Public Relations Plan

Public Relations Plan for Ronan Public Schools

By

Submitted to
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Ronan, Montana is my hometown and I have spent most of my life as a member of the community. Long before I became a teacher, I was a student in the schools here and worked as a cashier at both of the local grocery stores. Of course I had my own opinions of the school system as a student. My opinion, I would say, started out very positive in elementary school and then began a rapid downward slide after I was in middle school and high school. I eventually dropped out of high school and went on to get my GED and a college degree. While obtaining my elementary education degree, I spent time in several of the schools here (on the reservation) and found, again, I had positive impressions of the elementary schools but negative perceptions of the middle and high schools. For one thing, they were not nearly as welcoming to me as a college student and in fact would not return any of my correspondence regarding observations and field experience in the classrooms of the older children.

My daughter is a student at K. William Harvey Elementary, Ronan’s k-5 school, where I work as a para-educator in the special needs pre-school. I have seen great things occurring there, including positive parent relationships and an effort by many staff members to be involved in the community and provide a culturally competent atmosphere for all of our students. However, having more experience in the field of education under my belt has given me a more critical perspective and I definitely continue to see issues between our schools and the community. Although we live on an Indian reservation and our schools have roughly 70 percent tribal students, we have very few teachers of Native American descent, in spite of the fact that the local tribal college received their 4 year degree certification in 2008 and are graduating teachers every year. Not only that, but many of our newer teachers are from entirely different communities and have a very limited understanding of the culture of the community in which we live.
This issue is magnified in the middle and high schools. I have talked to many parents who are extremely unhappy with the quality of education their children are receiving past 5th grade. Our elementary school has not made AYP for 2 years (the verdict is still out on this past academic year) and neither has the high school, although our middle school did meet AYP requirements last year. Many parents are choosing to send their children to schools in other towns and still more are dropping out. Some parents are even choosing to home school because of the conflicts that exist between the teachers and administration of the middle school and the parents. When my daughter gets to 5th grade, it will be a difficult decision whether or not to send her to school here. In the 15 years since I last attended, it seems that little or no changes have occurred.

Meanwhile, enrollment is on the rise for kindergarten and first grade students. We had the largest kindergarten roundup ever this year, with 37 more students than last year. Last year we had three kindergarten classrooms with 25 students and more in each class. With 37 additional students, the district is only planning for one additional kindergarten teacher, so it will be interesting to see what happens with that. Students with special needs are also on the rise, particularly in pre-k. There will be a second special needs pre-school next year to account for the additional special needs 3 and 4 year olds who have been identified over the past year in our community, and more to come after school begins.

In summary, changes are occurring that our district needs to plan for and address, but many changes that should have been made long ago are being ignored. Few relationships between parents and the school are positive, particularly in the middle and high schools. As a result of this tension, which has existed throughout the history of Ronan Public Schools, we are not providing the highest quality of educational opportunity for all of our students.
Kowalski (2011) defines Public Relations as "an evolving social science and leadership process utilizing multimedia approaches designed to build goodwill, enhance the public's attitude toward the value of education, augment interaction and two-way symmetrical communication between schools and their ecosystems, provide vital and useful information to the public and employees, and play an integral role in planning and decision-making functions" (p. 22-23).

Based on my perceptions of the public's generally negative opinion of the Ronan Public Schools, our district has a great need for a Public Relations Plan that will address some of the issues at the heart of these negative feelings and take action toward the primary goal of enhancing public opinion and goodwill toward our organization.

**Ronan Public School's Mission Statement:**
The Mission of the Ronan Public Schools, an educational system which values our multicultural heritage, is to provide an equitable learning opportunity in a safe environment for all students. The District families, community, and staff join as partners to educate and empower students for present and future individual achievement and contribution to their community and compete in a constantly changing global society.

**Vision of Ronan Public Schools:**
The District and the community join in partnership to provide a safe, attractive, and orderly learning environment. This positive climate promotes healthy lifestyles, where students learn the importance of lifelong learning, to take responsibility for high personal standards, and to feel a great sense of self-worth and belonging. Each individual student will learn to celebrate and be respectful of the rich, multicultural community and to appreciate the unique heritage and history of the Flathead Reservation. This partnership strives for a standard of excellence where all students achieve their highest potential expectations and are prepared to be successful in today's competitive, global society. In this learning environment, students will graduate prepared to pursue their life choices and to attain their personal visions of success.

