

INFLUENCING PUBLIC EDUCATION

A Supporting Communications Plan

Background

The B.C. School Superintendents' Association (BCSSA) is committed to positively influencing the future of public education in British Columbia. The Association has articulated a number of beliefs that are key to the purposes of public education. Now members wish to pro-actively offer their professional influence in order to ensure that these purposes are understood and receive community priority and support.

The BCSSA believes that the purposes of public education are to:

- *help prepare our young for citizenship*
- *serve as an instrument of community will and, as such, create social policy essential to the development of a democratic society and preparation for life within a global context*
- *provide processes which will assist society to educate all its citizens to live fulfilling lives*
- *optimize opportunities for all students to learn, to realize their potential for the benefit of society*
- *assist in developing students to become educated, responsible citizens*
- *share responsibility for developing in students a respect for the past, an understanding of the present and a vision for the future*
- *provide opportunities for each child to receive a comprehensive, liberal education*
- *ensure that all children are able to exercise their rights to quality educational services and programs*

In April 2000, a strategic plan was prepared to clarify and identify ways to improve how the Association communicates with, relates to and influences its key audiences. These key audiences include: government, ministries, members, partner groups and the greater community.

The strategy studied both reactive and pro-active opportunities. It was generally felt that the Association manages reactive situations satisfactorily so it was determined to develop a communication plan to primarily support pro-active activities.

In October 2000, a number of pro-active issues of importance were identified. They include:

- governance (role and responsibilities for superintendents and boards)
- accountability

- labour/management relationships
- funding stability, public funds / private schools
- need for early intervention
- class size issues
- administrator and teacher supply and demand
- staff development needs
- ongoing amalgamation issues

It is recognized that some of these issues will require the leadership of the BCSSA, and others may have stronger impact if addressed in partnership with other stakeholders.

Plan Components

Successful influencing programs include a wide range of activities. In the case of issues important to the BCSSA, there are a number of organizations and individuals who may share particular objectives. It is advantageous, therefore, to be conscious of when it could be more powerful to work in partnership with others aiming for the same goal or when it is more important and strategic for the Association to take a leadership position on an issue. Further, successful influencing will result in building support from others who can assist in fulfilling the objectives of the BCSSA.

Objectives must be clarified whenever an issue is identified so that the appropriate messages can be developed and the component(s) chosen.

This plan has been developed to support and enhance the Association's commitment to influence public education. It identifies strategies to strengthen relationships with current stakeholders. It also identifies ways to communicate and involve other community members who are within the *Circles of Influence*.

A matrix approach is recommended so that messages about key and important issues are broadly disseminated. It is possible, though, to phase in activity depending on the subject and priority.

The plan includes the following components:

1. opinion research;
2. public affairs / government relations;
3. media relations;
4. internal communications;
5. community relations; and
6. stakeholder relations.

I. OPINION RESEARCH

*Seek first
to understand,
then to be
understood.*

To build successful relationships, it is crucial to take the time and effort to listen to constituents, measure current levels of awareness and understanding, and hear issues of concern and conflict as they relate to desired objectives. Opinion research can provide excellent groundwork and information when planning influencing objectives and delivering tactical components.

For example, it is important to test both public understanding and misunderstanding of the concepts identified by the BCSSA as issues. Levels of awareness will be valuable when preparing key messages and communication strategies to enhance the understanding of issues. What are the public beliefs and misconceptions about class size; early intervention; funding? Do they even care about these issues, and if not, why not? What is the language that needs to be used in order to share and discuss these important issues with members of the BCSSA's inner circle of influence and garner support and understanding?

Opinion research is a powerful way to test the waters of public opinion before launching into a well-developed and strategic influencing and communications plan. It also provides valuable baseline information that can be used to measure the changing levels of awareness within the circles of influence while monitoring issues and perceptions.

It is recommended that the BCSSA engage in a province-wide, phase-in public opinion measurement process over one year to help determine levels of understanding and interest in key educational issues as identified by the Association and measure changes in public awareness.

Stage one: The first phase of the study will involve three to six focus groups representing stakeholders in the elementary, middle and high school sectors. A possible group could be created from PACs. Through the guidance of a professional leader, these focus groups would offer opinions about issues identified by the BCSSA, and would identify others of importance to them. They would provide perspectives and language that will be valuable when determining key messages and context statements. For the purpose of logistics, focus groups would be conducted by telephone.

