

PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE MEDIA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING A  
BETTER PARTNERSHIP.

By

W. Chris Gill

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Educational Leadership Program

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2015

Public Schools and the Media: Recommendations for Building a Better Partnership.

W. Chris Gill

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*W. Chris Gill, Student* *Date*

Approvals:

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*Dr. Robert J. Beebe* *Date*

---

*Dr. Randy Hoover* *Date*

---

*Dr. Jane Beese* *Date*

---

*Dr. Rebecca Curnalia* *Date*

---

*Dr. Sal Sanders, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research* *Date*

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## ABSTRACT

The battle for public education in America has begun. Public schools are at an important point in history. Consistent curriculum changes, constant scrutiny, budgetary reductions, right-to-know laws, high-stakes testing, and violence in our schools have placed public schooling in the spotlight like never before. Public school leaders must establish and maintain viable partnerships with media and communities. Partnerships are created by understanding the role of the media and engaging the community, local businesses, and parents. Working in unison, all elements of the community are vital for public school leaders in strengthening the public institutions and their role within the community.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. My wife, Maria has been a driving, influential force in my life. She provides unwavering support, love, and honesty for all aspects of my professional career and personal life. She is by far the most intelligent, strong-willed and caring individual in my life. I love her for these attributes and, more importantly, for the person she has helped me become. Without Maria, no part of my happy life would be possible. To my daughter, Sophia, never let anyone dictate your life course. You alone and those you truly love and trust are the deciding factors in your success and happiness. Watching you grow moment by moment and seeing your curiosity about the world around you is a spectacular experience. You possess all the tools needed for success and most importantly, happiness: grit, intelligence, and a kind heart. I love you both with all my heart and intellect.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation represents the collective efforts of many people who offered expertise, advice, opinion, and critique to me as I formulated, researched, and wrote about public schools, the media, and forming better partnerships. A special thank you goes to my dissertation committee for their patience, expertise, and guidance during the research and writing process. I would like to personally thank Dr. Robert Beebe for his encouragement, time, wisdom, and personal attention. I especially enjoyed our conversations about education, educational philosophies, and life. Your belief in me will never be forgotten. I wish you all the health and happiness in your upcoming retirement. I would also like to recognize Dr. Randy Hoover. Dr. Hoover's unwavering support of both me and my topic provided me the encouragement to pursue this advanced degree. Both Dr. Beebe and Dr. Hoover have been an important part of my education from my Master's Degree to this degree and I thank them for their efforts. Dr. Jane Beese and Dr. Rebecca Curnalia deserve my profound appreciation as well. Dr. Beese's requests for clarity and Dr. Curnalia's expertise in the field of communication were both welcome pieces of the dissertation puzzle. A special thank you goes to Bonnie Auletta for editing my work and providing much needed assistance with the writing process.

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# Public Schools and the Media: Recommendations for Building a Better Partnership.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Statement of the Problem

Effective school and community relations are more vital to the educational system now than ever before given the climate of scrutiny that surrounds public education today. Public school leaders know that good relationships with their communities do not happen by accident nor are they guaranteed. They require strategic planning and sustained efforts to succeed (Hooper, 2001). High-stakes test scores, budgetary cutbacks, charter schools, vouchers, disciplinary concerns, and personnel issues are consistently presented to our communities via online newspapers. Schools must reintroduce themselves to the community and stop creating opportunities for the media to shed a poor light on them. If public schools are going to create viable and positive working relationships with the media, understanding the role of the online newspaper editor is essential.

Public schools need to improve their engagement with the community and the media. David Mathews (1997), President of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, feels that school reform has to be recast as public building. Working collaboratively with the public to establish and reestablish relationships as well as intentionally engaging the public is vital for the success and continuation of public schools in the United States. Parents, business leaders, politicians, government agencies,

and even the media feel disconnected from their public schools (Mathews, 1997). They feel they are merely spectators in the educational process. Many feel their public schools are not their schools. When Mathews (1997) spoke about public building in our local schools, he noted that there is often no public to engage and no desire by the public to be engaged. The public's trust in the system has been marginalized, and the public have effectively been told to stay away. Parents, business leaders, politicians, government agencies, and even the media should be welcomed into the public school system. Their involvement and inclusion in meetings, conferences, emails, and correspondence home allow these families and community organizations to become a part of the system where their voices can be heard and their concerns met.

Public school leaders have an obligation to focus on the community and the school together as well as learn how to “work across borders,” as former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner once wrote (as cited in Blank, 2006, p. 1; Mathews, 1997). The goal for education is to build partnerships and recognize the importance of youth development and the connection to family and community (Blank, 2006). Public school leaders who understand the importance of public building recognize how the integration of school and community creates positive, credible reform in our public schools. The local community, made-up of parents, business leaders, government agencies, and the media are then included in the decision making process and goal planning for their public institutions, thereby creating viable and sustainable school reform. Schools become centers of the community where public school leaders can focus on academics with the support of local families, create health and social service programs to assist all families, and bolster youth and community development programs (Blank,

2006). In towns where schools and the community develop a partnership, public school leaders and community leaders are able to accomplish several goals: 1. nurturing and expanding networks among schools, local governments, businesses, civic and other institutions. 2. engaging the community by selling not just their own agenda but by sharing, listening, and responding. Public school leaders are able to outline and define results attainable for all and goals that reflect mutual interests. These partnerships can work to align the resources of the school with those of the community. Achieving common goals and ensuring long-term, sustained support is the objective of public schools (Blank, 2006).

#### Current Practices for Community Relations and the Media and their Connection to Public Schools

When schools, parents, families, the media, and businesses within the community work together to support learning and school improvement, students tend to earn higher grades, attend more regularly, graduate more consistently, and enroll in higher level programs (Van Roekel, 2008). Research has cited that parent-family-community partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and more motivated students. The evidence supports this notion from elementary through the secondary level regardless of parents' education and family income (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Barton, 2003; Jeynes, 2003). Because family and community involvement can mean different things to different people, a research-based framework for how to involve the community, families, and schools is needed. Joyce Epstein (1992) describes six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with

the community. All offer a broad range of school, family, and community activities that engage all parties and help meet student needs.

Parenting, the first element of Epstein's (1992) framework, means assisting families with parenting skills and family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and creating home environments to support learning at each age and grade level. Schools also require much needed assistance in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals that the parents have for their children. The second element is communicating with families about school programs and student progress. A two-way communication channel between school and home is only effective when it is consistent. The third element in the framework of involvement is volunteering. Improved recruiting and training of volunteers should include families and guidance provided to educators who work with volunteers that support students and the school (Epstein, 1992). The fourth characteristic in the framework is learning at home, which is closely related to the second element of communication. Schools should involve families in their children's academic learning at home including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Public school leaders must be open and transparent with their families about the school's academic expectations for all students. In Epstein's fifth element, decision making, schools involve families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils, improvement teams, and committees. Collaborating with the community, the sixth piece of Epstein's framework, speaks about coordinating resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities. Enabling staff, students, and families to contribute their

service to the community is essential if public school leaders are going to reconnect schools to the community (Epstein, 1992). Epstein (2004) continued, saying that comprehensive partnership programs include activities for all six types of involvement, such as workshops for parents, newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and inclusion of volunteers. Each activity raises unique challenges that must be addressed by public school leaders in order to involve families and community members and to create the communication desired for positive change.

Epstein's statements and research ring true. Today's public school leaders are responsible now, more than ever before, to incorporate the community into their public school systems. When public school leaders mention the community, they need to know that an important element of the community is the media. Journalists and editors whose job it is to report on schools and education need to be a part of the school-community equation. Just as the school environment reflects society, the media does as well. Therefore, as public schools decide to make a concerted effort to speak of their successes, challenges, and concerns, the media is invited to become a partner in this plan to echo the sentiments and desires of the school to the community. It is through this bond and association with the schools that the media becomes the bridge that public schools will travel on to demonstrate their worth.

The whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its youth. In addition to the role that parents and families play in the education of a young child, the broader community also has a responsibility to assure high-quality education (Van Roekel, 2008). In the past, community involvement was achieved through volunteers, mostly mothers, assisting in the classroom, chaperoning

field trips, and fundraising. This old model has been replaced by a new, more transparent approach. School-family-community partnerships now include business leaders, community groups, non-profit institutions, parents, guardians, grandparents, and the media with all these individuals and groups linked to student success and achievement (Van Roekel, 2008). This new model of success involves the media, specifically the editors, who make decisions about what becomes published in online newspapers. These individuals make or help to make selective decisions on how and why many news items are presented (Cassidy, 2006). Their involvement, as a vital and influential member of the community, is essential in the success of America's public school image.

Further enhancing the need for public involvement, Vollmer (2010) spoke about having what he refers to as *The Great Conversation*, a positive, ongoing discussion between public school leaders and the people of the community they serve. *The Great Conversation's* key feature is that it takes place on the community's turf, away from the forces that have eroded public trust. Vollmer (2010) stated that we cannot continue to invite the public to our house for meetings and conferences that attract the same people who traditionally attend all the meetings. Public school leaders must reach further into the local community in an attempt to heal the damage caused by all the negativity of the past. At the same time, schools must strive and work tirelessly to increase community support for schools. Public school leaders must take this action, and they need to bring the media along with them. "Less than 20 percent of your taxpayers have children in school," Vollmer (2012) stated. Those very taxpayers are voting and making critical decisions on what happens in the schools. Encouraging the community to support their public schools is a win-win since a thriving community is related to the quality of the local public



schools. Vollmer (2012) stated that schools should perform the “5 S’s:” (1) Stop badmouthing each other in public. (2) Shift your attention from negative to positive. (3) Share your success with the community. (4) Sustain the effort. (5) Start now. Using ideas gleaned from Vollmer, public school leaders need to improve their relationship with the media. As Vollmer stated, if the same individuals are the only attendees at every school meeting, then we must change what we are doing. Our relationship with the media must be improved to assist those individuals who feel cut off from the public school district.

### Defining the Media

For this research, the media specifically refers to the online newspaper editors who are employed at one of the five regional newspapers: *The Youngstown Vindicator*, *The Erie Times*, *The Sharon Herald*, *The New Castle News*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. These editors are responsible for assigning stories to journalists to investigate and making the publishing decisions for each educational story.

If public school leaders are going to improve their connection with the community, they must include the online newspaper editors because they are important stakeholders within the community. Shoemaker, Eicholz, Kim and Wrigley (2006) contend that “gatekeeping in mass communication can be seen as the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed” (p. 233). Online newspaper editors can be influential in getting the message of the school into the community. Public school leaders should be building bridges with the editors by letting the media in and dealing with them openly and honestly. Blair (2005) even encourages public school leaders to allow the press to walk the hallways, attend classes, and talk to students, teachers, and staff members to gain a better understanding of public education

in the community. Bringing the community and media into the school improvement conversation only enhances what we already know: “Schools cannot succeed apart from community and community cannot succeed apart from schools” (Shorthouse, 2011, p. 1). Public school leaders do not need to be afraid of the media. Instead, inviting them to school functions when the school is celebrating their achievements, welcoming them to school board meetings when many positive successful programs are being profiled, and allowing them to freely and openly ask questions to public school leaders and teachers will cultivate the credible report needed to restore the community’s faith in our public school systems.

Although public school leaders are equipped to deal with the media in a time of crisis, they may not be equipped to communicate with the media on a regular basis and having the ability to do so helps build and foster positive relationships with the media (Schneider & Hollenczer, 2006). Becoming acquainted with online newspaper editors in the region is critical. Although public school leaders cannot control what is written, the media are essential in communicating good news, and developing a plan to deal with media is a sound idea. Public school leaders linked to the needs of the community are proactive and timely with good news and are responsive to the media with bad news. The statement, no comment, should be avoided. Instead, schools locate accurate information and call the media back with honest answers (Schneider & Hollenczer, 2006).

### Media Relations

Media relations refer to the relationship that a company or institution develops with journalists or editors. It involves working with the media for the purpose of informing the public of an organization’s mission, policies, and practices in a positive,

consistent, and credible manner (Johnston, 2008). The media have a role to play in cooperation with schools to convey a message to the community about specific successes and even struggles of public schools. This message is important for public school growth, sustainability, and credibility.

Media relations have a central role within the practice of public relations because the media are the “gatekeepers controlling the information that flows to the other publics in a social system” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, np). Understandably, it is easy and convenient to blame the media for any negative story that is reported. At the 1997 annual conference of the Education Writers Association, the school reform organization Public Agenda, released its report *Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About the Educational Press*. The survey revealed that 75 to 91 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that reporters cover educational news according to what sells, unfairly dwelling on conflict and failure, using quotes and statistics out of context, and helping to progress the decline in confidence of our public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1998). Failing schools, poor teachers, ineffective administrators, and unethical decisions, certainly do happen and need to be published and presented. Reporters are doing their job reporting what they see and hear about our schools and communities. When speaking to reporters who cover education, Watson (1998) heard them ask, “Why don’t people understand that our job is to cover schools, not to make them look good?” (p. 13). Although the media’s responsibilities for publishing difficult material can create irritation, the media can also be a positive source of support, provide the school an outlet and opportunity to enhance their own message, and connect the community (Keen, 2008). It is with this thought and focus that educators must discuss how citizens can become re-engaged in public schools.

Public school leaders cannot insulate themselves in the school. They must place themselves into the public and engage the community, government, business leaders, and the media. The entire community must reach out to the media, politicians, and business leaders if they are to find a larger purpose for schools than just teaching students. It is this passion and call to action that can create the interconnectedness that defines successful communities and schools and re-establishes faith to anyone who lives within the community (Mathews, 1997). Although schools and their employees can be their own worst enemies, Berliner and Biddle (1995) cite numerous examples in which the media place an overemphasis on blaming schools, teachers, and administrators when indeed there are several other factors that typically go unnoticed. Adler and Shadlow noted this fact in 2006:

The exaggerated notion about the educational system's capacity as an agent of social change may in turn result in blaming teachers and schools for practically every adversity in the society. The reformers simply failed to understand that the school is only one of a multitude of institutions in our society and that no amount of tinkering with any single institution could bring about fundamental social, economic, or moral changes (p. 2)

### Connecting the Community

Research by educators is pointing in new directions for developing comprehensive partnership programs with family and community involvement activities linked to school improvement goals (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2001). The objective for any public school institution should be the addition of a public voice to what some view or

feel is shut off and disconnected from them. The first recommendation and direction is to engage the community and media to re-welcome them into the public school system. The core of all efforts is essentially about strategic communication, and if persuasion is the goal, then the principles are the same regardless of the scale of the effort (Mizrahi & Gibson, 2004). Public school leaders must have a set of defined strategies and techniques for getting their message out there. One method is to systematically identify who the audience is and how to communicate with this audience. Civic and social groups, elected officials, and business leaders require public school leaders to develop a plan that is tailored specifically to each group while retaining the same message overall (Mizrahi & Gibson, 2004). This focus is essential in systematically identifying how to communicate with each audience.

A second recommendation for improving public engagement resides in the connection the public schools have with the media. Developing a working, genuine relationship with reporters, journalists or editors is similar to developing positive communication with students, teachers, and families of the community. Both require a genuine, transparent, and honest approach. Timely feedback, answers to questions, and a desire to remove obstacles, not create them is the approach most likely to lead to success. Establishing relationships and building trust is the goal (Domenech, 2005). School districts cannot control what editors write nor can they control what the media publish. School districts can send out numerous press releases and yet see only a few appear in the online newspapers. However, public school leaders can work with the media to achieve a balance between what they want publicized and what the media will publicize

(Domenech, 2005). This approach can assist in helping neutralize the negative perceptions that public school leaders may have about the press.