Both the Mission and Vision Statement for Ronan Public Schools are well-articulated and include consideration for cultural competency and positive, open communications with the community. Ronan Public Schools has a solid understanding of what our community wants to
see in a successful public school environment. What needs to happen now is the creation of a strategic Public Relations Plan that would overcome some of these obstacles standing in the way of our vision.

**Vision of Ronan Public Schools Public Relations Plan**

Ronan Public Schools provides a positive climate of mutual respect and understanding between our schools and *all* members of the surrounding community. With an environment conducive to honesty and two-way symmetrical communication (Kowalski, 2011), we provide educational opportunities for our public with regard to academic challenges and cultural issues unique to our area.

With my Public Relations Plan Vision in mind, goals and measurable objectives directly related to that vision have been chosen.

**Goals**

- Create a more positive climate within our community that fosters mutual respect between all members.
- Establish blame-free understanding of academic challenges within our district.
- Educate our publics about the cultural issues and diversity unique to our area.
- Build bridges of support between our district and other power-centers and resources in our community.

**Objectives**

1) Establish open channels of dialogue between our district and both internal and external publics regarding conflict and possible resolutions.
2) Using media publics, publish regular audience-friendly explanations of state and federal requirements for academic achievement and the status of our schools under these requirements.

3) Utilizing resources within our community, foster respect for our unique cultural history and traditions with particular focus on Indian Education for All.

Objective 1, establishing open dialogue and facing conflict, will no doubt be the most challenging task of my Public Relations Plan. However, I feel it is the most important and the foundation for the success of the other two objectives I have stated. I also feel it is the one objective that has never been fully addressed and stands as the largest obstacle to Ronan Public Schools’ vision.

No one looks eagerly upon conflict, but it is a necessary part of growth and progress. Kowalski (2011) states, “In fact, conflict can be an opportunity for personal growth or school improvement” (p. 93). This process would need to be approached slowly and carefully, but with a timeline set for the actions the district planned to take to elicit honest feedback from all members of our community. The first step would be organizing public forums for discussion in a variety of different environments around our community. Gatherings organized at Salish Kootenai College or various other tribal organizations would most likely encourage participation of more members of the tribal community. These gatherings would be advertised by a variety of local media publics, including the Charkoosta, our local paper published by CS&KT which is delivered weekly to every tribal member on our reservation. Ronan Public Schools would ask for assistance from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to better facilitate these discussions to ensure the best possible participation. A meal would be a focal point of the gathering, which would be advertised as “Ronan Public Schools Invites you to Dinner,” with a
sub-heading requesting voices be heard regarding how our schools are doing. Anyone from the community would be free to participate, but having the discussion at Salish Kootenai College, for example, would be a way of providing tribal families a more comfortable setting in the hopes of encouraging them to feel free to communicate opinions and concerns. Similar discussion would be initiated in public gatherings held at the schools themselves and other neutral gathering places in the community, such as the Ronan Community Center. With the same goal in mind, anonymous polling would be conducted by the Ronan School District to gather data about common concerns and areas identified for improvement. Mediation would be a necessary part of these discussions to work through conflict in a healthy and beneficial way, and trained professionals in the area of mediation would be recruited with respect for all cultural backgrounds. Representatives from all parts of our community would be necessary to make this process as successful as possible.

Some specific events that could be held to increase family involvement could be:

- Lunch Bunch – each classroom in the school would have 1-2 days a year where family members were invited to eat lunch with them in their classroom.
- Bring your mom/dad/grandpa/grandma/auntie/uncle to school day
- Crafts or Career Days – where family members are invited to come to their child’s classroom and teach a craft they enjoy or talk about what they do for work.
- Ronan currently has a “Donuts for Dads” and a “Muffins for Moms” day once a year, but these could be increased and held at different times of the day in order to allow flexibility for parents with different schedules.
- Adult education classes held in our building, including parenting classes as well as craft/hobby classes.
Objective 2, increasing the public’s awareness of academic challenges within our district, would require a strong positive relationship with all local media sources, as well as vast improvement of the school’s website. During the polling process discussed in Objective 1 above, it would be necessary to find out how parents and other community members prefer receiving their information. It is safe to predict that a high percentage of community members would prefer to receive their information through email communication as well as by viewing the district’s website. This would require a serious upgrade of the website, including the addition of email contact information for all staff and links to individual classroom webpages. There would be considerable cost involved in this, as well as time, but it would be worthwhile. In today’s digital age, anything less is unacceptable.