Following the focus group discussions, a post-discussion would be conducted with BCSSA members which, in addition to a written report, will provide clarification and a feedback opportunity. Again, for logistical and economic reasons, the post-discussion would be conducted by telephone.

Stage two: Based on the information provided by the focus groups, a province-wide Consumerscan would be conducted involving 500 citizens throughout B.C. This scan is a fast and economical way of measuring public awareness and understanding on a number of issues affecting public education. It is fast because the processing is instantaneous, and it is economical because it is added on to another consumer survey.

The first wave would consist of ten questions and could form the base for waves two and three, which are typically shorter in length (six questions) and conducted three months later, thus providing a quarterly measurement. Each wave of surveys would be conducted and analysed in such a way that the opinions gathered would have relevance to all areas of the province and could be reported on by chapter boundaries.

Results of the survey and analysis could be the basis of any one of a number of communication tools, including:

- board information – keeping the board abreast of the public’s awareness of educational issues both locally (by chapter) and provincially
- media releases – reporting on issues to the media following survey activity
- reports to staff – helping to keep internal audiences informed and “in the loop”
- district newsletters – using information as a part of messaging on key issues
- briefing papers – supporting positions developed in briefings
- presentations – bringing local relevance to educational issues
- articles – providing public reference to issues
- developing and counselling on education policy

Further, the results could be very useful when developing and counselling on education policy.

Stage three: After the first survey wave, and based on the information gathered from both the focus groups and the survey, three BCSSA member focus groups would be conducted. The purpose of the BCSSA member focus groups would be to clarify key issues, identify potential roadblocks and opportunities and, perhaps most importantly, provide feedback for the development of key messages for each issue of influence.

Approximate Cost:

Stage One	Preparation (six hours)	\$ 960
Six Focus Groups	Group discussion (set up, moderating, long distance)	5,700
	Summary of all groups	1,080
	Post-group discussion	720
Stage Two	Survey design (one-time cost)	750
Consumerscan	First wave (10 questions)	4,000
	Second wave (six questions)	2,400
	Third wave (six questions)	2,400
	First wave analysis	2,100
	Second wave analysis	600
	Third wave analysis	800
Stage Three	Preparation of discussion guide	720
BCSSA Member Focus Groups	Set up (three groups)	450
	Moderating (three groups)	1,200
	Long distance charges	450
	Analysis	1,100
	Final report	3,000

Total cost for Opinion Research: \$ 24,010

II. PUBLIC AFFAIRS / GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

There are three different levels of Government Relations or lobbying provided by consultants.

The first is extremely high level and usually involves a number of advisors and specialists working locally and provincially (and federally, where necessary, to keep political doors open and fingers on the pulse of all government issues relating to the client. This level is expensive and requires a fairly large and sophisticated in-house support group. It is also restricted to those organizations or industries where government influencing and decisions are crucial to the survival of their activity.

The second level is often limited to crisis situations when a political or local issue is raised that requires immediate and intense reaction from a group or organization.

The third level provides a less intense but longer-term relationship with the organization. It provides an opportunity for the GR consultant to gain a fuller understanding of the organization and issues, to provide policy advice and guidance, and to act as a facilitator to access key government and bureaucratic officials when important issues arise.

Consultants normally work at this third level with the organization's CEO and board executive or representative. Their work is supported by issue papers and policy directives. One of the valuable services a GR consultant can offer an organization is assistance in identifying the key, succinct issues and messages with strategic outcomes in mind.

Generally, the cost for these services can range from as high as \$50,000 a month for the first level to \$2,000-\$3,000 a month for the third level. Organizations should ensure that the contract outlines key quarterly deliverables.

In addition to external expertise, each school superintendent should be assigned the responsibility of connecting with at least one local-area MLA with the objective of establishing a relationship with that individual and becoming his/her expert on issues relating to educational policy. The objective is to ensure that issues identified by the BCSSA are made aware of to the local elected provincial official. If government support is ever required for a provincial issues briefing, a relationship is in place for dialogue, and the BCSSA can be assured that its position will be heard. This could become one of the Association's pipelines to the floor of the House in Victoria.

III. MEDIA RELATIONS

Media relations plans need not always fall into the category of crisis management. In fact, media advisors believe that a good, ongoing media relations program can only be helpful should a crisis situation arise.

A media relations plan focused around the pro-active issues identified by the Executive and members is a good way of raising awareness and generating discussion around topical points.