A third recommendation for connecting the community to public schools is to create a specific, strategic, and sustained effort to do so. Schools need to identify stakeholders and communicate quality and credible information to them. The information schools provide must be information the media and community need to understand that is connected to their educational programs and goals.

Johnson and Freidman (2006) state that in-depth surveys about public education consistently reveal poor communication within schools and school districts themselves. This must be rectified. Public schools certainly cannot connect with the public if they cannot even communicate among themselves. School districts frequently fail to engage themselves in conversation and sharing of information. Public schools must embrace communication and become proactive (Johnson & Freidman, 2006).

Many of today's public school leaders have developed skill sets for crafting plans and programs and formulating solutions for a difficult time. The time has come for a proactive, positive-minded approach to linking education, the community, and the media. It is essential that the model becomes one of the co-production of education with the public and public schools working together for the broader goal of educating students. This is certainly a pivotal point in school history. Public education is at a crossroads, and public school leaders must respond as never before.

#### Purpose of the Study

In this study, the researcher will explore the relationship among public education, the media, and community. In order to restore legitimacy to our institutions, public school leaders must fully understand how the media functions and how they affect their organizations. Although many public school leaders may not be familiar with specific media theories, they are certainly familiar with the media and their responsibility to report what occurs in our public schools.

Lippman (1922) describes how public opinion responds to the pseudo-environment, which he describes as the world constructed by the media. Therefore, public school leaders must be proactive as to what becomes printed and published by the media.

The Gatekeeping theory refers to the concept that there is some selectivity in how and why many news items are presented (Shoemaker, 2001). Online newspaper editors function as the gatekeepers and essentially decide what is published in online newspapers. Research will demonstrate that there is some subjectivity to this action. Public school leaders must know that the firing of professional employees due to their inability to manage their position will make the headlines, and they must also recognize that additional spending or budget cuts will become news as well. Public school institutions can take solace in realizing that they can accompany these unsettling stories with stories that demonstrate their triumph in spite of these difficult truths. Constant and consistent press releases from schools to their media allies may potentially create the necessary counterbalance to negative realities. Additionally, if the direct route to the media does not yield the result desired, public school leaders may have to create methods and develop ways to tell their story when the media will not. Developing a positive and

honest approach to the media can assist public schools in helping themselves (Shoemaker, 2006).

Agenda-setting refers to the concept that the media places more importance on certain issues than on others (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). The editors of newspapers have a meaningful role to play because they attach a level of importance to issues that influence the public, the public then learning in proportion to how much emphasis is placed upon these issues. When public school leaders develop a media-positive attitude, they will begin to see changes in the construction of messages about their schools. Editors have a job to do, and public school leaders can make their job easier. Public school leaders know that editors will not promise to write and publish only positive stories about schools. But developing a relationship with those who set the agenda, cooperating with the media, and helping them acquire the information they need in a timely and open fashion prompt the media to print information that public school leaders desire and begin to develop a more pro-public school message (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

In Chapter 2, two media theories are presented in detail. The research highlights and describes each theory and delves into the history and application of each. The research also provides necessary background information that public school leaders can use as a model to educate themselves as to how and why the media function.

Through narrative analysis with online newspaper editors, the researcher will seek and report recommendations for public school leaders in reconnecting the media and



community to the public schools. Interviews of online newspaper editors at five local regional newspapers will be conducted.

### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study rests in the recommendations that online newspaper editors will provide to the researcher. These recommendations will enable public school leaders to build better relationships with the media and consequently with the community as well. Interviews with five local online newspaper editors will provide information on how public school institutions and leaders can learn to engage the community and welcome them into their local school systems.

Many communities have lost faith in their local public schools due in part to educators' negligence and failure to communicate with the community (Mathews, 1997). Public schools need to establish faith and place trust back into the system. It is time that the public school leaders reach out to the media and community to establish viable and sustainable partnerships for the future. These partnerships are necessary for all public school leaders and employees. The recommendations gained from interviews with the online newspaper editors will provide public schools leaders the necessary background to jump start their media-school relations in getting the message out to the public that many public schools are successful and accommodating despite the many challenges they face. The representation of our public schools is not the fault of the media since the media only know what public school leaders tell them and allow them to know. Stating the progress and success of public school is the job of public schools leaders. Doing so is essential

while schools must simultaneously create sound educational experiences and a variety of learning opportunities while they test and re-test students in a high-stakes environment.

It is significant for public school leaders to also understand the role of the media and how it functions. Media history and background as well as literature on media theory are important for public school leaders in order to see how media reporting and education are linked.

### Limitations

One significant limitation in this study is that few editors have knowledge and understanding of how the educational system functions. From individual classroom lessons to school board executive meetings, there are many public school procedures that are beyond the scope of both the public and those who report on it. Additionally, editors may not have knowledge of the difficulties teachers and public school leaders, face on a daily basis from hungry children to curriculum and assessment.

A second limitation concerns the answers that each editor provides. Online newspaper editors may or may not be honest and forthcoming with their answers because of the researcher's profession. They may provide only limited answers that lack depth and breadth. A sincere attempt to understand and appreciate the role of an editor will be taken by the researcher.

A third limitation is the use of only five online newspapers. Because the online newspapers selected constitute only a portion of eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, they may not represent the views for the remainder of the United States. This limited

sample size may produce responses to the interview questions that are limited thus not providing an adequate number of themes that can be useful by public school leaders.

A fourth limitation is the researcher's relationship with the editors. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher had no relationship with any of the newspaper editors used in this research. Establishing a relationship with one or all of the newspaper editors prior to conducting this research may have yielded more open and honest responses.

#### Delimitations

The issues and challenges of public schools are outlined and discussed. There is no attempt to include private institutions and no attempt to determine if privately funded schools face similar challenges in connecting with the media or community.

Only online newspaper editors are chosen to participate in this study. They represent the online versions of *The Youngstown Vindicator*, *The Erie Times*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *The Sharon Herald*, and *The New Castle News*.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Cable television and media outlets on the Internet such as, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com) are on the rise, providing more information options for consumers (Maier, 2010). With minimal effort, American consumers can now access online newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television stations all over the world at any time day or night. With this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, it is no surprise that media choices increasingly reflect varied opinions and ideologies. People who feel strongly about an issue can seek out information they believe is consistent with their beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

People increasingly differentiate between various news outlets, and individuals tend to find some more trustworthy than others. Trust, reliability, and perceived bias in the media occur on a number of different levels. For example, Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) delineate between three levels at which people may perceive bias: “the individual level (e.g., journalists such as Bob Woodward or Sam Donaldson); the institutional level (e.g., outlets such as the *New York Times*); or at the industry level (virtually all mainstream media)” (p. 150-151). Because of the vast array of media options, people are now, more than in the past, forming their own impressions of media bias based on perceived differences between outlets (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999).

Trust in the media is a concern for the public regardless of where they receive their news. Traditional sources of news such as television, magazines, and print newspapers face the same issues of perceived bias as does the Internet, a more modern source of news. After all, “we trust the doctor not to do us deliberate injury because we expect him or her to live by the Hippocratic Oath and the standards of the medical profession” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). Numerous surveys point out that trust in the media has declined over the past several decades (Moy & Pfau, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2005; Prior, 2007). This fact is a concern for public schools and the community because the media are arguably the most important resource for people to obtain information that is necessary to be productive, informed citizens. Instead of complaining about this lack of trust, public school leaders can embrace the opportunity to build positive relationships with the media and community. Doing so enhances the public school image through intentional and systematic reports of public school success and adaptability to challenges in the modern age.

#### Gatekeeping and Newsworthiness

Negative news can be thought of as failing schools, crime, political conflict, public health concerns, terrorism, sex scandals, poor economic forecasts, poverty, war, and death. The bad news generally comes first, and then, later news stories reveal the background of the events reported (Shoemaker, 2006), so it is safe to say that if developments are negative, they are more likely to become news. Stories continue to be news until the problems are resolved (Shoemaker, 2006).

In 2006, Aiken and Shoemaker conducted a study of newsworthiness in ten countries that illustrates a certain disconnect between what people think is newsworthy and how prominently newspapers display these subjects. People were separated into four focus groups – journalists, public relations practitioners, low-socioeconomic audience, and high socio-economic audience. The groups were then interviewed and asked to rank ten headlines according to their newsworthiness. Each set of headlines was taken from their respective local newspapers several months earlier. Interestingly, people in each focus group ranked the stories in much the same way. The researchers found that journalists agreed with public relations practitioners and that high socio-economic status audience members agreed with low socio-economic status audience members. Therefore, no matter what their respective status, people agreed on their perceptions of what constitutes newsworthy events (Shoemaker, 2006). However, when the study compared the people's newsworthiness rankings to how prominently their local newspapers had displayed the stories, agreement was much lower, even a negative correlation in some locations. In most countries, the relationship was positive but certainly much weaker than the relationships between the focus groups (Shoemaker, 2006).

All news may not be considered newsworthy and consequently be selected for publication by online newspaper editors. What is revealed is that the newsworthiness of an event is only one of many factors that determine how prominently the story will be displayed. What cannot be certain is that even the most prominently covered stories are the ones that people, such as those in the above mentioned focus group, think are most newsworthy. Also, we cannot reasonably expect people's judgments about what is newsworthy to correlate highly with what actually becomes a chosen news story. The fact

that a story is simply thought of as newsworthy is not a good predictor of what will become news. Newsworthiness is a thought or a judgment whereas news is a social artifact, a thing (Shoemaker, 2006). News may be a primitive concept in that everyone knows what it is, but that concept is far from simple. What will eventually become news is a long list of factors and influences (Shoemaker, 2006).

For those who live in a democratic society, the role of the media is not to mirror the world as it is, but rather to draw attention to problems and situations that need solutions and repair. Conversely, in an authoritarian society, the media is not reflective of reality. Instead, it seeks to portray the world that those in power desire to be real (Shoemaker, 2006). These two societies, although seeming to be different, are similar in that the gatekeepers decide what will actually become news, and their assessments of what would be of interest to the public are almost the same. The gatekeepers share a common understanding of which kinds of events people want to know about. More importantly, whether gatekeepers allow or encourage the event to become news depends on many factors, but it is clear that people are able to predict what other people want to know (Shoemaker, 2006).

### Gatekeeping History

Gatekeeping refers to the concept that there is some selectivity in how and why certain news items are presented (Cassidy, 2006). Although early studies examined the possibility of a lone gatekeeper, further studies have revealed that the work and decisions of gatekeepers are influenced by many levels of gatekeeping forces such as the professional routines of editors and the constant influence of the news organization

(Shoemaker, Eicholz, Kim & Wrigley, 2006). This reveals a more complex process than was previously thought. Shoemaker, Eicholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2006) contend that “gatekeeping in mass communication can be seen as the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed” (p. 233). The gatekeeping theory was first proposed by psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) who tells us that there are forces that may either slow down or allow for the passage of news items via the gatekeeping process. White (1950) was the first to apply the gatekeeping theory in a journalism context, studying the decisions made by a newspaper wire editor who selected stories that should be published. In his seminal gatekeeping study, White (1950) asked why some stories were published while others were not. He had an editor named “Mr. Gates” keep track of all stories available for publication in one week and then record his reasons for rejecting or publishing various stories. Although many stories were rejected for reasons of no space or waiting for more information, White (1950) concluded that many judgments were based on personal values and subjective reasons (Petrow, 1982). Sixteen years later in a replica study, Snider (1967) used the same “Mr. Gates” and found that the news stories chosen represented a better balance among story topics, but the news judgments were still based on personal values. Furthermore, Stempel (1985) examined the gatekeeper theory to look at how editors choose individual stories as well as a mix of stories from different categories. He found agreement among the mix of story topics but disagreement on the specific stories that were published or aired on television. One of the reasons for this disagreement is that a single gatekeeper does not always make the final decisions (Stempel, 1985). Berkowitz’s (1990) study of network-affiliated television discovered that a group of people is responsible for the final decisions of what gets aired



and what does not. Most importantly, Berkowitz (1990) found that these journalists based their decisions on instincts instead of textbook news values.

To further explain the gatekeeper phenomenon, Petrow (1982) conducted a study that placed a slight twist on the “Mr. Gates” process first presented by White (1950). Petrow brought “Mr. Gates” into a classroom of students at New York University and asked eleven students to assume that they were the editors of a New York City newspaper or television news program. He asked them to look at several stories, none of which were true but conceivably could have been and to select four stories for publication or newscast and rank them in order of importance. The stories contained information about a new male birth control pill; New York City Mayor Koch’s visit to Queens; Mobil Oil’s discovery of oil in the Atlantic; Former President Nixon’s visit to Poland; the New York City Board of Education’s announcement of a decline in reading scores; the rise of the price of gold in European markets; an Albany, New York, passenger train derailment; President Reagan’s consideration of a shorter work day due to his fatigue; and the Coast Guard announcement that a Montauk lighthouse will cease operations (Petrow, 1982).

The results of the ranking reveal that the male birth control pill story ended up in the top four of all participants. President Reagan’s health and the Mobil Oil discovery appeared in the top four stories nine times. The decline in New York City’s reading scores, the passenger train wreck, and former President Nixon’s trip to Poland appeared in the top four stories, six, five, and four times respectively. Resting at the bottom of importance for the participants were the stories about Mayor Koch, the gold prices, and the Montauk lighthouse (Petrow, 1982). Although the appearance of these stories in the top four is important, the importance of this study and significance of the research are

represented in the reasons why participants chose or rejected each fictional story (Petrow, 1982). All students agreed that the American Medical Association's announcement of a male birth control pill was important. While some participants felt it should be published because it was a new topic, another said that it was 'of vital importance to the whole world' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 11). Another student commented that 'contraception can be big business,' while another felt 'it would be a relief for women' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 11).

The next important story, about President Reagan, contained comments that varied on the reasons for their selection. One student commented, 'everyone's dream or nightmare come true' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 11). Several others noted that the state of a President's health is always important. The two students who did not include it in the top four felt the story was minor and that worrying about the President's health is unimportant. The third most significant story was about Mobil Oil's discovery of oil in the Atlantic Ocean not far from the coast of New York City. One student saw it as an economic issue and commented, 'Price of oil affects pocketbooks,' while another explained that 'it was important because of the energy crisis' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 11). Roughly a 50-50 split occurred with the fall of the NYC reading scores. Those that chose it in their top four said, 'Even a slight decline worries parents', and 'This seems to confirm feelings that tax dollars are going down the drain' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 11). Participants rejected this story because 'this has been going on a long time and it is not as juicy as the birth control story' (cited in Petrow, 1982, p.11). Five students placed the Albany passenger train accident in the top four. They stated, 'Death and destruction are always important' (Petrow, 1982, p. 11). Those who rejected the story felt that Albany

does not have psychological proximity and that “one dead isn’t that many” (Petrow, 1982, p. 11).

Of the remaining fictional stories, Former President Nixon’s visit to Poland evoked the most subjective and passionate responses. Although only four participants placed it in the top four of importance, participants clearly indicated their dislike of the former President and this feeling certainly contributed to the downplaying of its importance. ‘What Nixon does privately is his own business,’ one noted (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 41). Others wrote, ‘Nixon is horrible; who cares for him?’ ‘Maybe they will keep him’ and ‘Private visits don’t count. He’s not an elder statesman, as much as he’d like to be’ (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 41). Some students did understand the story’s importance and commented that ‘it’s unusual for a former President to become embroiled in a politically tense situation’ (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 41). Another wrote, ‘Story is an odd one, but with international pressure on that nation, a disgraced American President being invited there is newsworthy’ (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 41). The remaining stories about Mayor Koch’s visit to a new incinerator and gold prices rising evoked few responses. Due to the content of its being an incinerator and being boring, to gold’s constant fluctuation, these stories would not have passed the gatekeeper. Interestingly, had the one student who placed the Montauk Lighthouse closing in the top four been the media gatekeeper, he would have passed it through. For him, it provided emotion and personal feelings that ‘everyone likes lighthouses’ (cited in Petrow, 1982, p. 41). His reasons were subjective, personal, and, in his eyes, significant enough to be placed in the newspaper or appear on the news. Petrow’s (1982) study represents examination into the decisions of editors. Individuals in the media who are in charge of what stories become

published or appear on television possess extraordinary potential for use and abuse of their power. The ability to publish stories of their choosing, either alone or collaboratively, represents an interesting opportunity - to use these choices to influence the public.

