

Public Relations: A Necessary Tool for Advocacy in Gifted Education

Public relations should be an integral part of advocacy in gifted education. Advocacy is the act of speaking or writing in favor of an issue by providing public recommendation and support. Public relations, on the other hand, are the activities of an organization, institution, or individual that are designed to win the favor of the general public and promote a better understanding of policies and purposes; it involves disseminating information in print and by nonprint media. Without building the knowledge base for understanding the unique needs and educational methods of gifted education, advocacy is likely to meet with limited success. Therefore, building a strong knowledge base among the public is critical. Gifted supporters need to go beyond talking for and among themselves to provide accurate information to other educators and the general public.

Reasons for Public Relations in Gifted Education

Several specialists have provided reasons for public relations in gifted education. Karnes and Riley (1991) stated that gifted children are often misunderstood, the victims of damaging myths and stereotypes. Grika (1986) indicated a widespread misunderstanding of giftedness which can mean public resistance to funding for gifted education. Dettmer (1991) pointed out that public relations for advocacy has taken a subordinate role behind other issues in gifted education. She stated that it is by crisis rather than design that public relations and advocacy are undertaken. Renzulli (1987) cited the lack of a large, dedicated cadre of persons who affiliate and know the need for gifted education as one reason for the limited longevity of gifted programs at the local, state, and national levels. The reasons for public relations for advocacy include: to promote a better understanding of the nature and needs of gifted children and youth, to gain positive support for appropriate programs, to keep all constituent groups informed on key issues, and to build a knowledge base for advocacy (Riley & Karnes, 1993a).

Importance of Media Coverage

Examination of national media coverage of gifted education in newspapers found that few news articles supported gifted education (Meadows & Karnes, 1992; Lewis & Karnes, 1995). Newspaper articles for both studies were cited in the NewsBank Electronics Index, a CD-ROM service with access to 500 newspapers from all 50 states. The more recent publication calls attention to the many critical areas in gifted education that are not being adequately addressed. In addition, there was only one listing on the more than 75 Javits programs. Of the many articles published after the U.S. Department of Education issued the National Excellence report in November, 1993, one was indexed in NewsBank. When two or more articles were listed on a topic, such as identification, minority enrollment, or funding, that listing usually indicated an unresolved problem (Lewis & Karnes, 1995). This selective indexing of news articles depicts an incomplete picture of gifted children and their education. It is important for supporters to use

newspapers as a means of educating the general public. Lewis and Karnes (1995) offered many suggestions for more effective newspaper coverage to disseminate accurate information about critical issues in gifted education. Local, state, and national magazines provide useful opportunities for public relations. Lewis and Karnes (1997) found that the number of articles on gifted education has dramatically decreased in recent years. However, numbers do not tell the entire story. Articles not written by gifted specialists vary as to their accuracy and support. Clearly this is an opportunity for advocates of gifted education to reach a wide audience. Magazines that have published articles on gifted children in the past include those with a general editorial format or focus on business news, education, news and opinion, parenting, psychology, science, and women (Lewis & Karnes, 1997). Renzulli (1993) wrote, "We [researchers] have been guilty in the gifted field of 'preaching to the converted,' and therefore a part of our effort is to reach out to other readerships" (p. 101). If specialists in gifted education were to write just one article for the general press each year, the quantity of accurate information available to the general reading public would increase dramatically. Teacher educators and researchers could write about their specialty areas; teachers could write about activities for parents to do with their gifted children at home or curricular ideas for other teachers (particularly important during the current trend toward inclusive education); and parents could write about their personal experiences that were positive learning opportunities (Lewis & Karnes, 1997). For guidelines, interested parties can contact the periodical's editor. Care should be taken when selecting a title, subtitle, section heads, and picture captions to ensure that the intended message is unambiguous and does not project an elitist tone (e.g., "Aren't we smart?").

State Level Strategies

Riley and Karnes (1993b) studied the possible impact of a state gifted organization joining together with other state educational and parenting associations. Of those responding, all expressed a positive interest in gifted education. Almost 370,000 individuals within these state associations could be impacted through presentations at state conferences and news articles in their magazines, journals, and newsletters.