The BCSSA may wish to appoint official spokespersons for particular issues. In addition, superintendents must receive general media training. Professional briefing sessions must occur before responding to media requests so that key messages can be identified and responses to the most dreaded questions prepared and practised.

All professionals have their own language and it is easy to feel that everyone understands all of the issues that are paramount. In reality, professionals spend much of their time communicating with people whose understanding is minimal. It is important, therefore, to spend time framing messages in a way that the general public can understand them.

School superintendents are often the first person the media calls when looking for information or comments on public education issues. In addition, superintendents should be able to approach the media about topics they wish to discuss. Not all media is news—both print and electronic media offer a wide range of opportunities and formats for discussion.

For example:

- columns in newspapers provide an excellent opportunity to explain a variety of issues relating to public education;
- key points in issue papers developed by the BCSSA can be included in media releases and circulated province-wide;
- key messages can be developed for any urgent educational issues that arise and require BCSSA positioning;
- results of public opinion polling can be written as backgrounders for media;
- backgrounders can be created for each of the pro-active issues identified by the Executive.

There are a number of media-tracking services available that can monitor both print and electronic media and pull items that are identified as key words. Although it is only one measurement for the effectiveness of the influencing campaign, monitoring can highlight topics and issues raised by any individual or organization commenting on public education while tracing the placement of any materials provided by the BCSSA.

Usually, the development and management of a media relations program costs between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year. This may not include ghostwriting for opinion columns or media monitoring. Media training for BCSSA issues would cost about \$5,000 for five to six people.

IV. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Mechanisms exist in each district for internal communications as they relate to district issues and activity. A plan to introduce and provide comment and feedback on BCSSA-identified issues should be developed in order for employees to be informed about provincial and chapter positions.

The following are suggestions to consider relating to the influencing objective:

- Superintendents or chapters may wish to organize open meetings and/or group specific meetings to discuss topics and gather information and opinions about key issues. These sessions should be sponsored by the BCSSA and could involve superintendents from other districts.
- District newsletters could contain columns by the superintendent on behalf of the BCSSA to report on Association directions and developments. Messages should include district benefit to these activities.

- BCSSA presence (e.g., certificate, plaque, etc.) can be displayed in the district office.
- Opportunities can be created for the BCSSA to recognize outstanding examples of ways that key issues are supported or dealt with in the district or chapter.

The cost for supporting this phase of the strategic influencing plan depends on what is currently in place in the districts. If the BCSSA wishes to standardize messages and a process for meetings, a budget of approximately \$5,000 could be identified for this initiative.

V. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Each district or chapter has a wealth of potential members for its circle of influence. Key issues identified by the BCSSA could be the topic of presentation to service clubs and opinion leaders in the community. Superintendents can offer their willingness to speak to organizations about the issues of importance in public education with the objective to gain increased support and understanding.

Who are the opinion leaders in the community that the BCSSA wants to support its issues? They could include:

- service clubs
- health boards
- library boards
- municipal councils
- industry leaders
- trainers and post-secondary educators
- major employers
- aboriginal councils
- clergy
- other professional groups (lawyers, doctors, etc.)
- unofficial opinion leaders (butcher, baker, candlestick maker!)

Support materials need to be prepared and packaged for formal presentation and could be created in a variety of ways in order to suit the audience. They could range from Powerpoint to overheads, speaking notes to speeches, leave-behind materials and methods of evaluation and feedback.

The budget to coordinate and support a province-wide community relations program to support the influencing strategy would cost in the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000.

VI. STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS

When influencing requires the support of others, it is important to be able to call upon associations that carry their own “circles of influence.”

These groups should be identified and a mechanism developed so that communication with them occurs on a regular basis. These relationships could include partnering on various projects or an endorsement of positions when appropriate.

To support and enhance the BCSSA’s image of providing thoughtful perspectives on important educational issues, the Association may wish to sponsor formal *think tank* events to include varying thoughts and positions on issues, open communication and broaden stakeholder relations.

Budgets for this component would include a coordinating function, logistics and support materials, if required, and would cost in the range of \$10,000 to \$20,000. This function could be folded into a Community Relations activity.

COMPONENT MATRIX

	PA public opinion	MR media relations	IC internal communications	CR community relations	SR stakeholder relations
<i>Opinion polling</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Media training</i>		✓		✓	
<i>Briefing papers</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Opinion columns</i>		✓			
<i>Information kits</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
<i>Presentation templates</i>			✓	✓	
<i>Issue papers</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