White (1950) concluded that the editor's decisions were highly subjective and based on the gatekeeper's own set of experiences, attitudes, expectations, and personal values as to what makes up the news. Gatekeeping is a process that demonstrates forces functioning on more than just the individual level of examination (Cassidy, 2006). Research illustrating journalists' beliefs about their roles in newsgathering began with the work of Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman (1976), who discovered that some journalists saw themselves as the important link responsible for dispensing information to the public. Although the concept of a link may be true, some journalists believed their outlook was to examine the information provided by sources in order to find the real story. Still other journalists, who labeled themselves as neutral, felt their most important function was getting information to the public as quickly as possible while staying away from the stories that could not be verified (Cassidy, 2006). There is always some subjectivity to what actually becomes news, subjectivity based on many legitimate and reasonable factors and manipulation of the public is not one of them. Because the media has a responsibility to report what they are told, what they can verify, and what is vital for the public to know, public school leaders must understand the media's role and make a concerted effort to collaborate with them to advance the public school message.

#### Gatekeeping and Photojournalism

In 2003, Kratzer and Kratzer set out to determine how photojournalists across four regions of the United States decided which photos to publish of the September 11, 2001, terroristic attacks on the World Trade Center. The dilemma dealt with the graphic and rather gruesome pictures of those trapped inside the Trade Center Towers. The debate over publishing disturbing and sometimes controversial stories and photos is certainly not a new dilemma. In a similar study of photojournalist decision making, a researcher examined the issue by focusing on how the death of Chris Hani, secretary-general of the South African Communist Party, was depicted. A photograph showed “blood spilled over the bricks around Hani’s head, his tongue hung between his teeth, and a bullet hole was visible in his jaw and editors debated on how to walk the narrow tightrope between news and sensationalism, between reality and tastelessness” (O’Dowd, 1996, pg. 3). While several editors chose not to publish the image due its graphic nature, the photo did run in two African newspapers, one editor explaining he “specifically chose the photograph because we need to shock the nation a bit and deliver the story to them as blatantly, as raw, as it was, and this was the best we could do” (O’ Dowd, 1996, pg. 3).

In the Kratzer and Kratzer (2003) study of whether to print the graphic images of those leaping or falling to their death after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, editors grappled with the decisions. They did not take their decisions and responsibilities lightly. For the research, the United States was divided into four geographic regions that represented newspapers from the East, South, Midwest and West. For each aspect of the gatekeeping theory, the results were mixed in every region: some chose to print while others did not (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). During in-depth interviews, it was revealed that some editors chose not to print due to the graphic nature; for others,

the proximity of the event took precedent, while for others in the same proximity, this was not a deciding factor. (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). Editors who chose not to publish had worried they would traumatize their audience, while others who chose to publish responded that the lack of response after publishing demonstrated to them that the readers already saw these images in one way or another, and their portrayal in the newspaper was not significant (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). The most telling of the decisions to print or not appeared in the editors' comments regarding their decision making process. Not a single editor considered the basic elements of the photograph, black and white, color, and lighting in determining the publication. Instead, all concentrated on the content (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). Some editors made decisions alone while others collaborated in groups. Some of the staffs had lengthy conversations about the ethics of printing such images, but for others the decision to print was made quickly. One Western editor stated:

There was not a great deal of hand-wringing. It was clear that this was a big story with powerful photography, and we did not want to hold back in that effort, so it wasn't as though we went through a great deal of soul searching on each photo (cited in Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003, p. 41)

Several others found this issue more complex and even debated about whether the images were too shocking and disturbing to print. In fact, the sheer horror served as an argument on both sides of the debate on whether to print. "I think after we looked at thousands of images, the flood of powerful imagery was so overwhelming that there was little or no doubt to not protect the public from the reality of the situation," said one editor (cited in Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003, p. 14). There were many editors who agreed that the public should not be shielded from the truth, whether violent or brutal. Many editors

stated that the overwhelming reason the photographs were published was they contributed to the overall story about the attacks. A few editors admitted that they would not normally run images this graphic or disturbing, but the immensity of the attacks prompted them to reevaluate their thinking. Most telling was a comment from an editor in the West:

If it were a suicide or a traffic accident, then we wouldn't show it because they are perhaps no less tragic to the individuals involved, but unfortunately, they are daily events. Something like this, I think it's our duty to bring out the exclamation points and the visual sledgehammers so that we can tell this in the enormity of the story, as best as we possibly can (cited in Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003, p. 43)

The debate over which photographs and even stories to print involves ethics. Studies that have been conducted provide some insight into the arguments for and against publication. O'Brien (1993) noticed that some Pulitzer prize winning photographs don't show a dead body but document the murder. She looked at reasons why newspapers decided to show photos of African National Congress sympathizers killing an accused Zulu spy. From the editors, O'Brien (1993) wanted to know if a particular photograph violates the ideals of compassion or taste and whether its news value and newsworthiness trumps the other values it may violate. O'Brien (1993) also examined 57 U.S. and Canadian newspapers and found that almost half published images of a victim being burned or stabbed. Almost a third showed victims in less violent images while the same number did not run the photos at all. When the editors were interviewed, they stated that there was no single, defining rule that helped them to make their decisions to publish the disturbing photos. Two of the rules they did mention included the breakfast test, which

gauges whether gruesome photos or factual stories would ruin a reader's breakfast, and distance test, which looked at the victim's proximity to the community (O'Brien, 1993).

An important point demonstrated from the above research shows that the content of either photos or stories is what makes each publishing decision an important one. Although several other reasons exist regarding whether to publish certain stories or photos of events, the content and facts of a story or photo are what makes them potentially newsworthy in the eyes of an editor. The upcoming research on educational stories that editors choose to print can also employ the breakfast test or the distance test. Online editors working at the online newspaper in Eastern Ohio and the four online newspapers in Western Pennsylvania may or may not decide to publish stories that violate the principles of good taste, thereby affecting a reader's morning. Additionally, online newspaper editors may or may not publish happenings in the public schools because the events do not involve the local community the newspaper covers or represents.

#### To Publish or Not To Publish

Although the need of a visual sledgehammer does not constitute the sentiments of all gatekeepers, visual sledgehammers are an indication that some media personnel represent the philosophy of shock value and wow factors. Editors are the gatekeepers. They have the authority, either alone or collaboratively, to make decisions based on their personal values as to what appears in news reports, magazines, and newspapers. This responsibility to choose 'what we think about' is a powerful and influential one. It can shape our lives and tell us what is important at the local level and even on the national



stage. The Kratzer and Kratzer (2003) study revealed that editors and gatekeepers do not take their jobs lightly. When faced with enormous ethical decisions about what to publish, many collaborated with others. While some felt that victims and their privacy about their demise were more important than publication, others felt that the story was too important to forgo on the opportunity, considering that the graphic and disturbing images told the entire story in its fullest and most honest form (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003).

In 2007, Fahmy, Kelly, and Kim examined the selection of photos covering Hurricane Katrina. The result of their study revealed that very few photos of the actual storm were ever published. This is explained by Fahmy et.al. (2007): “This is because in the end, people, ordinary people and how they cope in a crisis are always the most important story, not the storm” (p. 136-145).

The research findings of photos published from the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center terroristic attacks and of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana depicting human suffering and emotion and not showing the storm itself indicate the presence of a gatekeeper (Fahmy, 2005; Fahmy, Kelly & Kim, 2007). The White study in 1950 revealed that the selection and discarding process used at newspapers involved decisions based on subjective reasons and personal values. The upcoming research may demonstrate that the publishing decisions of educational stories by online newspaper editors can determine how the local community views their public schools.

### Agenda-Setting History

The history of media research begins with Walter Lippman. In 1922, Lippman summarized that the news media are our window to the world beyond our own

experiences. Lippman's famous book *Public Opinion* outlined how the media determine our cognitive maps of the world. In the opening chapter, entitled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," Lippman (1922) theorizes "how public opinion responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment or the world constructed and characterized by the news media" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009, p. 2). Later, in 1948, Harold Lasswell informs us that mass communication has several broad social roles in order to achieve consensus among segments of society, transmit culture, and hold watch over the larger environment (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). Agenda-setting is important because the stories and photos selected by the editors provide the community with ideas about what is happening in their world. This research demonstrates that as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the media was already becoming a force in our society (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

In order to clearly understand what agenda-setting means for those in public education, we must clearly understand what agenda-setting is and certainly how agenda-setting functions within the mass media. For these explanations, we look first at the research history and then at the area where agenda-setting is most prevalent: politics.

Since the introduction of agenda-setting, it has received significant scholarly attention. British scholars Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) once observed, "Among the field's master paradigms, agenda-setting may be most worth pursuing" (p. 225). It is the idea that there is a relationship among those issues the media say are important and how much importance the community places upon them (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The content reported in newspapers and shown on television constitutes much of the information upon which the public makes decisions or gathers data. This data is based

upon what people feel is important when making decisions. This concept makes some information seem more important compared to other types (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009) and is also important in shaping reality. In reporting the news, editors play an integral part. Readers not only learn about an issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position in the online newspaper. They learn from or are influenced by news stories in direct proportion to the emphasis placed on certain issues by the media, although no real learning takes place (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting involves studying the amount of emphasis the media place upon an issue. Doing so dictates the importance people place upon it. In politics and elections, there is strong evidence that voters learn or are influenced from the immense quantity of information available during each campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In most cases, individuals who are more educated and more politically interested actively seek details from a variety of sources because the more they gather, the more informed they become. Sometimes information is just acquired without much effort, however. Berelson (1954) states, “On any single subject many ‘hear’ but few ‘listen’ ” (p. 244). Berelson also discovered that those with the greatest mass media exposure are most likely to know where the political candidates, in particular, stand on the issues. With this evidence, we have now set the agenda.

### Agenda-Setting Research

In 1959, Trenamen and McQuail found evidence to support the agenda-setting theory during the General Election in England. “Voters learn in direct proportion to the emphasis placed on the campaign issues by the mass media,” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 1). Lang and Lang (1969) discovered that the mass media force attention to certain

issues. “The media builds up public images of political figures, and they are constantly presenting topics to suggest what individuals in the mass media should think or have feelings about” (p. 468). This theory is represented best by Cohen (1963), who noted that the press and media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers and viewers what to think about” (p. 13). Therefore, the mass media are influential in setting the agenda for political campaigns.

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw launched the Chapel Hill study to investigate the agenda-setting capacity of the media. In this seminal study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) researched the Presidential Race of 1968 between Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace. They wanted their research to focus on voters’ attention to news stories. What McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated was how voters’ perceptions of issue importance was determined by media attention given to those issues rather than by the voters’ selective attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This does not prove the agenda-setting theory, but it does reveal the presence of it.

The McCombs and Shaw (1972) study attempted to correlate what Chapel Hill, North Carolina, voters said were key issues during the 1968 Presidential campaign. Residents were asked to participate in 100 interviews held from September 18 and October 6, 1968. A filter question helped identify and select the 100 respondents, Chapel Hill residents who had not yet definitely decided how to vote and were not yet fully committed to a particular candidate. Each registered voter was then asked to identify the key issues as they saw them regardless of what each Presidential candidate was saying at the time (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media messages in the Chapel Hill community

were collected and analyzed along with the voter interviews. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the Chapel Hill community received almost all their political information from the *Durham Morning Herald*, *Durham Sun*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, and *Raleigh Times*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and NBC and CBS evening news broadcasts (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The 100 registered voters participating in the study provided answers about major problems as they saw them. The problems along with the news and editorial comments that appeared between the September and October timeframes in the selected newspapers, magazines, and news broadcasts were coded into 15 categories that stood for the key issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The conclusions of the Chapel Hill Study indicate a considerable amount of campaign news was devoted to the analysis of the campaign itself and not to political issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, this study indicates the presence of an agenda-setting function. Also, “it may give pause to those who think of campaigns and campaign news as being primarily about the issues” (McCombs & Shaw, p. 2). In addition, conclusions indicate that the media had an impact on voters’ judgments of what they considered the major issues in the campaign. Lastly, the correlation between the major item emphasis of the main campaign issues mentioned by the media and voters’ judgments of what were important issues was  $+0.967$ . Therefore, the data demonstrate a strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and judgments of voters as to what they felt were important topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The three presidential candidates, Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace, all placed different emphasis upon different issues. However, “the voters’ judgments seem to reflect the composite of the mass media coverage” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 181).

Specifically, voters pay some attention to all political news regardless of which candidate or party is stressed. Although the agenda-setting function is not proved by the McCombs and Shaw (1972) study, it does suggest that evidence is connected with conditions that must exist if the agenda-setting theory is to occur. The political world is reproduced imperfectly by the news media, but the evidence in the Chapel Hill Study found that voters tend to agree with what the media says is important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The agenda-setting theory tells how those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems the viewing public regards as the nation's most important. In the book *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*, Iyengar and Kinder (2010) asked random participants to view sample news programs and respond to the importance of national problems both before and after viewing television. The pre- and post- surveys revealed that the random participants changed their views of national concerns after viewing the edited news stories. Once again, it is important to note that the media can use their influence to tell us what to think about (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010).

The news media can make certain issues come to mind more easily and affect our decision making. Sometimes referred to as accessibility in memory, this occurs when “the mass media content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). By calling attention to some issues while ignoring others, the media influence the manner in which governments, presidents, policies, candidates for public office, and even local public school districts are judged (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

The exposure of culture is also linked to agenda-setting (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). “Agenda-setting is moving beyond the concepts of politics and elections to the exploration of cultural agendas, public affairs, and to even defining the ideal appearance of our society’s inhabitants” (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009, p. 13). The agenda-setting theory has implications for our society. Once the community is exposed to the ideals of the media, these ideals and thoughts can then become what the community thinks is reality. Each public school has a reason to work closely with the media to express the positive attributes of their district. This connection with the media and focus on the successes of local public schools and their enormous challenges are the realities which require representation by the media.

#### Similarities and Differences among Online and Print Newspapers

Singer (2001) tells us that we do not exist in isolation. “We exist as members of a real community that extends well beyond our newspaper’s primary circulation area and we always have relied on our paper to remind us of that” (Singer, 2001, p. 78). If the newspaper no longer can provide that service, then it will have relinquished a vital role in connecting its readers to the broader world.

The Internet has drastically changed the ways in which some individuals receive news and information. The most obvious way is through its always on format. It provides links to an endless list of news media at all hours of the day and it allows individuals to receive information any time via email. (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). This new media, which also includes cable news, talk radio, and blogging, can affect the public agenda in ways that are different from traditional media. Many individuals have yet to

grasp the statement by the CEO of Cisco Systems, John Chambers, who claimed in 1998 that the Internet will change everything. This concept seems to spark the debate about the role of the news media and its contribution to our society (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

In 2009, the Project for Excellence in Journalism collected 13,000 news stories and compared the content from five prominent Web news sites to the front-page news of a large representation of U.S. daily newspapers. The findings of the massive study reveal that print newspapers remain the primary source for news in an in-depth, investigative fashion (Maier, 2010). Newspapers offered not only longer stories but also reported far more frequently on nearly every major domestic news topic including business, the environment, health, immigration, transportation, and sports (Maier, 2010). Its online news counterpart almost entirely overlooked some news topics about which readers felt strongly. For example, out of 6,500 news stories published throughout the year by the nation's five largest online news services, only 10 stories focused on education and only 18 on religion (Maier, 2010). The results also reveal that print newspapers are less sensationalistic than online services. Finally, the only major news topics receiving less coverage in newspapers were celebrities, entertainment, disasters, and accidents. However, the online newspapers lack the depth of their print counterparts, they cannot be dismissed as providers of merely headline news (Maier, 2010).

