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I began my school PR career in 1989, a time when most public school districts didn't have a dedicated communications position, let alone an entire department. While some districts embraced the concept of a proactive communications program, most questioned the need for such an expense.

Throughout my 35-year school PR career I worked in four different public school districts, all of which are located in central Ohio. I also held various job titles: Communications Specialist, Marketing Manager, Communications Director, Director of Communications & Media Relations, Community Relations Coordinator, Community Relations Director, Communications & Community Engagement Director, Executive Director of Communications, and Chief Communications Officer.

Those of us fortunate enough to be working in this field at that time were able to watch school districts evolve as they started to realize the importance of proactive communications. They began creating positions and hiring individuals to fulfill these responsibilities. Some larger school districts created actual communications departments consisting of multiple employees, while smaller districts typically had only one person spearheading their communications efforts.

In some cases the communications responsibility was added to an existing position. The best job title I ever saw came from a small, rural Ohio school system back in 2002: Director of Food Services & Communications. Though this title sounds rather funny, I've always viewed it as a symbol of school systems finally realizing the need for and importance of having someone on staff to manage their proactive communications initiatives.

For the first three districts in which I worked, I was hired to fill a vacancy in an existing communications role. I was about 17 years into my career, working as the Director of Communications & Media Relations in what is now Ohio's largest school system, when the typical routine of reading Sunday's newspaper turned into a career-changing moment.

I wasn't even thinking about a career change when my wife began reading to me a Help Wanted advertisement from a local school district that was seeking a new Community Relations Coordinator. I knew the district and assumed they were looking to fill a vacancy created by the departure of a communications colleague whom I had known nearly my entire career. He had been with this particular district for quite some time, so I told my wife I was going to call him on Monday to give him some grief for leaving.

When I made that phone call, I soon discovered that my colleague wore many hats and held many different responsibilities in this district. His communication role was secondary to most of his other job responsibilities and performed on an "as needed" basis. I was completely unaware of this because I only knew and interacted with him through our respective communications roles.

He proceeded to tell me he wasn't leaving and that district communications responsibilities would now belong to this new position. The Board of Education was seeking someone with significant experience managing a comprehensive communications program for a large school district. They wanted someone who could build a strategic communications program from the ground up.

I had never had such an opportunity before and without hesitation said to my colleague, “Tell me more.” I learned that the district had been experiencing difficulty passing an operating levy. Community leaders gently admonished the board because the district was a multi-million-dollar business, but it did not have a dedicated communications function. The previous superintendent had little interest in establishing a comprehensive, proactive program for the district.

The effects of this approach lingered and community leaders perceived this to be a primary hurdle to rebuilding trust and regaining community support. They told district leadership that if the levy was going to pass, the board needed to commit to improved communications and increased operational transparency.

During the subsequent levy campaign, the board publicly committed to improving communications and increasing its transparency. The ballot measure included funding for two communications positions, along with the board’s pledge to implement a fully-staffed communications department.

The operating levy passed and I was hired shortly afterwards. One person on staff, a former secretary with magazine experience, had supported the former superintendent with required communications. She served as a district photographer, issued required notices and news releases, and created an annual report/calendar. Upon approval of the levy, this position became part of my department and I was also able to hire an additional employee to work as a graphic designer/webmaster.

Fast forward 18 years to my retirement from this district, which I will refer to as “my final district” throughout this publication. I closed out my career in September 2024 having established in my final district a highly-skilled, four-person (counting

myself) communications team to execute a comprehensive, proactive communications program. We did it all: communications, PR, marketing, advertising, promotions, community relations, crisis communications, media relations, video production, social media, and web design, along with a dash of technology integration and support.

I believe we were successful in meeting the lofty goals set by the board when I was first hired: improve communications, restore public confidence, and increase organizational transparency. A few of the anecdotes included in this book help support this claim.

The strategies, philosophies, and concepts shared within the following pages will be beneficial no matter the leadership role you hold or your reason for consulting this book. This book is meant for:

- The Communications Professional who is leading a one-person department or supervising a team of employees.
- Superintendents, Treasurers and Board of Education members who are seeking ways to improve their district’s communications.
- The Principal who wants to improve their building-level communications.
- Directors, Coordinators and Managers who supervise a department or program and have made communications a priority.

Whether you hope to strengthen an established communications program or are tasked with building one from scratch, I am certain this publication will serve as a helpful guidebook. I wish you great success in your venture and would be happy to support you throughout the process.

- Greg Viebranz