Unfortunately, none of the groups had a position statement, committee, or special interest group in gifted education. Networking with other state organizations provides many opportunities to break down barriers between special interest groups and to build the groundwork for mutual trust and support. Another technique to determine support for gifted education is to use a state-wide telephone public opinion survey. The response of a representative, statistical sample of residents in a given state was very positive toward gifted education (Karnes & Riley, 1996). The initial sharing of results could be facilitated through a press conference and newspaper releases. The topic may lend itself to further discussion through radio and television talk shows. Key legislators need to be apprised of the findings to garner support for increased funding. The

process of surveying for public opinion and the results of such endeavors could be disseminated at local, state, and national conferences on gifted child education.

Target Your Audiences

Everyone who is interested in working for and with the gifted should know a variety of effective public relations tools. Dettmer (1991) reminded us of the many groups to target both within a district and outside of it. Those individuals within a district include: gifted and talented students; their teachers, parents, and program personnel; regular classroom teachers; school administrators; psychologists and psychometricians; guidance counselors and curriculum specialists; librarians and media consultants; school board members; and special education personnel. Those suggested outside of a district include: legislators, members of state boards of education, and other policy makers; business and professional leaders; community leaders and members; medical personnel; social psychologists; persons having the responsibility for teacher preparation in general and special education; curriculum and textbook consultants; visionaries and futurists; and theorists and researchers. Other groups include members of Congress; members and leaders in religious, humanities, and art associations; interdisciplinary groups and organizations in academic areas; and the general public.

How to Get Started

Local, state, and national groups will benefit from having an organized approach to public relations and a committee charged to design and implement a written plan. Several crucial decisions must be made as the public relations campaign plan is developed, implemented, and evaluated:

- What is the purpose of the campaign? That is, what are you trying to make happen or prevent?
- Who is the target audience, and who in that audience has the power to make changes?
- What is the best message for that group?
- What public relations strategies should be employed, based on the resources and expertise available?

When these questions can be answered effectively, then:

- Decide on a clear goal.
- Identify objectives and activities to reach your goal.
- Select appropriate strategies.
- Determine cost effectiveness.
- Establish a reasonable timeline with dates for initiation, completion, and person(s) responsible.
- Develop evaluation criteria so you will know when you have achieved your goal.

- Get others involved so that you increase your support and communications base.

Always remember the knowledge level and sophistication of your target audience in selecting and planning specific strategies.

Strategies -- Nonprint Media

A variety of public relations strategies can be employed, based on the message to be imparted, the target population, and objectives and resources of the group. Nonprint media could include radio, telephones and answering machines, television, videotapes, videodiscs, and interactive videos. Radio and television include paid advertising, talk show interviews (which involve no costs, except those of transportation), public service announcements, or news reports focused on gifted children, their program activities, or the beneficiaries of some special project. Planned telephone trees or networks allow for quick dissemination of important information. An answering machine with its phone number and time and date(s) of activation can be set up to deliver a short message with the advertised information. Videos, including those produced by students, can be utilized at meetings, malls, fairs, conferences, and on television. Experts can provide a wide array of informative topics suitable for parent meetings and staff development (Karnes & Lewis, 1996).

Strategies -- Print Media

Print media include letters, faxes, magazines and journals, newsletters, newspapers, brochures, buttons, post cards, posters, and T-shirts. Some frequently underutilized methods include advertising slugs (postal stamps used on postage meters for mass mailings), billboards, bookmarks, bus placards, electronic signs and commercial message boards, piggyback mailings (information included in another group's mailings), stickers, and the wire service. Also gaining in popularity is use of the Internet. Gifted education centers; college and university departments of gifted education; local, state, and national organizations; state departments of education; and teachers, administrators, and other school personnel can set up home pages linked to other informative sources on the World Wide Web to provide ready access to a wide range of resources.

Other Strategies

Other forms of public relations include displays and presentations at conferences, meetings, and special events. The latter may take the form of proclamations (for example, a governor announcing gifted education month); ribbon cutting events; recognition ceremonies for supporters, parents, or teachers; conferences; panel discussions; seminars and workshops. Student performances in school and at meetings, conferences, and mall events also

afford great opportunities for public relations. Volunteering or being solicited for speaking engagements at business, civic, social, and arts events should bring a better understanding of gifted children to those groups.

Link Between Public Relations and Advocacy

Support for gifted education has always been limited. Advocates for gifted children need to be involved in positive public relations on a continuing basis. In times of educational reform, it is even more essential to build a foundation of general understanding about gifted children and their educational needs. When advocacy becomes necessary, more people in positions of power will be informed, making the advocate's job easier and more likely to be successful. Use public relations to increase support for gifted education--locally, state-wide, and nationally.

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