Many online media enthusiasts are proud of their new strength by arguing that the new technology will provide ordinary people the power to overcome the traditional media stranglehold (Armstrong & Zuniga, 2006; Reynolds, 2006). However, others are concerned that such a trend will divide audiences and deprive the nation of a common diet of news that is essential for proper functioning of modern democracy (Sunstein,



2001; Katz, 1996). Unlike in the prior age of media, in the new era of Internet media, amateurs as well as professionals can provide power to the new information economy (Burns, 2005, 2008; Leadbeater & Miller, 2004). Due to the new networked forms of content production, media scholars must reexamine how preexisting media theories operate in environments where the influence on society and community of electronically connected citizens is high (McCombs, 2005). The majority of media theories assumes that traditional media have the singular power to disseminate information and thereby influence public opinion, but in the Internet age, citizens can bypass traditional media to engage with other, similar-minded citizens in a truly personal media format (Anderson, 2006).

#### Agenda-Setting Theory and Contemporary News Sources

Traditional media outlets such as radio, print newspapers, and network television have begun to concede to online newspapers and cable news networks. In fact, 2008 may mark a pivotal point in history where online and cable news are the only news platforms to have experienced growth in recent years (Maier, 2010). Furthermore, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) reported that “as a source for national and international news, the Web surpassed all other media except for television” (Maier, 2010, p. 548). For decades, news consumption has been undergoing a change, and as a growing medium, the Internet is exceeding traditional media usage (Journalism Studies Interest Group, 2005). According to Maier (2010) “Audiences have been shifting from newspapers to network television to cable television and more recently to online news” (p. 549).

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008) is responsible for tracking from which medium consumers receive their news. They report that:

Since the 1990's the proportion of Americans who indicate they read a newspaper on any given day has declined about 40% and regular television viewing has fallen by half. By contrast, online news consumption has trended with six in ten Americans now getting some news online in a typical day (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, p. 549-550)

The Pew Center (2009) demonstrates that fewer Americans are using print newspapers to acquire their information. Instead, more are turning to online resources for their news and reports. The decline in newspaper readership becomes increasingly dire as online newspaper viewing and reading becomes the norm. Therefore, recognizing the distinctions between the two types of media has never been more important (Maier, 2010).

In 2005, the Journalism Studies Interest Group presented the findings of its study on agenda-setting of online news in websites of major newspapers, television, and online news services. The interest group examined whether the agenda-setting theory is present in Internet news sources and online newspapers. Just as in the Chapel Hill study in 1968, the results of the interest group indicated that the media agenda is present and that the media have a similar view of what is happening in the world. When the study compared online editions of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* newspapers to television news sources of *CNN* and *MSNBC* and then to the Internet news sites of *Yahoo News* and *Google News*, it revealed a statistically significant median value of +.921

(Journalism Studies Interest Group, 2005). These findings indicate that the presence of a media agenda is still consistent over different media (Journalism Studies Interest Group, 2005).

Lee conducted research of blog posts and mainstream media news stories during the 2004 presidential campaign. He found that the blog news agenda was similar to that of mainstream media, “indicating a fairly stable agenda across mainstream and Internet news outlets, despite the diversification of information channels” (Lee, 2004, p. 745). A content analysis by Just, Belt, and Crigler (2008) found online and traditional media coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign to be similar in tone and content. In 2006, Hoffman reported that mobilizing information that encourages people to act was no more prevalent in online newspapers than in their print counterparts. The majority of the year’s top stories were the same for both news sources. Also, the print and Web editors agreed on how prominently news stories should be displayed. This demonstrates that the gatekeeping theory appears similar for each medium (Maier, 2010). Neither newspapers nor online news offered much in the way of opinion or analysis on their front pages, with straight news, such as local headlines, political happenings, and the economy accounting for 95 percent of stories examined for either medium (Maier, 2010). An examination of almost 4,000 news stories from 2008 through 2009 analyzed how online news was different from traditional print newspapers, network television, cable television, and radio. This study found that in any given week, news consumers who use Web sites viewed and read a mixture of national and international news that followed the topics covered by the print newspaper media (Maier, 2010). Although the match of news content is not exact, approximately 60 percent of the top news stories on news Web sites

correspond with the news stories found on the front pages of print newspapers, national television, or radio. Therefore, online news sites share similarities of depth and frequency when compared to their traditional news counterparts (Maier, 2010).

### Further Online News Studies

Beaudoin (2008) drew upon national survey data and found that the Internet had a stronger positive effect on international knowledge among Americans than did either newspapers or network television. The comparison between online newspapers and print newspapers revealed that those who read printed newspapers recalled relatively more public affairs stories than those who viewed the online editions (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). When Curtin, Dougall, and Mersey (2007) investigated reader choices at the *Yahoo!* News Web site, they discovered that online users sought more entertainment and odd news stories than they might find in their daily print newspaper. A Dutch study by Schoenbach, de Waal and Lauf (2005) found that online newspapers contained more brief stories on the front pages of their newspapers. However, the print editions offered more articles in number than the online versions. The Schoenbach et al (2005) study also found that reading print newspapers contributes to an overall awareness of more public events and issues than using an online newspaper. Reading and even spending more time on an online edition of the newspaper may further promote an awareness of the most important events, but it does not really widen one's agenda, and printed newspapers do serve a function by widening the horizons of people whose range of interests is rather small (Schoenbach, de Waal, & Lauf, 2005).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Public school leaders need to establish ways to reconnect with the communities they serve and to improve their engagement with the community. Public school leaders would benefit from recommendations to improve engagement with the community and the media. Much of the erosion of public trust in public schools stems from a failure to understand the role of the community in educational decisions. The media should serve as a voice in a relationship with educators and the community. Educators need to “work across borders,” as former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner once wrote (cited in Blank, 2006, p. 1). Educators should strive to build partnerships and recognize the importance of youth development and the connection to family and community (Blank, 2006). When educators realize the importance of public-building, they understand how to integrate community and school to create a comprehensive approach to education reform (Mathews, 1997, p. 740). This research study sought to understand the role of the online newspaper editor. Following multiple interviews with online editors, the researcher developed recommendations for how to connect the community, media, and school.

## Design of the Study

In a narrative analysis, themes emerge from a story told to the researcher, and that story conveys a message or point (Riessman, 2008). A narrative analysis uses a variety of analytic practices with roots in different social and humanities disciplines (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Czarniawska (2004) defines it as a specific type of qualitative design in which a “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Narrative analysis concentrates on studying several individuals. When interviewing these individuals, the researcher gathered extensive data through the collection of their stories then report their individual experiences and finally place the meaning of those shared experiences into a clear, chronological order. A narrative analysis approach concentrates on what the interviewee says, the nature of the story, or who the story is directed toward (Riessman, 2008; Cresswell, 2013). A narrative analysis may contain turning points or specific tensions or interruptions that may highlight the researcher’s telling of the story (Denzin, 1989). The interviews with the online editors provided responses on how the media work and the researcher studied the responses, which lead to recommendations the researcher made to public school leaders who desire effective school and community relations.

Participants in this study were the five online newspaper editors at five regional newspapers in Ohio and Pennsylvania. The newspapers have print and online editions. The participants have knowledge of the selection and publication process of educational stories. Interviews with the participants at the respective newspapers revealed the meaning behind the experiences of the online newspaper editors from the standpoint of

the media theory on gatekeeping. The research method provided the researcher with an understanding of what it means to be an online editor at a regional newspaper. The narrative analysis allows collaboration with participants and researchers and actively involves them in the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a narrative analysis, the desire is to examine the relationship between the researcher and the researched because both parties learn and change from the encounter (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). For this research, the school learned to appreciate the role of the media to report the news, not necessarily make the schools or community look good (Watson, 1998). The media learned that an important function of the school is to connect itself with the community. The researcher and online editor collaborated and produced recommendations that will help public school leaders reach the public school community and enhance the public school image.

### Population and Sample

The researcher used the online versions of each newspaper because traditional media outlets such as radio, print newspapers, and network television have begun to concede to online newspapers and cable news networks. In 2010 Maier remarked that 2008 could be a landmark year in history because online news and cable news were the only news sources to have experienced growth in the recent past (Maier, 2010). Also, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009) reported that the Internet was the second choice while the first was television. Finally, the Pew Research Center for the Press reported in 2008 that since the 1990's, only 4 out of 10 Americans are now reading daily print newspapers while online news retrieval has increased to 6 in 10 Americans.

The term online editor constitutes any person or persons who make publishing decisions. The online newspaper editors for this study were from the following newspapers: in eastern Ohio; *The Youngstown Vindicator*; in western Pennsylvania; *The Erie Times*, *The Sharon Herald*, *The New Castle News*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The geographic location of the researcher accounts for the selection of the newspapers. They constitute 12 counties, 189 schools districts, and newspaper circulation numbers for print and digital editions which approach approximately 300,000 daily editions.

### External Validity

External validity refers to the idea of how the results of a study are generalized or transferable to a larger region or area. Generalizability asks whether the results will be useful to other researchers in other situations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Therefore, In order for this research to be useful for other public school leaders in various parts of the country, the samples must be similar. The newspapers represented in this study may not represent a similar population of schools and demographics as other areas of the United States, but publishing decisions for educational stories may be similar.

### Newspapers in the Sample

*The Vindicator* (Youngstown) has a daily circulation of approximately 47,000 online and print copies. It primarily covers the eastern Ohio counties of Trumbull, Mahoning, and Columbiana. These 3 counties contain a culturally and economically diverse population that represents 49 urban, suburban, and rural public school districts.

In northwest Pennsylvania, *The Erie Times* has a daily circulation of 47,000 online and print copies and primarily covers the counties of Erie and Crawford. These 2



counties contain urban, suburban, and rural public schools. Erie County has 13 public school districts; Crawford County has 7 rural school districts.

*The Herald* (Sharon) in western Pennsylvania covers primarily Mercer County. It has a daily circulation of 17,000 print and online copies and represents the school districts of the greater Shenango Valley. There are 12 public rural and suburban school districts in the Mercer County area.

A fourth newspaper, *The New Castle News*, is also in western Pennsylvania. It has a daily circulation of 17,000 print and online copies and covers primarily the Lawrence County area. *The New Caste News* covers 9 rural and suburban public school districts contained either entirely or partially within Lawrence County.

*The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* represents the Pittsburgh metropolitan area and has a daily circulation of 173,000 print and online copies and a Sunday circulation over 300,000 print and online copies. The 'PG' covers primarily Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, Washington, and Westmoreland counties and contains 99 public urban, suburban, and rural school districts that are either entirely or partially contained within the mentioned counties.

### Instrumentation and Data Collection

The narrative analysis design was to conduct sequential interviews with all editors. The researcher conducted interviews using a published educational story from each online newspaper. Each educational article was selected for publication by the online newspaper editor within the past school year (2012-2013). Each article for the initial interview was chosen to initiate conversation with each participant. The articles

were selected by accessing Newsbank.com. This database contains archived news stories from around the world. Advanced searches under the key words; teachers, schools, and school boards resulted in a vast array of selections from one week prior to not beyond one year prior.

The set of questions for the initial interview elicited responses about the selection of the educational story for publication. The interview developed the interaction necessary for a genuine exchange into how he or she performs his or her job.

### Interview Procedures

Interview procedures involved several steps: (1) The researcher set up a mutually agreeable time and location for a person-to-person interview via telephone or email; (2) Prior to the initial interview, the researcher emailed or faxed a copy of the article published in each newspaper; (3) At the beginning of each person-to-person interview, the researcher provided a hard copy of the article published in each newspaper from the Newsbank.com source; (4) The researcher explained the purpose and goal of the research to the participant; (5) The researcher described the interview process and gave the initial interview questions to the participant for review; (6) The researcher provided time for the review of each article; (7) The researcher began the interview with the questions; (8) The researcher set up the follow-up interview.

The researcher conducted the follow-up interviews no more than two weeks after the initial interviews to continue the dialogue with the participants. The objective was to seek recommendations for public school leaders on the media's role in assisting their reconnection to their local communities.

During the narrative interviews, the researcher recorded the responses from participants via electronic means. A digital audio recorder collected all responses and verbal interactions as well as sounds, silence, and other nuances (e.g. pauses), which may be noted in parentheses to convey the spirit of the dialogue. A stenographer hired by the researcher transcribed the interviews in a word processing format and all transcriptions were stored on a flash drive. The transcription process followed suggestions of Riessman (1993) where a first draft of the entire interview developed, detailing the words and other striking features of the conversation (e.g. long pauses, laughter). The researcher scrutinized the rough draft for accuracy and completeness during a second listening before moving onto the analysis process as recommended by Riessman (1993).

#### Ethical Treatment

In compliance with ethical research protocols, all editors were required to give their consent to participate in this research. The conclusions of this research study did not attach the names of the editors to their corresponding answers. The research results did not reveal which editor responded to each individual question in their first interview or the second interview. This procedure assures confidentiality of the participants.

#### Interview Articles and Rationale

From eastern Ohio:

*The Youngstown Vindicator* online editor: Todd Franko.

Email: [tfranko@vindy.com](mailto:tfranko@vindy.com)

Article 1:

Dick, D. (2013, August 14). City school teachers point to disparity.

*The Youngstown Vindicator*. Retrieved from <http://nl.newsbank.com>

The rationale for selection of this article was to highlight the relationship of teacher unions and school boards. Teacher salaries, raises, and public school taxes are sensitive issues that need discussion. The article provided a glimpse into the negotiation of the two parties.

From western Pennsylvania:

Article 2:

*The Erie Times* online editor: Doug.Oathout.

Email: [doug.oathout@timesnews.com](mailto:doug.oathout@timesnews.com)

McCartney, A. (2014, January 14). Iroquois students lead recycling effort.

*The Erie Times*. Retrieved from <http://nl.newsbank.com>

The article from *The Erie Times* described the efforts of Iroquois middle and elementary students in a recycling program. Helped by their teacher, students have taken an active role in separating and sorting recyclable lunch-related items that were put in the trash in the school cafeteria. Through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, The Great Lakes Great Stewards program is part of Pennsylvania's Sea Grant's B-WET program. Iroquois is one of nine schools receiving a grant to participate in this environmental education program to promote experiential learning and provide meaningful watershed education experiences.

Article 3:

*The Sharon Herald* editor: James A. Raykie, Jr.

Contact: 724-981-6100

Keely, M. (2013, December 26). Program helps students with core studies.

*The Sharon Herald*. Retrieved from <http://nl.newsbank.com>

This article from *The Sharon Herald* describes the Farrell Area School District's Children's Opportunities for Outside Learning Program. More commonly known as the C.O.O.L Program, this grant-funded initiative promotes and reinforces classroom standards in reading, mathematics, and science. The students participate in hands-on activities and get assistance with homework from state certified, district employees. Staying after school and working on writing homework and math problems has become a safe and productive way to spend an afternoon, and those students who have participated state that their grades have improved.

Article 4:

*The New Castle News* editor: Mitchel Olszak

Email: [nceditor@newsonline.com](mailto:nceditor@newsonline.com)

Wachter, D. (2013, September 14) School board honors six employees.

