a thorough examination of the characteristics of an effective communication system, and from this source a wealth of information can be obtained on which to base the practical implementation of the suggested ideas.

De Lellis (1979) offered good advice if communication channels are to be effectively established - begin small, particularly if there has been relatively little communication between the school and the community in the past. He argued that public pronouncements tend to be viewed with scepticism, if not outright cynicism. Therefore, measures to improve communication channels between the school and the community should be undertaken thoroughly, but not loudly.

Strategies to improve communication procedures overall have been examined by McNeely (1983), Gorton (1983), and Andrews (1987). Gorton (1983) suggested that a review of research on parents' preferences for how information about the school. should be communicated to them be undertaken. One such piece of evidence (Gallup 1979:37) revealed that seventy per cent of respondents preferred word of mouth and personal involvement as their best sources; thirty seven per cent identified the local newspaper; sixteen per cent mentioned local television programming; and seven per cent identified school publications and newsletters as their best sources of information about the school. Schools should follow Gorton's (1983) recommendation and undertake a similar survey of the school community. The information obtained from the survey will indicate communication procedures preferred, and those procedures least preferred— and probably in need of improvement.

The establishment of positive linkages with the community is a necessity according to McNeely (1983), Gorton (1983), and Andrews (1987). To ensure this occurs the school needs to identify and secure positive contact with influential community members. While giving these community members different names — "opinion leaders" (McNeely 1983) and "key communicators" (Gorton 1983) both agree on the importance of such contacts, for they are identified as having an important role to play. This involves helping the school communicate important messages, providing solid support for these messages, and reducing the incidence of rumours. Andrews (1987) adopted a somewhat different approach towards the establishment of human linkages with the school community. The concept of a "boundary spanner" is essential to his suggestion. A boundary spanner is an individual with "feet" in both the school system and the community infrastructure. To be a boundary spanner requires skill in compromise, resolution and flexibility, and the ability to operate in situations without formal authority where the use of expertise or friendship is the base of power. Andrews (1987) discussed other characteristics as including the possession of finely-honed verbal skills and the ability to represent norms of the school system to the community in a manner that does not offend or alienate power elites in the community.

An ideal situation would be a combination of the above - boundary spanners working in conjunction with the influential community members. A combination of the two would necessitate close internal consultation, but the rewards of having messages communicated clearly, and with support, to all sectors of the school community would be worth the extra effort involved in maintaining the internal consultation. Schools should pay close attention to this idea. Individuals who could be approached to assist in this manner may include officials of local organizations such as Apex, Lions Clubs, and sports clubs; local and state government representatives; the local media; and members of the school's Parents' and Citizens' Association. The concept of a "boundary spanner" could be applied to members of the Parents' and Citizens' Association,

and it may be worthwhile for the school principal to adopt a higher profile in the community in an attempt to perform a similar role.

Having considered, and established, a human linkage network schools should also pay attention to information available in the literature about other ways of improving the existing communication channels. Oral and personal communication can be improved by the adoption of two methods according to Gorton (1983). First, taped telephone messages can be used to give community members information about the school, for example homework, school activities and school services. Second, the use of a courteous, friendly and helpful approach in situations such as the way parent-teacher conferences are conducted, responses to telephone calls, and the general receptivity of the school office to visitors will generate beneficial outcomes in terms of community attitudes. Accompanying this improvement in community attitude should be a willingness to participate more in school activities.

The taped telephone messages could be produced by students as part of their media study program and , in doing so, would widen school involvement in the restructuring process. Ensuring that a courteous and friendly approach is adopted towards school visitors may necessitate staff at the school attending an in-service course. The in-service course could be the entire agenda of a staff meeting, and be conducted by the staff themselves. Such a move would further widen total school involvement in the restructuring process.

Schools could consider other alternatives to improving oral and personal communication. The number of parent-teacher evenings be increased and copies of teacher's timetables could be kept by the school receptionist so that it becomes possible for parents to make contact with teachers during normal school hours. Deschamp (1986) provided another method of improving personal and oral communication by suggesting that the telephone numbers of members of school decision-making groups be published and by advocating the use of school assemblies to make announcements regarding any developments in school policy.

Improvements to written communication received attention from Gorton (1983), Long (1985), Deschamp (1986) and the Community Participation in Schooling Committee (n.d.). Gorton (1983) described two approaches that should be adopted - written information sent home should be in an attractive and readable form; and important printed information should be mailed. Long (1985) outlined a case for increasing the variety of written information by using the local newspaper and sending out special letters or documents for specific purposes. Deschamp (1986) agreed with the idea of utilizing newspapers and special letters , and added the suggestion that copies be placed in the school library and on school bulletin boards. The Community Participation in Schooling Committee (n.d.) also discussed the use of bulletin boards, and argued for the establishment of a school community newspaper, involving parents and community members in its production.