In addition to utilizing local media resources and technology, some other ways of communicating information regarding how families can help their children reach academic goals would be through a comprehensive newsletter sent home with students as well as published on the district’s website. Another method would be through materials sent home with families at the hospital when they take home their new baby, regarding developmentally appropriate activities that will help their children learn. This information could also be provided through the local WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) office, Human Services of Lake County, and Headstart programs. Local licensed daycare providers could also be involved in the distribution of such information.

Additional ways of communicating academic goals/challenges/successes could be:

- Mandatory cards sent home regularly telling parents of their child’s academic improvements/successes in the classroom.
Articles in local newspapers, on the district's website, and/or through the school's newsletter giving biographical information on teachers within our district.

Celebrations open to the public when teachers move on from the district or retire.

Objective 3, utilizing resources within our community and fostering respect for our unique cultural history and traditions with particular focus on Indian Education for All, would first require substantial efforts on the part of Ronan Public Schools to build stronger relationships with local cultural resources, including Salish Kootenai College and the Salish and Kootenai culture committees. Particularly in light of SKC's recent addition of a 4-year teacher education program, Ronan Schools could improve this relationship by posting information about our school on bulletin boards in the college's Education building and providing welcome opportunities for pre-service teachers to complete observation and field experience hours in the classrooms of Ronan Public Schools. In the school's newsletter, as well as on the website and through articles in local newspapers, historical information could be published to increase awareness of the facts regarding the establishment of our reservation that many community members may have never learned. Contemporary issues could also be addressed and ongoing discussions (as introduced in Objective 1) could be held to increase awareness and eventual acceptance of cultural issues.

- Indian Education for All would be explained, through media resources, as state law and the essential understandings as well as basic incontestable reasons for it would be given.
- Book Clubs regarding Indian Education and other topics relevant to our community. These would be informal and include snacks/meals.
- An annual powwow could be initiated that would of course be open to all students and families.
As at Cherry Valley Elementary, in Polson, a Native American Families Coalition could be started in order to increase involvement of native families in our district.

Crisis Plan

Our district has dealt with crisis situations in the past and has faced criticism for their method of dealing with these situations. Ronan Public Schools has experienced alcohol-related deaths of students, as well as the deaths of staff members during the school year. In addition, we do occasionally face severe weather situations, and there is always the possibility of school power, heat, or water sources failing during the school day. The possibility of a violent intruder in the school is always there, and there is a fault-line which in the past has caused earthquakes of varying intensity.

Our district does have a safety committee/crisis team in charge of locating possible hazards as well as facilitating training regarding how staff would deal with potential crisis situations in our school. Each classroom has a red “crisis” folder which includes fire-exit routes, student lists, as well as lists of students with allergies and other health concerns. The folder also has a green side which teachers are directed to display when they know their students are safe (red is displayed when not all students are accounted for or the situation is still in some way unsafe). However, training and practice opportunities for staff and students within our schools have been very minimal. During the 6 months I worked for the district there was only 1 fire drill, and no other types of safety drills were held. In the future our district needs to hold more regular drills in order to provide staff and students with the practice they need in case of a real crisis situation, as well as comprehensive training for all staff members so they feel prepared in case of an emergency.
After a crisis has occurred within the district, it is imperative that the schools release information to the public with facts regarding the crisis and what is being done to alleviate future concerns. In the event of the death of a teacher or a student, for example, families will want to know that their children have support in place to help them deal with fear, grief, and other emotional concerns after such a crisis has occurred. Community members can and should be involved in this process.

In conclusion, a strategic Public Relations Plan for Ronan Public Schools would serve to greatly improve relationships between the school district and all of their publics. Issues exist that have existed for many years, and although efforts have been taken in the past to attempt to resolve these issues, more motivated and resolution-compelled action is necessary to create the positive atmosphere our students need to reach their ultimate potential and lead successful lives. With the district's mission and vision statements in mind, goals and objectives I have listed in my plan would be steps toward eventual achievement of the shared vision of our school and community.
References

Appendix A

Sociological Inventory

Customs and Traditions

Since I live on the Flathead Indian Reservation, which has been open to white settlement since 1910, my community's customs and traditions are divided between that of the American Indian population and that of the non-Indian community members. Within those divisions, more complex sub-groups exist. We have Indian residents who have maintained a strong connection with their traditional customs and native language, while others have not. However, I would not say these individuals identify with the white community members any more than they do with the tribes. I would say this is a spectrum of most traditional to least traditional. Many tribal members and descendants (like myself) may feel confused at times about where they belong because of a lack of background with the traditions of the tribes, while at the same time a lack of connection with non-tribal groups. Most of the non-tribal community members (as well as many tribal) are Christians. We have a high poverty level, with the median household income at 28,355, about 14,000 less per year than the state average, and the unemployment rate is 12.4%. In many of these cases, poverty has been generational and has formed a culture of its own within our community. We also have a growing population of Amish, Hutterite, and German Baptists which add an entirely separate and unique aspect.