*The New Castle News*. Retrieved from <http://nl.newsbank.com>

Six New Castle Area School District employees were recognized for excellence by the school board. The employees were honored with the Pride and Promise awards which are monthly presentations that recognize leadership and dedication within the school district. The Pride and Promise awards were first given in the 2000's and initiated by former superintendent George Gabriel, who, along with a Pennsylvania School Boards initiative, began issuing the honors for teachers and district employees who went above and beyond their responsibilities. The latest set of recipients are all third grade teachers who helped students in their economically disadvantaged school achieve significantly above-average PSSA test scores.

Article 5:

*The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editor: Eleanor Chute

Email: [echute@post-gazette.com](mailto:echute@post-gazette.com)

Trozzo, S. (2014, January 16). Mars Area tweaks requirements for graduation.

*The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://nl.newsbank.com>

The fifth article selected outlines the new graduation requirements for Mars Area School District seniors beginning in 2017. The new requirements are aligned with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's desire for all high school students to score proficient or advanced in the Keystone Exams which are in the content areas of literature, algebra I and biology. Students who do not pass the exam must take an alternate path which includes a project in order to graduate. These new guidelines for the class of 2017 are different from those for the class of 2016 who were not required to complete an alternative project in order to graduate.

### Initial Interview Questions for Online Newspaper Gatekeepers:

1. (Reference article sent to editor prior to interview) Can you elaborate how or why this article was chosen for publication?
2. Talk to me about your job and responsibilities as an online newspaper editor.  
What are some challenges and rewards of your job when covering education?
3. What special training or skills are involved with your profession to cover education?
4. What do you consider a newsworthy topic in education?
5. As an online newspaper editor, do you feel you have a relationship with your local public schools? If yes, describe the relationship you have. If no, why do feel so?

### Second Interview Questions

Follow-up interview questions with the online editors are from the literature in Chapter 2 and obtained the professional opinions of newspaper editors. The experience, perspective, and responses of online newspaper editors helped school leaders make recommendations for a better school-community partnership.

1. How do you feel that educators could benefit from understanding your role as an online editor?
2. How do you feel that school districts in this area make a real and sustained effort to make their mission and vision public to the community?
3. What recommendations can you provide to public school leaders to establish a viable relationship with the media?

4. What role do you believe the media has in helping the public schools engage the community?
5. From your perspective, how do you perceive the relationship among the public schools in this area and the media?

### Data Analysis

A thematic analysis emphasizes what is said more than how it is said (Riessman, 2003). A thematic analysis approach is a widely used qualitative data analysis method that consists of a six-phase process ([psych.auckland.ac.nz](http://psych.auckland.ac.nz)). This first phase involves reading and rereading the data and becoming familiar with the data the researcher collects. A second phase involves categorizing, which describes, classifies, and aggregates the text into small categories of information. “It involves generating succinct labels or codes that identify important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the research question,” ([psych.auckland.ac.nz](http://psych.auckland.ac.nz), p. 1). Creswell (2013) suggests developing no more than 25-30 codes or categories of information and continually reducing them into themes. Third, searching for themes involves examining several codes and collating data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning and units of information. It involves winnowing the data to a small, manageable set of themes to construct the narrative or conclusion (Creswell, 2013). The fourth process of thematic analysis is to review the identified themes and compare them to the data. This process will help determine if the data tell a convincing story and whether that story answers the research question ([psych.auckland.ac.nz](http://psych.auckland.ac.nz)). In this fourth phase of a qualitative study, the researcher refines, splits, and removes themes (Walcott, 1994). The fifth step involves



defining and naming the themes. The researcher develops a detailed description of each theme and focuses each theme to determine the story being told. “The sixth phase is to blend together the analytic narrative of data extracts and contextualizes the analysis in relation to existing literature” ([psych.auckland.ac.nz](http://psych.auckland.ac.nz), p. 2).

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis

#### Introduction

Interviews were conducted during the fall of 2014 with editors of five regional newspapers: Four interviews completed over the telephone and one conducted in person, which included three of the five editors identified in the methodology. The subject of the interview for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* is the education editor of the print newspaper. The contact listed in the Methodology provided the education editor's name. The subject of the interview for the *Erie Times-News* is the print editor of the newspaper. The contact listed in the methodology had delegated the interview to the print editor. The subject of the interviews for the *Sharon Herald*, *New Castle News*, and *Youngstown Vindicator* are employed as both the print and the online newspaper editors of their newspapers. All interviews were designed to be conducted over two separate sessions, but all editors requested that one interview be conducted. All five interviews averaged approximately 35 minutes in length with the shortest interview lasting 25 minutes and the longest interview being 54 minutes in length.

Each editor interviewed is employed by the largest newspaper representing the surrounding geographic area in either a print or online version or both. Each editor interviewed was contacted by email to determine a date and time for the interview. The email contained an explanation of the nature of the study and its potential significance to each respective community and also asked for their voluntary and confidential

participation in the research. All five editors agreed to participate and signed the Informed Consent portion of the email.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device, and an open coding of the editors' answers to the interview questions is included in Chapter 4. The design and purpose of the interviews had two objectives: One, to help public school leaders understand how and why educational stories are chosen for publication, and, two, to seek recommendations from the online newspaper editors on how public schools can create a better relationship with the media and community.

The newspapers used in the research represent geographic areas of eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, each having a collective circulation of 301,000 print copies and an online daily copy. The newspapers are responsible for covering 182 public schools.

The initial interview questions were designed around an article printed in one issue of the online or print newspaper. Each article appeared in the newspaper between August 2013 and January 2014 and was selected to initiate discussion on how online newspaper editors make educational publishing decisions.

### Initial Interview Questions and Responses

(A reference article was sent to editors prior to interview.)

#### **Question 1: Can you elaborate how or why this article was chosen for publication?**

The first editor interviewed said, "Well, this story was written by, what we call a stringer. She was assigned to cover the school board meeting." Editor 1 continued, "She

went to the school board meeting, and it was her conclusion that the most important thing that happened at the school board meeting was that students must meet the graduation requirements to follow the state mandates.” A decision to expand some stories is made by a reporter and not the editor, explained Editor 1, but the reporter and editor often have some collaboration to decide on publication.

The second editor said, “A local teacher called the reporter at the newspaper. Actually, when you talk about a relationship, the relationship is built between reporters and schools, and districts.” He continued, “The teacher told us about the COOL program going on, and we’ve got this holiday twist to it because this was December 26, I think, that this story was in. So she made the call, and we said, well, why not.” He continued, saying, “It’s timely, and we haven’t done anything on COOL for a while. This is a community that’s always screaming that we don’t do anything positive. She called. We had the time to do it. There wasn’t anything happening. The cold hard fact of it is if we had a hundred reporters, we’d do a hundred stories a day.” Editor 2 said he had thought “Had we said no, I don’t know what would have happened for future calls.” Further discussion with the editor revealed that if the newspaper had more reporters and more room, additional stories similar to this one would be published.

Editor 3 responded to the question by saying, “City schools are supposed to be working together.” He explained, “That is, I know nothing about this story. Our job, I’d say 80 percent of the time, is to give everybody within the community an equal voice, whether it’s the superintendent, the principal, the (school district) Education Association, parents, youth, everyone in the school district. I’m not looking at the school district singular, though. I know in the school district there are many chains of command.” Editor

3 said, “Administration, teachers’ unions, parents, students, the football team, the band, you know. So I’m looking at the story if it’s important for us to make sure that we are a vehicle for getting communication from all the populations of a certain community in the school district. I would say this: We look at it as a community of many parts. Each school district we look at, is like one forest and four hundred trees within that forest. Our job is to make sure the whole forest gets covered. That is the analogy.”

The fourth editor interviewed for this research responded to Question 1 saying, “The article you sent me, is part of the NIE Program, or the Newspapers in Education Program. The article was written by one of our free lancers.” He said, “I don’t know how familiar you are with NIE, but our Newspaper in Education Program goes out to several area school districts, and thousands of kids will get newspapers delivered to their school. One of the changes newspapers across the country are having with that program is the money that supports it is drying up.” Editor 4 explained further, “We could go down that road in some other conversation. You know I’m a proponent of literacy and think reading a newspaper is a good way of creating that habit, but not everybody finds it an affordable thing.” The Newspapers in Education Program was once a popular initiative. School districts throughout the region and state are provided opportunities to acquire newspapers for the school and classroom at no cost. The newspapers are used for a variety of curriculum enhancements in social studies, language arts, and current events.

The fifth editor interviewed answered question one saying, “Well, it’s pretty straightforward. That came out of a school board meeting. It was from our reporter, Debbie, who covers the schools and was at the meeting.”

Four of the five editors interviewed for this research were vaguely familiar with the development of the story referenced in Question 1. A single editor identified with Theme I: Community. He is employed at one of the smaller newspapers used for this research and one that serves a less populated community.

**Question 2: Talk to me about your job and responsibilities as an online newspaper editor. What are some challenges and rewards of your job when covering education?**

**Question 3: What special training or skills are involved with your profession to cover in education?**

(After editors' responses were examined, Questions 2 and 3 are reported together due to the similar responses to each question.)

All editors reported they rely heavily on their experience in the field of journalism when they speak about challenges, rewards, and special training needed to cover the field of education. Taxes, public school funding, student discipline, and testing are just a few areas that editors reported as important topics in education. Although none of the editors had specific education training, their knowledge of education demonstrates education is a big business that deals with millions of dollars and thousands of students and families. Editor 5 summed it up best by saying, "You learn, to a large degree, as you go along, and you deal with it. You figure out what's a mill in taxes and all that stuff. You know, it's a learning process. It's still a learning process because there is always something new coming up."

Editor 1 had her start doing whatever was asked of her in the newspaper business. Her background and experience in both journalism and economics allowed for her focusing on the numbers in education as well as making the proper contacts. She explained, “You have to be able to find the right person who can provide the information. If people are uncooperative, they’re less likely to get stories printed. You know you can get the people you need, and you know who can get you. If you are doing a story and you’re in a hurry and it’s a survey of districts, you’re going to survey the ones you think you can get information from.” Typically, the focus of gathering information for Editor 1 is directed toward either the superintendent or the principal of the public school district. If a district employs a public relations director, the editor will seek that voice as well. She said, “You know, if you’re in a big hurry, we try to mix them up as much as possible. But there are those that happen on a deadline, and people who are cooperative might get a little extra boost.”

Editor 2 said there are challenges, by saying, “I’m not saying you have to be a cheerleader for the (newspaper). That’s not going to fly. I think you just have to say, look, we have to keep the channels open here. They’re not a bunch of ogres down there. I’m feeling like the rest of you. I don’t like negative news.” Editor 2 continued,

I don’t like to print it. I don’t like answering my phone the next day after we do, and I would much rather fill the paper with good stuff, but we can’t do that. Part of my job is to make sure the newspaper is being a mirror of the community, the good and the bad. I mean when you wake up in the mornings, you look pretty good in the mirror, and you wake up some mornings, and you don’t. But the

challenge that comes with that is not sitting and making little tick marks or keeping a spreadsheet.

Editor 2 said, “The challenge with that is to make sure you’re printing the good news as much as the bad.”

Editor 3 answered Questions 2 and 3 when he said, “I love the bad-police and the tough-guy role of my job as much as the good, Oprah-Winfrey role. That’s a mantra I issue describing me but also our job. I think you know I’m pretty comfortable with thinking we are the best in the business, and we are pretty consistent.” Editor 3 expressed one challenge of the job: “We have to celebrate both, the good and the bad news. We have to be eager to embrace and celebrate it, but also not be shy about it when it’s bad.” A second challenge for Editor 3 is to be sensitive to the trends. For example,

I think those in the industry need to be sensitive, recognizing that trends last a long time. I think you see a lot more media not using a name now. Back in the 50s and 60s and 70s you used every name. So with a student who may have put a stink bomb in the toilet, you can probably be a little more lenient with naming that kid. I think sensitivity toward identification is hard. Some in your industry might say we forced it on you because the records access is so easy, but with social media now, we actually have more access to names regardless of the records. It is one of the ironies that you and I talked about last week with the anniversary coming up with the football player. We knew the names (through social media) of those kids without ever having the need for the school district and the superintendent to announce.



The prevalent experience of Editor 4 was his former position in another metropolitan area over two decades ago. He said, “Well, it’s education. Before I came here 20 years ago, I was a regional newspaper editor back in (hometown). Education coverage has always been kind of a big deal to me. So it’s become a big deal every place I’ve worked.” Editor 4 continued,

My perspective on it is that education is a big deal in the community because you have several thousand students in the county, 30,000 kids who are going to school, 40,000 families that are somehow, linked to a public school district. You have 70 private schools and their families, and they are paying money. That is big business. You also have several thousand employees working across this county in public schools and private schools. Then you have your college level. At the college level here, I think, we have 15,000 students in the county who are in college and somewhere around 1500 employees or probably a few more. So you’re talking about quite a large audience for a niche coverage area. You have to have someone who covers education. It’s a niche coverage area and requires some specialization so you understand the language of the people you’re talking to and also kind of the ins and outs of what’s available or what’s not available, what topics you can cover, what’s hot.

The fifth editor interviewed said he has four reporters who report to him, and he is responsible for covering eight school districts, the fire and police departments, municipal governments, courts, judges, county agencies, and businesses. A job challenge for Editor 5 is, “I mean the challenges are easy to describe. It’s the time limitation, and it’s across the board, not just with education. How many hours in a week do you have staff time and

to what do you devote those hours?” Editor 5 explained that not long ago the newspaper was informed parents would be speaking at a local school board meeting. The editor sent a reporter to the meeting where subsequently no parent spoke on any issue, which was frustrating to him because there is so much to do and so little time to accomplish everything, but he mentioned that serving as an editor is rewarding because it serves a public purpose. He said, “The rewards are, I guess, when you think you’ve accomplished something, that you serve a public purpose and have gotten some important information out, regardless of what it is. It may involve some problem in a district, some new program. The rewards are when you can look at a story and say this is helping somebody and serving a real purpose.”

Each editor interviewed expressed a passion for the journalism profession. All five editors stressed the need for creating meaningful connections with the residents of the community. Community is Theme I and is supported by the editors’ answers regarding a desire to help the community and make a positive impact.

**Question 4: What do you consider a newsworthy topic in education?**

Each editor did not hesitate to state that all stories are newsworthy, and editors provided multiple examples of newsworthy topics in education.

Editor 1 said, “Well, anything that affects people’s lives or is new or different. I’ve had people call me wanting to do a story on a bulletin board. I’ll just say it’s rare to do a bulletin board story, but one of my questions to people is would you read it if it weren’t about you?” “News can be anything,” she said. For example, “Regarding enrollment trends around here, a lot of districts have had double-digit losses in their

enrollment over the last decade and closed schools and consolidated. Last fall we did a series on school attendance. As it turned out, in the fall they were having a big attendance campaign, and we planned the story before the campaign. With school attendance, if the kid doesn't go to school in kindergarten, the child has much less of a chance of reading in Grade 3." Editor 1 continued, "The point is that as an editor, you see things happening and you try to pull them together." Last, Editor 5 said, "News can be anything that informs or helps people make better decisions."

Editor 2 explained what newsworthy means: "News has to be brutally local and, preferably, involve people and not things. Breaking news is newsworthy and a teacher strike, all those crazy things, like if you have a power outage and the school is closed. That is newsworthy." Editor 2 continued, "A feel-good community story is newsworthy. If something is rare, it's newsworthy. Is it out of the ordinary or a national trend?" For example, "Schools on the fringe of our coverage may call and say they have a good story. We've been trying to track down this story, and we haven't printed it yet because we're having trouble getting through to the principal. It is some bizarre story about how in one grade they have like eight sets of twins and triplets. We have been trying to get this story, but it's not a time story. I guess when people finally get together, we'll end up with that story." The second editor also explained, "I believe the true educational process compromises teachers, students, parents, and the community. That's the reason we find, I believe, test scores struggling in (local school) and (local school) because there's nobody at home to make sure these kids are doing it. That is no revelation, just the way it is." Since teachers, students, parents, and the community make up the news, people stories are more preferred than stories about cold numbers.