A variety of methods to improve the standard of written communication have been suggested in the literature. Written information sent home should be attractive and readable, with important printed information, such as special letters, to be mailed. Improving the standard of written information presents another opportunity to encourage school involvement. The art, media and computing departments could become involved in the presentation of various aspects of written information, while the possession of an off-set printer, or similar machine, would allow the material to be produced by students enrolled in relevant courses at the school. Seeking information from media companies could also be considered as part of the process to improve the standard of written communication.

In conjunction with improving the presentation of written communication, schools should also pay attention to the content of the communication. Conciseness, clarity, and the use of appropriate vocabulary ought to be considered, while ensuring that adequate advanced notice is given of proposed events or meetings. Attention to these matters can be undertaken by staff and students at the school as part of the teaching and learning programs.

The literature suggested the use of the local media as an opportunity to disseminate information about the school in alternative forms. This may involve writing a regular column in local community newspapers, ensuring that the achievements of the school receive adequate exposure, the occasional feature in the state newspaper, and appearances on television and radio by the principal or delegated staff members.

On the school premises, the literature argued that improvements to communication could occur by utilising bulletin boards, inviting parents to school assemblies, and establishing a school-community newspaper involving parents and community members in its production. The bulletin boards could be constructed, installed and maintained by students as part of their manual arts program. School assemblies could be conducted by students, and parents or community members invited to address the school on topics of interest. The inception of a school community newspaper may involve media, art and computing students in its presentation, and other students in its production. One of the overall results of adopting these suggestions should be greater school and community involvement in the change process.

Obtaining feedback on communication has been identified as being important. Three methods were discussed by Gorton (1983). First, space for feedback comments, suggestions, or questions in the printed information disseminated by the school should be provided. Deschamp (1986) provided agreement with this idea by suggesting the use of tear-off slips on newsletters. Second, Gorton (1983) argued that parents and community members should be invited to the school in small groups for the purpose of meeting the principal and members of the management committee in an informal atmosphere. From such meetings feedback can be solicited. Third, a community analysis (a process in which

schools attempt to gather information on the characteristics of their community) could be used to obtain feedback on a more systematic basis.

Most schools would have the necessary resources to implement the previously discussed suggestions on restructuring their communication systems. However, there may be some school situations in which the characteristics of the school prevent access to the resources required to undertake the suggested restructuring process. Two such situations could include a small urban primary school and an isolated rural high school.

The general thrust of the methods to establish an effective communication system is applicable to both the small urban primary and rural high school. However, the characteristics or the urban primary school may prohibit certain suggested features or the restructuring phase from being utilised. For example, it could occur that the school does not have the facilities to produce taped telephone messages. To overcome this problem it may be necessary to liaise with an organization, such as a nearby high school or tertiary institution, which is able to provide the required facilities at little or no cost.

The presence of a media department in a small urban primary school is unlikely. Consequently, previous suggestions about the involvement of such a department in the production or oral and written communication is inapplicable. A member of the teaching staff may have skills or an interest in media, which could compensate for the lack of a media department. If there are no members of the teaching staff with the required interest or skills, the implementation team may have to rely on "contacts" in the community to obtain advice on improving and producing aspects of oral and written communications.

In primary school students computer skills may not have been developed to the extent where use could be made of these skills in the production of written communication. A staff member may have the requisite skills, but not have the time to participate in the production process. In an attempt to overcome this difficulty it may be possible to persuade the nearby high school to allow its students to contribute their skills, while ensuring that appropriate accreditation is received for their contribution. Otherwise "contacts" in the local community may have to be utilised.

Although the small urban primary school may possess the facilities to print one to two page newletters, it is unlikely to have the capability of producing a regular school-community newspaper. Approaches could be made to the nearby high school, regional education centre or local businesses for assistance in this respect. If such assistance is unavailable, it may be necessary to compromise with the production of a school-community newsletter.

Students involvement in the production and installation of bulletin boards may be inappropriate in a small urban primary school due to the lack of appropriate skills among the students. In this situation the best alternative may be to persuade parents to contribute their skills to the provision of these boards.

Despite these apparent deficits in the facilities and resources available in a small urban primary school, the suggested alternatives should ensure that an effective communication system will be established. Every effort should be made to involve staff, students and community members in the restructuring communication practices.