Population Characteristics

Total population July 2009 - 1,999

64% American Indian, 32% white, 3% Hispanic, 1% black (school district) (according to OPI website).
Ronan statistics according to www.city-data.com: 58% white, 28% Indian, 2 or more races 5%, Hispanic 5%, Asia 2%, Black <1%.

Median age is 35.

For population 25 years and over in Ronan:

- High school or higher: 76.4%
- Bachelor's degree or higher: 16.6%
- Graduate or professional degree: 3.5%

For population 15 years and over in Ronan city:

- Never married: 27.6%
- Now married: 42.6%
- Separated: 3.0%
- Widowed: 9.0%
- Divorced: 17.7%

Community Groups

Church groups, PTA, Ronan Women's Club, Volunteer Fire Department, Senior Center, Ronan Ambulance (now a paid service), Ronan Police Department, Salish & Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, Kootenai Culture Committee, Booster Club.

Leadership

The assigned leaders within our community would be the tribal and city councils, the mayor, the superintendent, and heads of various community organizations. However, many decisions in our community are driven by nepotism. There are certain family names that have a powerful influence over decisions made by the superintendent and school board as well as tribal and city offices. These family names are different within the tribes than they are non-tribal groups. However, some of the most powerful families within our community have their power because they involve the intermarriage of tribal and non-tribal community members.
Economic Conditions

People in our community are employed in a variety of areas. Some of these include tribal offices, Salish Kootenai College, Jore Corporation, local businesses including grocery stores and restaurants, some farming/ranching and other small businesses, the hospital and assisted living facility, as well as our schools.

Most Common Industries:

- Retail trade (18%)
- Construction (14%)
- Manufacturing (14%)
- Health care and social assistance (9%)
- Information (8%)
- Other services, except public administration (7%)
- Educational services (6%)

Most Common Occupations:

- Laborers and material movers, hand (7%)
- Electrical equipment mechanics and other installation, maintenance, and repair occupations including supervisors (7%)
- Construction trades workers except carpenters, electricians, painters, plumbers, and construction laborers (6%)
- Other management occupations except farmers and farm managers (5%)
- Other production occupations including supervisors (5%)
- Retail sales workers except cashiers (5%)
- Vehicle and mobile equipment mechanics, installers, and repairers (4%)
- Child care workers (7%)
- Cashiers (5%)
- Secretaries and administrative assistants (5%)
- Assemblers and fabricators (5%)
- Preschool, kindergarten, elementary and middle school teachers (5%)
- Food and beverage serving workers except waiters/waitresses (5%)
- Counselors, social workers, and other community and social service specialists (4%)

Political Structures

Primarily the local governments – city and tribal councils as well as county government.
Social Tensions

Many social tensions are based on cultural differences and a lack of connection between the school and parents of American Indian students as well as non-Indian families who live in poverty. Without an athletic connection (student who plays sports) zero connections are being made between students and teachers. In my school specifically, there are some veteran teachers who are disenfranchised with the changes that have occurred while at the same time there are new teachers coming in who might have different views and innovative ideas but are afraid to express them for fear of upsetting the administration. There is a lot of negative feedback from parents about the schools but very little being done to motivate change. We also have tensions within the tribe regarding the blood quantum issue. In 1960 our tribe went from lineal enrollment to a required blood quantum of \( \frac{1}{4} \), which caused a rift even between members of the same family. There are also issues regarding the use of local funds and water rights.

Community Change History

Although I cannot say I am aware of any really radical community changes that have occurred, I can say that our community, when given a worthy cause, is capable of coming together to raise great support, both financial and otherwise, for community members in need. Two examples of this were the Tomy Parker event, which raised awareness on a national level for injured soldiers and also raised almost 100,000 dollars for Tomy’s recovery, as well as “A Dream for Decker,” a movement begun by a member of my family with an autistic child to raise autism awareness and financial support for his education.
Sources of Information

Telephone books, Advertiser, Lake County Leader, Missoulian, Charkoosta, and Valley Journal, local businesses have bulletin boards for communication, and I would say even Facebook plays a huge part in how people get information in our community. We have several local radio stations and SKC has its own television station.

Community Power Structures

I would say the power structure of my community is “pluralistic diffused” because there are several power centers including the city council, tribal council, County representatives, school board, mayor, to name a few.