Editor 3 responded confidently: “To me, all of it is news. My approach is that it is just a matter of how much space you have.” Editor 3 continued, saying, “So the Forensics Club coming back from a match against (local school) may be two sentences. Okay. The forensics team coming back from a visit to the White House is probably going to be a couple paragraphs or even more.” Editor 3 said, “So to me, that school has communication sensors, all of which you do is newsworthy, and that’s for sure whether it’s good news or bad news. Schools as institutions are part of the community, and teachers are part of that community and therefore placed on a higher scale for news. For example, Editor 3 said, “So there’s a scale to report news even out of your school district and into the community. For instance, last year, (you can look this coverage up), there was a crazy Bonnie and Clyde robbery/drug thing that happened here within 24 hours. It was no different from any other crazy two people who rob to get money for drugs, except in this case it was a teacher. She was a (local school) teacher driving the getaway car. That kind of simple community incident takes a higher profile because the person was in an institution such as the local school district.” Editor 3 explained further by saying, “Sometimes in that pursuit of the bad news, there’s no doubt we are acting as judge and jury. Maybe the principal or police officer has to make a statement that this activity is wrong. Therefore, we think we have the experience to know it’s wrong and there’s actually accountability. But you make a judgment this is wrong, and it deserves to have no shut eye. Some of it is our just recognizing that it is the community who will want to know football scores and they want to know the reports from the code inspection of the cafeteria.”

The fourth newspaper editor clearly explained, “Almost everything is important. Let’s say that our education reporter is going out to one of our city schools. There’s a teacher in a certain class at this school who had passed away last year during childbirth. There is also a local organization that makes blankets for children. For school, there was the story about the teacher passing away. The group was moved enough to bring blankets to the school, an inner city school, to give blankets to these children in this classroom. Editor four continued, “That story is emotional. Is it a great educational story? No, but it is a great human interest story.” This fourth editor also said, “We have the results of the PSSA scores from our city schools. The state released those in advance of the rest of the state. Also, we did a story about a local company sponsoring an engineering program in one of our local high schools. We also did a story, which is mostly college, which is a freshman class that’s doing it, a class breaking down the TV program *Breaking Bad*.”

A fifth editor answered the newsworthy question by saying, “Our fundamental standard, for want of a better term, is there a public interest in the story? Does it serve the public?” He said editors must determine whether a story on school recycling will greatly benefit anybody. He also asked who will benefit from the media reporting student test scores. “But things like taxes versus test scores are a hot topic. Not only what the test scores are, but are they serving the students or the districts, or is this whole system of testing not enough. You can get into those debates,” said Editor 5. The fifth editor also mentioned a well-known axiom: “What bleeds, leads.” Stories of crime, fire, or disasters certainly get the community’s attention. “It is certainly more fun to read the juicy stuff,” as Editor 4 said.

However, Editor 5 cited a survey conducted in the past: “Several years ago, I was in charge of a citizen focus group. It was basically a group of young people that we met monthly to talk about the paper: what they saw, what they liked, what they didn’t like. At one point several months into the meetings, one of the members asked if we were writing more positive stories than in the past” Editor 5 continued, “Other focus group members chimed in and said they noticed this as well. I answered that we haven’t really changed anything. What we suddenly realized was because they were in the focus group, they were reading the paper more closely. Stories that they would gloss over that were positive, now they were reading. They would read the juicy negative stories, also; they just weren’t paying attention to the positive stories. Now that they were in this focus group, they were more disciplined into looking at what’s in the entire paper. So I think that is a common problem with people, not just those in the focus group, but everywhere.” Editor 5 even explained that he receives calls complaining about positive, human-interest stories. The citizens expressed dismay over the stories being actual news. Asked one community member, “Was it a slow news day?” (Editor 5)

These examples of unusual and interesting stories are determined to be newsworthy by the editors and connect to Theme IV: Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News. The emotional and human-interest story about the passing of a teacher and the college forensics class pose a hierarchy in the media’s view. Specific news stories have greater significance and appeal to a larger number of people, which makes them newsworthy.

**Question 5: As an online editor, do you feel you have a relationship with your local public schools? If yes, describe the relationship you have. If no, why do you feel so?**

Four of the five editors interviewed for this research reported having an overall good relationship with the public schools in their area. Editor 5 reported the media not having a consistent relationship with the public schools and stated that in order to have a good relationship, face-to-face contact is needed with the media and the school. If a reporter has what Editor 1 described as “good contact with the superintendent, the principal, or the public relations employee, then the school blossoms.” “Positive relationship is built on trust and two people seeing eye-to-eye,” said Editor 2. When the positive relationship occurs, the school usually receives a favorable amount of press. Furthermore, if the schools are cooperative, they will receive more positive coverage in the future.

Editor 2 said that at the newspaper where he is employed, “I can tell you that the community and the readers indirectly keep the paper in line. You can’t get too out of line in a community paper. They’re going to call, and they’re going to call for your head. They will quit buying the paper because they call into here. According to the second editor, if an event is missed or reported incorrectly, an internal conversation will occur, and corrections will be made, specifically, “When I was teaching, people would ask me about plagiarism and the New York Times following fake stories. I said, look, I’m an editor at a community paper and I do not have to worry about that. I said we couldn’t print a false story with false sources. People are going to call and say, hey, there is something wrong with this story.” Editor 2 also mentioned that although there is an overall positive relationship with the local public schools, “with my (high school) alma mater, we’ll never have a good relationship. They are one of the districts that feels the only thing we do is negative news, and they are crazy.” He reported that people only

remember the negative coverage even though he can cite many positive stories printed about the district.

Editor 3 answered Question 5 about a relationship by saying,

We have to have these checks and balances, but a lot of times, we're just relying on trust first. But when trust is broken, it's time to look at something different.

We are not out there watching how the newspaper reports on (local school), but we are casually watching. We just stick our finger in the air as a measure. We will also jump quickly if we hear from a principal or a parent, and they say you are blowing off some big spending issues that are going on. So maybe this was a good story and all that happy joy, but they (the school district) just blew a million bucks.

He finished by saying, "So that's a lot of times how a bad reporting situation or a bad relationship that goes too far in the media is caught." Many communities are populated by intelligent, well-read individuals. The community members know when the coverage and reporting of a story is unreasonable. The community will express their dissatisfaction with the newspaper coverage thereby keeping the reporting of stories in line and not allowing the coverage to exceed what is deemed appropriate by the community.

Editor 4 explained his relationship with the public schools: "We have 17 public school districts that we cover. Generally we have pretty good relationships with all of them. Every so often in my experience, when you have sketchy relationships, it's easily a result of a sketchy relationship with the superintendent of that school district. But



generally you can go beyond that, working with the school board and other members of an individual school community. Editor 4 continued, explaining,

We have a pretty good relationship. That's because we are definitely not a reactionary kind of newspaper. I'm kind of the guiding force behind education coverage, but I look for it in all my writers. You know tell me how they're spending my money and tell me who is teaching my child. The fourth editor continued, "So we have teacher profiles or stories about people in the district. We're talking about the programs and the things that are occurring in the school. Finally, tell me what's around the corner. What are the trends in education, what are the things that are changing? Some of it's because you don't have a lot of engagement unless it's about school sports. We cover the heck out of school sports, which is not only great from the perspective of celebrating certain districts for their sense of community, but also individual accomplishment and team accomplishment. Sports engender goodwill toward all the other things in the district.

The fifth editor explained that in his experience, "relationships with public school districts wax and wane." Editor 5 explained that a public school district in his coverage area views the newspaper and media as negative. He said, "There is one district down here in particular that is often viewed as somewhat paranoid in dealing with publicity. We've had board members just brag about the fact they don't talk to us and deal with us. They view us as meddling." This same editor felt that this attitude and lack of a relationship are poor, because schools, which are governments, need to be accountable to

the public for its decisions. If the school district has a construction project or public policy, it must be accountable and open to questions about the cost and implementation.

All editors reported the necessity of a Relationship, Theme II, with the public school leadership in order to have a positive relationship with the school and community. One editor mentioned creating a strong relationship with the reporter is vital because the reporter is connected with many people in the community. The media can be helpful to the public school leaders in communicating the vision, goals, and successes of the school district.

#### Second Interview Questions and Responses

##### **Question 1: How do you feel that educators could benefit from understanding your role as an online editor?**

Editor 1 said that educators can benefit from understanding the role of an online editor by understanding and appreciating time lines and deadlines. Editor 1 said, “Sometimes people don’t understand the deadline thing. You’re calling for a reaction, and they will say, oh well, we’ll call you back tomorrow. Well, tomorrow I am not going to be interested in the reaction.”

Editor 2 was not directly asked Question 1. However, when discussing his responsibilities as editor at the newspaper, he said, “You touched on it. There’s a great majority or great number of people out there, not only in education, but they get angry with the paper when you print it (negative news). You didn’t have to print it.” He explained, “We’re a newspaper. We print stuff. We print the news. That’s our job. We can’t hold the news. You can’t get away at this level with holding the news.”

Editor 3 agreed that educators can benefit from understanding the role of an editor. He wished the entire educational community not see the media as “bloodthirsty idiots.” He said schools can learn a lot. For example, “The media are not just looking to tear down an episodic thing that we think is important for the community as a whole. So when we are picking apart the mayor or picking apart fracking, we are actually trying to bring issues to light.” Editor 3 stated that negative issues are simply stories that need to be reported. He explained that educators must understand there are many viewpoints, and media are more appropriate now about bad news than in the past. Editor 3 said, “I think that, if anything, we are there to be reasonable about bad news more so than in the past. In fact, in the last ten years, you have probably seen more bad news than any generation before because of Facebook. Those 2,000 students in your school district can run and publish something about Chris Gill,” said Editor 3. He wants the community to embrace the fact that media will do a fair and balanced story, unlike the 10,000 publishers on social media or Facebook who publish without any facts. The newspapers publish something bad someone did in a fair and balanced way. Social media are amateurs, saying anything. Mainstream media are interested in the future of the community, but unfortunately much of the funding that assisted newspapers in acquiring stories has disappeared from their hands and been redistributed to other media sources.

Editor 4 responded, “Understanding the media’s role all comes down to communication.” The editors want public school leaders to build a relationship with a local reporter and editor. Educators should email reporters or call when they have something to share, and their stories may be covered. If the answer is not to cover the story, educators should not take it personally. Editor 4 explained, “We run into several

superintendents who attempt to take care of their own and do not see a need to communicate with the media.” In his opinion, this is a poor approach. “Public schools are a major focal point of many communities. Schools are teachers, administrators, a parent, or volunteers who make an incredible contribution to an individual’s life over the occurrence of a school year or the course of an academic career. They (schools) have a lot of interaction, and the contribution newspapers make is to celebrate those interactions,” said Editor 4. Bad news is just something that happens. It is not to expose school districts but to help them. “I would say that 95 percent of all education stories are incredibly positive and the five percent that aren’t, the district had it coming. Most of our action is really positive,” replied Editor 4.

Editor 5 wanted educators to know the media are not the bad guys. Instead, he said, “You know one of the basics is there are days when you get bad publicity. I am dealing with people sending me e-mails today. They’re complaining about a letter to the editor we ran earlier this week, and they say it makes us (media) look bad. That is part of the job.” His wish is for public school leaders to understand how to deal with and get ahead of the negatives that occur. He said, “There are things that are going to happen and make you look bad. I say to people, when something goes wrong, you make a mistake, you have to gauge how bad it is. Can you correct it and make sure it does not happen again?” This editor said social media are harmful to schools and the mainstream media as well. His advice is not to engage the lies nor challenge the rumors that are posted on social media.

Question 1 is applicable to Theme III: Communication, Theme IV: Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News, and Theme V: Social

Media. Consistent communication between public school leaders and media will create an environment to celebrate the interactions between the community and school. For Theme IV, all editors interviewed want to be viewed as responsible professionals who must report negative news as well as positive news. For Theme V, Editor 2 explained the harm of Social Media to the journalism profession and the potential harm to public schools.

**Question 2: How do you feel that school districts in this area make a real and sustained effort to make their mission and vision public to the community?**

The consensus of all editors was for school districts to do a better job communicating their vision to the community. Specifically, Editor 1 declared, “Every district is different. They all have their own personality.” She explained further,

I guess they (school districts) could send out press releases on things they are doing. They could make their meetings as transparent as possible, and I hate to use that word because it is my experience that when anybody says they are being transparent, they’re not. You don’t normally have to say that. But you go to school board meetings where they do not pass out the agenda, and most people can’t tell what the heck they’re talking about. They’re very complicated, some of them.” Editor 1 also said, “I do not think it is legal to do it that way, but that is another issue.”

Editor 2 said, “I think it is a mixture of both and probably no different from your standards. Our staff is shrinking here; there is more demand from fewer people. The outreach for us is to the community. We are resigned to whether it is a major issue or a

tax levy; we need more communication, and I don't think that is negative. In fact, in a school district it becomes the reality of just the schedules." He concluded, "I think it is hit or miss and is trending to less communication opposed to 15 or 20 years ago when I got into the business."

The third editor also spoke about school districts making a sustained effort to make their mission public. He said,

The former superintendent of the (school district) was reluctant to have any engagement with us, even at school board meetings. The school board was more open to the media than the superintendent was. We decided we would just work around him. That is unfortunate, because here you have someone incredibly bright about education, and instead of the community benefitting from his perspective, they never heard from him. That is not healthy, I don't think.

An open opportunity for dialogue with the media and the public school will create healthy opportunities for more dialogue and a sense of belonging for the school district, the public, and the community. Theme II: Relationships and Theme III: Communication, apply to Question 2. All editors spoke of the importance that public school leaders have to create a relationship and the responsibility of communication. The themes applied here help inform the public and community of the events and challenges of operating a public school.

**Question 3: What recommendations can you provide to public school leaders to establish a viable relationship with the media?**

One recommendation from all editors interviewed is to openly and regularly communicate with the media. Public school districts should send out press releases, and superintendents should lead the media contact and have regular conversations with the newspaper. The media tend to know sports are happening but do not know all the academic elements.

A recommendation for public school leaders from Editor 1 is “That (school districts) should know the law on open records. For example, there are places where if you ask what a teacher’s salary is, and I’m asking about a particular teacher, they will not tell you. You know what? That is the law. Many school leaders are unfamiliar with the rules of the game.”

Editor 2 said the best recommendations he can give are “to build a relationship with the reporter, not me directly, although that is fine. But it’s the reporter who is going to hear, who is going to write, who is really plugged in.” He continued by saying, “Walk the fine line of calling. Let us know about a story, because if I haven’t uttered it a thousand times in my career, I may tell you no, but we can’t do it unless you call me and let me know that it is going on. Probably the best way now is to email. The realities today are people are busy.”

Editor 3 said, “I think having a media day, an event in the evening or a couple minutes set aside for all the media each month or each week, whenever you have, just two minutes to meet.” He continued by saying, “I think a face-to-face meeting is helpful; an annual start-of-the-season from the top person is good. Last, be the first point of contact when something goes wrong and be responsive to that person.”

A last recommendation that will establish a relationship with the media is for school districts to learn how to deal with negative news. Public school leaders must be accountable for negative events and not cover up negative occurrences or wait for them to go away. Public school leaders can learn from their mistakes and from other districts that are better prepared.