The resources available at an isolated rural high school should allow the suggestions on the restructuring of communication practices to be implemented. In addition, the school should consider the role of the local media in its efforts to improve the school's communication system. The isolation of the school, although impairing access to television exposure, probably makes the use of the available local media (newspaper and radio) more important than in the case of a school located in a large metropolitan area.

## Summary

The establishment of an effective communication system follows a clearly delineated path. Schools should initially evaluate existing communication practices and note any weaknesses. Restructuring communication practices involves the identification of the characteristics of an effective communication system, before enacting the desired characteristics. The result of the process should be an effective and efficient communication system which disseminates information to, and received feedback from, all sectors of the community. Schools should attempt to involve staff and students at the school, and community members, in as many possible aspects of the process to change communication practices. Throughout this process schools should also remember the advice given by Byrne and Powell (1978) who insisted that, while the existence of the characteristics of an effective communication system do not guarantee success, they are the elements without which success can never be obtained.

## Comment

The trend towards closer school-community relations in Australian schools is becoming increasingly evident. Part of this closer relationship could involve some of the ideas in this article. Should some or all of these ideas be adopted by schools the implications on teachers ought to be considered. Such implications may be discussed in two areas. First, pre-service training for teachers. Second, in-service training and the acceptance of additional responsibilities for practicing classroom teachers.

Pre-service training for teachers should include courses on the area of school-community communication. The method that training institutions could adopt to discuss this issue could include the more traditional approaches such as lectures, tutorials and research assignments. Consideration could also be given to devoting a portion of the teaching practice sessions to the observation of, and participation in, communication practices used by the schools in which

the practice sessions are conducted. Such first-hand experience may prove to be of value to both the student teacher and the school.

Attempts to involve practicing classroom teachers in school-community communication procedures may be contentious, particularly if overall teacher morale and job satisfaction are low. Involvement in school-community communication procedures may be viewed with some hostility if these conditions exist. Consequently, any attempts to directly involve teachers in the school's communication system should be carefully considered. The principal may be able to offer release from some duties as an inducement for staff to contribute the time required to make an effective contribution.

In-service courses could be conducted to facilitate the development of appropriate skills among teachers. However, if the prevailing attitude among teachers is negative to anything new, extreme care should be taken with the timing and presentation of such courses. The employment of an external agent may overcome any problems, not only with the presentation of in-service courses, but also to act as an adviser and assistant in the development of a school's communication system.

In summary, the implications of the suggested ideas on the development of a school-community communication network on teachers are twofold. First, pre-service courses may have to develop an awareness of, and skills in, communication. Second, practicing teachers may have to develop appropriate skills to be able to contribute towards the establishment of effective school-community communications.

## References

Andrews, R.L. (1987), The School Community Interface: Strategies of Community Involvement. In J.I. Goodlad (ed)., *The Ecology of School Renewal*, N.S.S.E., Chicago.

Bedley, G. (1977), How One Principal Promotes Positive School Climate, *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 7, 2, 15-16.

Byrne, R. and Powell, E. (1976), *Strengthening School-Community Relations*, N.A.S.S.P., Reston.

Community Participation in Schooling Committee, (n.d.), *Increasing Community Involvement*.

Daresh, J.C. (1986), Effective Home-School-Community Relations for Second School Improvement, *Clearing House, 59*, 7, 312-315.

De Lellis, A.J. (1979), A Principal's Guide to Working with the Community, *N.A.S.S.P. Bulletin, 63*, 426, 53-59.

Deschamp, M. (1986), *Community Participation in Schooling Project - Interim Report*, Education Department of Western Australia, Perth.

Doherty, J. E. (1970), Who is in Charge of Our Schools? *Updating School Board Policies, 1* 5, 3-4.

Foley, A.D. (1970), Dialogue, Decision, Development, Demonstration and Diffusion. The Five D's of Educational Change, *A.E.D.S. Journal 13,* 4, 103-105.

Gallup, G.H. (1979), The Eleventh Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude toward the Public Schools, *Phi Delta Kappan,* September, 37.

Goldaber, I. (1980), Community Involvement in School Closing: A New Approach to a Growing Problem, *Updating School Board Policies, 11,* 6, 1-3, 5.

Long, C. (1985), How to Get Community Support, *Principal, 64,* 5, 28-30.

McNeely, R.L. (1983), Conceptualising Models of Linkage for Community Involvement in Educational Desegregation, *Urban Review 15,* 3, 165-176.

Rogers, R. (1978), The Closures Are Coming to Town, *Times Educational Supplement (London), 3304,* 18-19, October 27.

Ryan, C. (1976), *The Open Partnership — Equality in Running Schools,* McGraw-Hill, New York.

Wheeler, D. (1974), *Community, Curriculum and Change,* School of Teacher Education, Australia.