School Power Structures

I would say a majority of decisions regarding the schools are made by the administration (specifically the superintendent) and the school board with little input from teachers or community members.
References


Appendix B

Internal and External Publics

Kowalski states:

"Public schools serve multiple publics, and defining them accurately is a prelude to improving relationships. Administrators should know the stakeholders with whom they need to cultivate relationships. A stakeholder public is defined here as any group that has a stake in the district or school in question (Richardson, 1997). Generally, publics are divided into four categories." (p. 153)

Internal Publics

Kowalski defines the “Internal Publics” as “groups within the organization, such as teachers and students.” (Kowalski, 2011) However, in class we have discussed the fact that other groups can be considered Internal Publics if they act as a part of the organization itself. In my community, I believe the Internal Publics is made up of the teachers, students, some parents and family members, particularly those that are involved in athletics, and our building principals, superintendent, and school board. The PTA also plays an important role in our school, although I think they lack involvement by both parents and teachers. Even former school board members can exert an internal influence, especially if they have maintained connections to the current board and administration. Other members of our Internal Public are Speech and Language Pathologists, as well as both Physical and Occupational Therapists that are contracted to work one on one with students in our school in need of their services.
External Publics

In our community the External Publics are extensive. Kowalski defines “External Publics” as “groups outside the organization, such as taxpayers” (Kowalski, 2011). In my community the External Publics would be all community members, including those listed above, because although they might function as part of the Internal Public of our district, when you are home with your child you definitely view your school differently than when you are there teaching. Most of our teachers, school board members, and principals have students who attend schools within our district, and I believe they also have an opinion of our schools that has been formed from their perspective as parents. They are “double” stakeholders, if you will, because not only do they have “stake” in the school district because of their employment and their students, but also because they have children within the schools. The External Publics would also include local businesses, such as Jore Corporation, our two local grocery stores, McDonald’s, Dairy Queen, and many others that are occasionally called upon for donations. Salish Kootenai College is another External Public that is highly involved with our school district since they received certification for a 4-year elementary education degree, and we get quite a few student teachers from this program. Church groups and other community organizations are also members of our External Public, as well as the two tribal culture committees. Additional examples of External Publics would be Headstart, the Boys’ and Girls’ Club, and Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Kowalski also mentions “Media Publics,” which would include “print and broadcast reporters and editors,” as well as “Regulatory Publics,” or “governmental agencies that have authority to affect schools” (Kowalski 2011). Our Media Publics would be our local newspapers, which include the Missoulian, the Lake County Leader, the Valley Journal, as well
as local television and radio stations. Regulatory Publics would be state and federal representatives who make decisions regarding legislation.
Appendix C

Legal & Ethical Implications of Public Relations

for Ronan Public Schools

In the Ronan School District, due to its diverse cultural population as well as the fact that we are a small community with an intricate web of relationships both familial and otherwise, there are specific areas of public relations that require a rigorous and thoughtful grasp of legal and ethical implications.

First of all, due to the lack of mutually respectful relationships between school staff and some parents, Ronan is particularly vulnerable to lawsuits regarding negligence. Because many parents in our district do not trust the school for a variety of reasons, at times when unfortunate or even tragic events have occurred regarding our students, parents have not hesitated to file charges against the school for negligence when their children have been harmed. If this relationship was cultivated further and more concern was taken for how sensitive situations are handled, I do not think these types of situations would be as often to occur. I also do not believe parents would be as likely to blame the school if they were shown more respect in general which would encourage them to trust school officials (Kowalski, 2011).

Another area I feel needs to be addressed that carries heavy legal implications is a commitment to privacy in regards to academic and behavioral issues. Because we live in a small community, even when names are not used, the identity of students and families can be easily inferred. FERPA does not only require that names are not used when addressing student issues, but also requires that discretion is utilized in its utmost capacity so that information is not shared with parties who should not legally access such information, even by inference. Many of our
staff are not knowledgeable of this sensitive area of school law, and need to be directly instructed so that the school is not held accountable for revealing private facts that need to remain private (Alexander & Alexander, 2009).

Finally, Ronan Public Schools commonly hires new staff based in large part on their relationships within the district. At times they are not as objective as they could be when interviewing candidates for positions. Administrators within the district have been heard to say they “knew who they were going to hire” even before they began the interviewing process, and having friends or family within the district can be almost a guarantee that you will be given a position. School leaders behaving in a most ethical manner maintain fairness at all times when dealing with staff, students, parents, and other community members (Kowalski, 2011).