Theme II: Relationships and Theme III: Communication, apply to Question 3. All editors reported the necessity for public school districts to be open and inviting to the media. The openness creates trust between the organizations. Also, public school leaders, particularly superintendents, must regularly communicate with the media through press releases and conversation.

**Question 4: What role do you believe the media has in helping the public schools engage the community?**

Two of the five editors interviewed do not have a philosophy that referenced the media having a responsibility to engage the community. Editor 2 wished he had a specific answer to share. He did say that “If you could have non-stop athletic contests, that would engage most of the community. That is one of the frustrations I have about covering education; it is hard to define education in general.” Apart from bussing issues, strikes, athletics, and a plumbing breakdown in the schools, Editor 2 could not define or rate what issues in education need to be covered. He did state, “Unfortunately, the school boards have public meetings that we cover. They often set the image for the school district, probably much to the chagrin of the people running the school districts. They can



be petty and say things that are very public.” He continued by asking, “How do you engage? That is a tough question.”

The remaining two editors expressed a clear need for the media’s role in engaging the community. Editor 4 stated, “The media must recognize that schools are one of the most expensive operations within the community.” Schools are a community investment, and although the trail of tax dollars, test scores, and cafeteria health reports must be followed, Editor 4 replied, “The media are not performing their jobs properly if we only cover tax dollars and not cover the classrooms.”

Engagement is important. “In terms of communication, I think it’s our responsibility to create opportunities for that (engagement). If a school board member or an administrator wants to reach out to the public in that fashion with an editorial column in the paper, I think we’ve always said sure,” replied Editor 5.

Even though the Newspaper in Education program did engage the community, money for the program was cut a number of years ago. Two editors said the media write stories and inform the public. It is up to the schools to call parents and engage the community.

Three out of the five editors interviewed had recommendations that answered Question 4. The editors’ answers highlight Themes I: Community, Theme II: Relationships, and Theme III: Communication. A partnership between the media, the community, and the public school is vital to the success of all.

**Question 5: From your perspective, how do you perceive the relationship among the public schools in this area and the media?**

Four of the five editors interviewed reported an overall positive environment with the local school districts. Editor 1 offered a few suggestions for a good relationship: “I was going to say about letting people in the door. There was a case where people (a school district) invited us for the first-day-of-school pictures. We went out, and then we couldn’t use the pictures of the kids. Don’t invite us back under those circumstances.”

Editor 2 said his relationships with public schools are solid. He responded unequivocally that the one event that will damage the relationship is a teacher strike. He explained, “The worst thing that will make a newspaper’s relationship strained with a school district, is a teachers’ strike because we have to cover that.” Editor 2 said a teacher strike in the recent past damaged relations even to this day. Schools must understand the media will always cover a teacher strike like any other community event. The editor explained, “We have never covered a teachers’ strike that the teachers agree with our coverage; they end up hating us. He explained further, “We have people in (school district) that will not buy the (newspaper). Their kids might be in sports, and they will still not buy the (newspaper). In my mind, it is the most divisive thing that that can happen to public education because it festers and filters down to teachers not wanting to cooperate.” For example, “A couple of years ago, we got a call from a teacher at (school district that had a strike). We did a story, and that teacher underwent some grief because she had called the paper. We did the story and that strike was six or seven years ago, but that is the lingering effect.” Teacher strikes make enemies of the newspaper and the community, and teachers never seem to forget the manner in which the newspaper covered the strike. The second editor’s last recommendation is to “encourage your staffs

to have an open relationship with the newspaper. Don't be afraid to call. We are open to talking to you, but don't be mad if we say no...call back."

A third editor interviewed for this research responded, "My best answer is there seems to be a more suspicious environment these days, a little less trust among institutions and between each other, and I'm not sure if that is healthy."

The fifth editor interviewed responded to Question 5 saying, "What I get from my perspective is there's a lot of insulated attitudes and a lot of wagon circling and again, it's not just with school districts." He continued, saying, "A lot of entities, you get an us-versus-them situation. It's really bad communication, sometimes bad attitudes, and people get burned by bad publicity. So they get mad and don't communicate properly. There are a lot of factors that go into it." Furthermore, "It's a public problem, too. The public doesn't always communicate properly. They don't ask the proper questions, and they assume the worst, and rumors start. It's a two-way street when it come to communication, and there's a huge disconnect in our society, not just school districts. Just look at the voter turnout rate. As a nation, it's a really unhealthy situation." Editor 5 recommended having a regular conversation because we are happy to report positive news when we get it.

Four out of the five editors interviewed described a healthy Relationship, Theme II, with the local public school districts. One editor explained he will never have a positive relationship with his alma mater due to the negative attitude the district has toward the media.

## Conclusion

The answers to interview questions asked in this research are important information for public school leaders. Superintendents, principals, and public relations employees can access the information provided by the editors of the regional newspapers used in this study to make better decisions. Chapter 5 outlines five themes that have been revealed through the editors' answers. The themes provide recommendations that public school leaders can use to benefit the public school district and the school community. The themes in Chapter 5 present a framework on which positive school, community, and media relationships can be built.

Theme I is Community. Each editor interviewed for this research explains the need for public school district leaders to establish and maintain an understanding of how the schools, the community, and the media are linked. Public school leaders need to make a strong effort to be inclusive to the communities they serve.

Theme II is Relationships. Editors of all newspapers urged the public school leaders to build bridges with the media. A poor relationship with the media leads to negative attitudes directed toward the public school leaders. The media provides increased coverage to those schools that cooperate regularly.

Theme III is Communication. This theme explains how vital open, honest, and consistent communication is between public schools, the media, and the community. Once a relationship with the local reporter or editor is established, school districts have a means to report their message to the community.

Theme IV is Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News. This theme provides reasons why all public school leaders must understand how the media functions. The predominate communication theories are explained and linked to the editors' responses to the interview questions.

Theme V is Social Media. This theme describes the changing landscape of the media because of the increasing popularity of the Internet.

## Chapter 5

### Recommendations and Conclusions

#### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to seek information and recommendations from online newspaper editors on how the public schools can create a better a partnership with the media and community.

Interviews were conducted with five newspaper editors in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. The interviews provided answers to the two research questions underlying this research study:

1. How and why do media choose to publish the educational stories in the newspaper?
2. Public schools are connected with the media and the community. Therefore, how do public school leaders create a better relationship and engage the community and media to strengthen the public school systems?

Open coding of the five newspaper editors' responses to interview questions produced five themes: Community, Relationships, Communication, Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News, and Social Media.

## Theme I: Community

### Recommendations to Public School Leaders

In Chapter 1, research shows the connection between public schools and the community. The research reveals the importance of public schools and communities working together for the benefit of each other. All five newspaper editors interviewed for this research spoke on the importance of community and the connection to healthy public schools.

Parents, business leaders, politicians, government agencies, and the media should be welcomed into the public school system. Public school leaders have the obligation to focus on the community and the school together as well as learn to “work across borders” (Blank, 2006, p. 1). The goal for education is to build partnerships and recognize the importance of youth development and the connection to family and community (Blank, 2006).

One editor explained the job of the newspaper is to give equal voice to all community residents and the media’s role is to connect with the entire school district. A public school district is a community, and schools are supposed to work together. A second editor recommended public school districts and the community cooperate with each other, which will yield positive newspaper coverage in the future. The same editor reported there are many stories to choose from and if the purpose is to show the whole community, what must be published is what the community does not know, both good and bad. A third editor recommended the community and public schools not be afraid of negative news, and, at the same time, communities and public schools must embrace the

good news. Public schools have a large community audience. Therefore, a newspaper employing an editor who covers education and who has a connection to the community is vital to discovering the details of educational topics. The third editor believes he has been fortunate to disseminate educational information that is both positive and negative out to the community in an unbiased manner.

Schools need a connection to the media and community. Although the media's responsibilities for publishing difficult material can create irritation, the media can also be a positive source of support, provide the school an outlet and opportunity to enhance their own message, and connect the community (Keen, 2008). "Schools cannot succeed apart from the community and community cannot succeed apart from the schools" (Shorthouse, 2011, p. 1). One editor interviewed explained public education compromises teachers, students, parents, and the community. All of these people are necessary to constitute education. If the school community does not incorporate all the elements, poor school performance will be the result. The editor stated teachers, students, parents, and the community make up the news, and stories about people are more preferred than stories about cold numbers.

Van Roekel (2008) states when schools, parents, families, the media, and businesses within the community work together to support learning and school improvement, students tend to earn higher grades, attend more regularly, graduate more consistently, and enroll in higher level programs. When these school-family-community partnerships are created, the links to student success and achievement are evident (Van Roekel, 2008). Research shows that parent-family-community partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and more motivated students. The evidence supports this notion



from elementary through the secondary level regardless of parents' education and family income (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Barton, 2003; Jeynes, 2003).

Several newspaper editors said that stories of crime, fire, or disasters printed in the newspaper certainly grab the community attention. Newspaper editors understand this phenomenon and are aware the community has many people watching the newspaper coverage of all events. The coverage can impact the relationship with the community and the public schools. According to one editor, the newspaper staff is casually, although not intentionally, watching if something is missed or reported on too heavily. The editor explained there are numerous community reactions to stories printed in the newspaper, but only a few will resonate with the newspaper staff and catch the editor's attention for publication in the future.

One editor interviewed for this research feels there is less trust among institutions and between citizens in the community. Public schools are government institutions. The editor recommended public schools be held accountable to the community for the decisions the school makes. Another editor interviewed observes how school boards do not follow the rules, and this lack of transparency and trust is evident. Passing out meeting agendas, following laws, and being open with the community and public at the local school board meetings are always recommended.

Public schools operate as a business. This sentiment was presented in all five newspaper editors on several occasions during the interviews. Editors explained that although none of them have specific education training, their gained experience from covering education for years demonstrates to them all that public education deals with

millions of dollars as well as with thousands of students and families. Newspaper editors recommended that local public school leaders recognize school districts as one of the most expensive operations within the community. The public schools are a community investment, and the trail of tax dollars, test scores, and cafeteria health reports must be followed.

One newspaper editor stated the media should not tear down anything that is truly important to the community, recommending that educators understand there are many viewpoints to many topics, and the media are much more reasonable now about bad news than in the past. Also, public school leaders need to know the mainstream media are interested in the future of the community, not its destruction. Unfortunately, much of the funding that assisted newspapers in acquiring stories to help the community, has been redistributed to other media sources. Editors recommended public school leaders be aware of this recent lack of coverage and reporter availability due to financial constraints. The consensus and recommendations of all newspaper editors are that public school districts must do a better job communicating their vision to the community and that communicating the public school vision is vital for the future of the community. Several editors felt the community is entitled to know all the information that occurs, and since 95 percent of the printed news is positive, it is recommended this positive news be shared with the community in a consistent manner.

Another editor seeks to find trends in education and becomes disappointed when engagement in the community is lacking. This editor wishes he had a recommendation that would fix the lack of engagement between the community and the schools. The editor said sports engage the community if they could be non-stop, but he recommended

that public schools call parents and begin to engage the community since engagement is not the role of the media. One editor explained the role of the media is to recognize that schools are an expensive and important community investment, and although the trail of tax dollars, test scores, and cafeteria health reports must be followed. The media are not performing their jobs properly if they are not in the classrooms as well as the boardrooms.

## Theme II: Relationships

### Recommendations to Public School Leaders

Relationships with the media, community, and public schools are essential. Working collaboratively with the public to establish and re-establish relationships as well as intentionally engaging the public is vital for the success and continuation of public schools in the United States. When public schools decide to make a concerted effort to speak of their successes, challenges, and concerns, the media are invited to become partners in this plan to echo the sentiments and desires of the school to the community.

Public school leaders should be building bridges with the editors by letting the media in and dealing with them openly and honestly. Although public school leaders may be equipped to deal with the media in a time of crisis, they may not be equipped to communicate with the media on a regular basis, and having the ability to do so helps build and foster relationships with the media (Schneider & Hollenczer, 2006).

The media have a role to play in their relationships with schools to convey a message to the community about specific successes and even struggles of public schools. This message is important for public school growth, sustainability, and credibility. Therefore, developing a relationship with those who set the agenda and make publishing

decisions, public schools can help the media acquire information to develop a pro-public school message (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

Newspaper editors interviewed for this research indicated different levels of their relationships with the local public schools. School superintendents, principals, and public school relations directors are the focus of a reporter or editor's contact. A poor relationship results in poor or little coverage in the local newspaper.

Four of the five newspaper editors interviewed for this research reported having an overall good relationship with the public schools in their area. The four editors who reported having a good relationship with the schools recommended public school leaders have regular, face-to-face contact with the media. One newspaper editor recommended that superintendents, principals, or public relations employees have consistent contact with the media. Consistent contact will create a successful school and a relationship that will prosper. A second editor explained a positive relationship is built on trust and two people seeing eye-to-eye. He recommended working at developing a positive relationship with the media. When the relationship is established, it usually results in increased coverage for the local public school.

One editor contended that although he has an overall positive relationship with the public schools in the area, he bemoaned he will never have a good relationship with his high school alma mater, which feels the media consistently portray the school district in a negative fashion, even though the editor can cite numerous examples in which the school district received positive coverage. The editor recommended public schools must use reporters and work hard to build a relationship with the school because the reporters are connected with many people in the community. All editors recommended the

necessity of a relationship with the public school leadership in order to have a positive relationship with the school and community. If the schools are not cooperative, the media are less likely to print stories from the public school district.

An editor interviewed for this research asked the community not see the media “as blood thirsty idiots for the most part” (Editor 3). The editor spoke about his local school board and how specific members brag about not having a relationship with the media. When there is not a positive relationship between the media and the public schools, insulated and protective attitudes in the public school systems are the cause. Instead of the insulated and protective attitudes, several editors recommended public schools be accountable to the community for its decisions and actions at all times. When negative news happens, organizations tend to protect themselves, stated one newspaper editor. The editor recommended public school leaders work hard not to allow distrust to develop between the community, media, and school. Distrust creates a media versus public school attitude and damages relationships, creating a tendency to assume the worst about the organization.

A consensus among editors interviewed is that a teacher strike damages the relationship between the media and public schools the most. The editors recommended public schools understand the media will cover the teacher strike like any other community event. The feelings and attitudes from a teacher strike linger for years. Editors recommended public school leaders maintain an open relationship with the newspaper at all times. Also, newspaper editors recommended that public school leaders build a relationship with the local reporters and editors by hosting a media day and being responsive to the needs of the media. One recommended method is to have public school

superintendents meet face-to-face with local reporters at the beginning of each school year.

### Theme III: Communication

#### Recommendations to Public School Leaders

Communication is an essential element in the success of public schools in America. Research indicates that communication between public schools, the community, and the media is part of the solution to strengthening our public school system. Newspaper editors interviewed for this research stress open communication between public school leaders and the media. Chapters 1 and 2 include examples of research supporting communication as an important element of a strong community and strong public school.

Newspaper editors interviewed for this research shared their views on the importance of communication. The editors' views represent a connection to the research and provide conclusions and recommendations to public school leaders.

Epstein (1992) discusses six types of involvement between the community and the school. Epstein's (1992) second element is communication. Epstein stresses communication with families about school programs and student progress. This two-way communication channel between school and home is only effective when it is performed consistently by both parties (Epstein, 1992). Johnson and Friedman (2006) also support the need for communication between public school leaders, the community, and the media. Their study reveals that public school systems often have poor communication within their own institutions. Rectifying this is vital. Public schools must embrace

communication and become proactive with the community and media. Newspaper editors can be influential in communicating the message of the public school to the community. Public school leaders should be building bridges with the editors by letting the media in and dealing with them openly and honestly.

The first newspaper editor interviewed for this research explained that the job of the newspaper is to give equal voice to all community residents, and the media's role is to communicate with the entire district since the public school district is a community, and schools are supposed to work together. Editors recommended that public school leaders know that the media will solicit information from people and sources they know will communicate back to them. Typically, the focus of gathering information is directed toward either the superintendent or the principal of the public school district. If a public school district employs a public relations director, the editor will seek that person's voice as well. If school personnel are not a reliable source of information, editors will seek their information elsewhere. Newspaper editors interviewed for this research recommended public school leaders be timely, reachable, and accessible and be available after hours and in an emergency. Editors ask public school leaders to build a relationship and communicate regularly with local reporters or editors. Public school educators should email reporters or call when they have something to share, and the story about an event or happening at the school may be covered.

Open communication with public schools, the community, and the media is important. One newspaper editor said he can name several school board members in a local school district who brag about not speaking or communicating to the media. If the school board approves a construction project or new public policy, newspaper editors

recommend being accountable and open to questions from the public about the cost and implementation of each project and policy. Another recommendation for public school leaders is to create transparency at all school board meetings. School boards need to pass out meeting agendas, follow laws, and be open with the community.

One newspaper editor declared that the public schools in his community all vary in the communication of their vision to the community. He said that all public schools can do a better job in this area. Never hearing from the local public schools is unfortunate, and this attitude helps nobody. A simple, recurring recommendation from all editors interviewed is for public school leaders to openly and regularly communicate with the media by telephone, email, or face-to-face meetings when possible. Editors recommended public schools send out press releases. Superintendents should lead the media contact and have regular conversations with the newspaper. The media tend to know sports are happening, but do not know about all the academic successes. The media must know about a story if we are expected to print it. One editor mentioned that the public does not have to love the media, but they must keep the channels of communication open because the newspaper is a good vehicle for public school districts.

Newspaper editors recommended public school leaders communicate with the media when they would like to have the media visit the school. However, the newspaper editors strongly recommended that when doing so, schools must know what the media are allowed to do and what they cannot do. For example, if the newspaper cannot take pictures or publish the photos of students taken on the first day of school, the school principal should not invite the media to the school.



Newspaper editors recommended public school leaders be accountable for negative events and not cover up negative occurrences or wait for them to go away. Public school leaders should not deflect the negative news when it occurs. Editors desire that the schools deal with negative news clearly and not allow an attitude of “us versus them” to develop and thereby break down communication and create a tendency to assume the worst. Editors reported that superintendents’ trying to insulate their employees from negative news and not seeing a need to communicate with the media is a poor approach. Editors recommended public school leaders understand how to deal with and get ahead of the negative events that occur.

Vollmer (2010) also speaks about the importance of communication. He refers to having what he calls “The Great Conversation,” a positive, ongoing discussion between public school leaders and the people of the community they serve. Public school leaders are charged with reaching further into the local community in an attempt to heal the damage caused by all the negativity of the past. Public school leaders must engage the community and media with consistent communication and re-welcome them into the public school system.

#### Theme IV: Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News

##### Recommendations to Public School Leaders

The communication theories of gatekeeping and agenda-setting are defined and explained in Chapter 2. Their importance to this research study is demonstrated by the connection to how and why newspaper editors select and publish educational stories.

The gatekeeping theory refers to the concept that there is some selectivity in how and why many news items are presented (Shoemaker, 2001). Newspaper editors are gatekeepers. They decide what will actually become news, and their judgments are closely related to what would be of interest to the public. Editors share a common understanding of which kinds of events people want to know about. More importantly, whether newspaper editors allow or encourage the event to become news depends on many factors, but it is clear that editors are able to predict what other people want to know (Shoemaker, 2006).

Agenda-setting refers to the concept that the media place more importance on certain issues than on others (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). The agenda-setting theory tells how those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news or in the local newspaper become the problems or issues the viewing public regards as the most important. By calling attention to some issues while ignoring others, the media influence the manner in which governments, presidents, policies, candidates for public office, and even local public school districts are judged (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Not all news may be considered newsworthy and consequently be selected for publication by newspaper editors. The newsworthiness of an event is only one of many factors that determines how prominently the story will be displayed. What cannot be certain is that even the most prominently covered stories are the ones that people think are newsworthy. The fact that a story is simply thought of as newsworthy is not a good predictor of what will become news. In fact, what eventually becomes news is determined by a long list of factors and influences (Shoemaker, 2006).

All editors interviewed for this research provided examples for what constitutes a newsworthy topic. The editors also explained how educational stories are selected and how publishing decisions are made. Each editor reported that stories are chosen for publication because the newspaper decides what to publish based on reader interest. One editor interviewed explains his job is to cover the “whole forest” (Editor 3). A second editor reported there are many stories to choose from, and if the desire is to show the whole community, what needs to be published is what the community does not know, good and bad.

Newspaper editors recommended public school leaders understand that the role of an editor is to report what is memorable. One editor explained how media personnel enjoy bad news, but, in his opinion, newspapers must celebrate both since good and bad news is what the community remembers. Editors recommended that community and public school leaders not be afraid of the bad news and at the same time embrace the good news. Each editor did not hesitate to state all stories that occur, both positive and negative, are newsworthy.

One newspaper editor interviewed recommended public school leaders understand the statement; “To me all of it is news. It is just a matter of how much space it gets” (Editor 3). A second editor said that if a story is different or if the story affects the lives of others, then the event is newsworthy. News can be anything that informs or helps people make better decisions. Newsworthy means local and is about people, not things. Breaking news is newsworthy, crazy is newsworthy, and a feel-good community story is newsworthy, explained another editor. Rare is newsworthy as well as is any story out of the ordinary at the regional, state, or national level. Trends in education and stories that

may have an impact on the community are newsworthy. A third newspaper editor reported almost everything is newsworthy: PSSA scores, School Performance Profiles in Pennsylvania, and all information regarding the budget are always news. If a story is outside the proximity of the newspaper coverage area, explained one editor, it needs to be a great, bizarre, or unusual story to be considered for publication.

Editors recommended public school leaders understand that kids make bad choices, bad news will be printed, and newspapers cannot censor the news. When dealing with negative news, the media recommend public school leaders learn from the mistakes of others and learn from districts that are better prepared to deal with the negative occurrences. The media are not always right, but they must cover any negative story about education.

A fourth editor explained how specific types of news stories have greater significance and appeal to a larger number of people, which makes them newsworthy. This can be explained through a well-known axiom: “What bleeds, leads” (Editor 5). Stories of crime, fire, or disasters certainly get the community’s attention, and it is certainly more interesting to read the negative news. In pursuit of any bad news, editors recommended that local public schools know that during these times, the media will act as judge and jury. The community needs to know what the football scores are as well as the poor code inspection results in the school cafeteria, the failing tests scores, the teacher strike, and the dismissal of an employee. Editors interviewed for this research explained how the people in the community tell the media what is important by how the community reacts to the stories printed in the newspaper. The newspaper will print all stories they feel are important whether the local public school feels they are important.

Teachers, along with students, parents, and the community make up the news, which makes people stories more preferred than stories about cold numbers. Schools are community institutions, and teachers are newsmakers and therefore placed on a higher scale for any news story, especially when a negative news story involving a teacher may occur. A story about a teacher involved in a crime or wrongdoing will always be news, according to one newspaper editor.

Editors interviewed for this research recommended the community know what the Friday night football scores are as well as the cafeteria code inspection results. One newspaper editor explained how the people in the community tell the media what is important by the community's reactions to the stories regarding the cafeteria inspections and local football scores. These community reactions are what drive the editors to continue to seek out information on these topics. The fourth editor interviewed stated that community response to football scores and cafeteria inspections demonstrates their level of importance. Specific news stories have greater significance and appeal to a larger number of people, which makes them newsworthy. The media must ask themselves whether there is a public benefit in publishing it.

Editors explained to educators that a final decision of what to report and whether to print a story or not, rests with the newspaper. One editor specifically stated that if schools are not cooperative, the media are less likely to print stories from the school district. When media cover the schools, you cannot possibly print every story. Saying no causes bad feelings, and schools get upset. Editors reported that people only remember the negative coverage even though one editor cited many positive stories printed about a

local district. One editor declared that although sports engage the community and can certainly be a source of good will, there is too much of an emphasis on sports in the news.

Newspapers try to publish stories in a fair and balanced way. Two editors interviewed felt the community is entitled to know all information and stated almost all printed news is positive and should be shared with the community at every opportunity. Newspaper editors do not want public school leaders to forget that positive stories are also considered newsworthy, although the public does not always agree. One editor recalled a citizen expressing dismay over a positive, human interest story being printed on the front page by asking, “Was it a slow news day?” (Editor 2).

In his seminal study in 1950, White concluded that editorial decisions on what will ultimately become news were highly subjective and based on the editor’s own set of experiences, attitudes, expectations, and personal values as to what makes up the news. Newspaper editors have the authority, either alone or collaboratively, to make decisions based on their personal values as to what appears in news reports, magazines, and newspapers. This responsibility to choose ‘what we think about’ is a powerful and influential one. It can shape our lives and tell us what is important at the local level and even on the national stage (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003). Because the media have a responsibility to report what they are told, what they can verify, and what is vital for the public to know, public school leaders must understand the media’s role and make a concerted effort to collaborate with them to advance the public school message.

## Theme V: Social Media

### Recommendations to Public School Leaders

The Internet has drastically changed the ways in which some individuals receive news and information. The most obvious way is through its 24-hour format. The Internet, which includes cable news, talk radio, blogging, and social media, provides links to an endless list of news media at all hours of the day and allows individuals to receive information any time via email (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwon, 2002). Internet sources can affect the public agenda in ways that are different from traditional media. Media scholars must also re-examine how pre-existing media theories operate in environments where the influence on society and the community of electronically connected citizens is high (McCombs, 2009).

Newspaper editors interviewed for this research complained about social media outlets. Specifically, newspaper editors want public school leaders to know that social media use student and even teacher names without asking when an event happens, and the mainstream refrains from doing so. The community and public schools should embrace the fact the mainstream media will do a fair and balanced story unlike the 10,000 publishers on social media or Facebook, who publish without any facts. Social media are harmful to the mainstream media as well. All newspaper editors recommended that public school leaders do not engage the lies nor challenge the rumors posted on social media.

## Implementation of Themes

The five themes are presented in the order that public school leaders should implement them for use. The process of implementation is important since the order of the themes represent an intentional focus on the recommendations provided by the newspaper editors interviewed for this research.

First, public school leaders must understand their role and place within the Community. Successful schools need a supportive community and a strong community needs a successful school. Once school leaders understand how the schools and community are linked, meaningful relationships with local governments, politicians, and the media can be created. The second step of the implementation process is building Relationships. The relationships made with the community partners will enhance the ability for public school leaders to communicate their vision. The third step of the implementation process is Communication. Open and consistent communication with the media provides a vehicle in which public school leaders can articulate their message to the public school community. The fourth step of the implementation process is, Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News. Public school leaders need to know how the media works. Recognizing specific theories of how the media communicates and the media's rationale for how publishing decisions are made play a vital role in schools creating and maintaining a healthy school and media relationship. The fifth and last step in the process of how public school leaders must implement the editors' recommendations is to understand Social Media. The Internet and social media has transformed how people receive their news and information. It is



important that public school leaders know how the Internet and social media can be both helpful and harmful to school communities.

### Suggestions for Further Research

This researcher recommends interviewing a larger population of newspaper editors over a wider geographic area. A larger number of editors may give validation to the recommendations provided to public school leaders and potentially identify additional recommendations.

### Limitations

The first limitation is the sample size. Conducting qualitative interviews with more than five newspapers editors may have provided a broader range of responses to the interview questions. The responses may have provided additional themes and thereby provided additional recommendations that public school leaders could use to connect the media and the school community. Also, the newspapers selected constitute only a portion of eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania. The newspapers may not represent the views for the remainder of the United States.

A second limitation would be to acquire additional practice and experience interviewing subjects for research would serve this researcher well. Additional practice would assist the researcher in learning to listen to interviewees' responses to the research questions and speaking less in an attempt to control the interview. This approach would produce results that are better focused on the original research questions. Practicing the process of better questioning techniques and learning how to redirect research questions back to the research prompts are an important skill that would produce more focused and clear results.

A third limitation is the researcher's relationship with the editors. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher had no relationship with any of the newspaper editors used in this research. Establishing a relationship with one or all of the newspaper editors prior to conducting this research may have yielded more open and honest responses.

### Summary and Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how newspaper editors make publishing decisions and asked the editors to provide recommendations to public school leaders that can help build a better relationship with the community and the media. Through the literature and the research, recommendations from newspaper editors emerged under five themes: a. Community b. Relationships c. Communication d. Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Newsworthiness: Understanding the News e. Social Media.

All five newspaper editors interviewed in this study recommended that public school leaders embrace and engage the community. A successful school and successful community are not independent of each other. They are intimately connected, and this connection yields a parent, government, and business connection, empowering the schools and making them stronger. Editors are asking public school leaders to engage the community and invite them into the local schools. The five newspaper editors interviewed for this research are responsible for covering 182 public schools in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Each public school has an annual budget provided by local taxes totaling in the millions of dollars. This fact makes newspaper coverage of the happenings in the public school important events that the community is entitled to know

about and places the media at the front door of any public school when negative news occurs.

Editors recommended that all public school leaders learn how to build and sustain a relationship with the media. Education is a constant public relations necessity. Newspaper editors interviewed desire to have a relationship with the public schools within the coverage area of the newspaper. Editors asked schools to be open, inclusive, and honest with the media. Developing a strong relationship will assist public schools in making connections with reporters and editors who can help in times of a crisis and be available to report on the positive stories occurring in the school district.

Communication is an essential element of all successful public school, community, and media partnerships. Public school leaders who are willing to communicate with the community and media on a regular basis will receive more positive press than those schools that try to avoid the media. Public schools are expensive government organizations. The organizations that do not communicate with the community and try to protect themselves in a crisis are helping no one. Schools must come to terms with the openness that newspaper editor's desire. Public school leaders need to grasp the understanding that the media's role is to report the news in the manner in which they see fit. Media do not exist to make public school schools look good nor engage the community. That is the role of the all public schools and their leaders.

All stories are newsworthy, according to the newspaper editors interviewed for this research. Public school leaders must be aware of this and must try not to censor the news. Attempting to cover up negative press will do harm and serves no purpose to editors. Public school leaders must also understand that all positive stories cannot be

printed. Editors will function as gatekeepers and set the agenda for what types of news and stories they have time and space available to print. The publishing decisions of newspaper editors are not personal.

Newspaper editors do not think highly of social media. The editors have a strong view of themselves as responsible, professional members of the community. Editors viewed social media as amateurs who will say anything with no accountability.

Newspaper editors interviewed are accountable for what they publish and are not afraid, nor intimidated by, any criticism they may receive concerning a story. Editors publishing stories in a fair and balanced way while being held accountable by the community for their decisions makes for a healthy environment between the community, media, and public schools.

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July 22, 2014

Dr. Robert Beebe, Principal Investigator  
Mr. Chris Gill, Co-investigator  
Department of Educational Foundations, Research, Technology & Leadership  
UNIVERSITY

RE: HSRC Protocol Number: 017-2015  
Title: The Community, Media, and Public Schools: Recommendations for a Partnership

Dear Dr. Beebe and Mr. Gill:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed the abovementioned protocol and determined that it is exempt from full committee review based on a DHHS Category 3 exemption.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,

Dr. Daniel Suchora  
Interim Associate Dean for Research

DS/cc

c: Dr. Mary Lou DiPillo, Chair  
Department of Educational Foundations, Research, Technology & Leadership



July 22, 2014

Dr. Robert Beebe, Principal Investigator  
Mr. Chris Gill, Co-investigator  
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