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Effective Print Media Relations Practices of Georgia's Rural High-Performing Principals: Three Case Studies

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EFFECTIVE PRINT MEDIA RELATIONS PRACTICES OF GEORGIA'S RURAL
HIGH-PERFORMING PRINCIPALS: THREE CASE STUDIES

by

PATRICIA L. CATO

(Under the Direction of James E. Green)

ABSTRACT

Previous researchers (Scott, 2005; Mobley, 2007; Oplatka, 2007; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008) have illustrated the impact of journalists and newspapers on the public's perception of a principal's effectiveness. However, prior studies have focused on higher education, funding, and urban areas. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceived best print media relations practices from the viewpoints of identified high-performing principals, print media professionals, and parents.

This qualitative study employed a multi-case study design with purposive sampling. Principals from one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school who had been named to the Georgia high-performance schools list were interviewed for this study, as were focus groups of parents in the schools led by the principals and also journalists assigned to cover the principals' schools. The audiotaped interviews were transcribed and coded for patterns in responses, from which major themes were developed. Newspaper content analysis of one calendar year's artifacts was also conducted for each of the newspapers.

Findings revealed four major themes: the responsibility of the media; the unique connection between rural newspapers, schools, and community; practices for relationship

building; and impact on public opinion of schools' effectiveness. Though participants agreed that the primary responsibility of newspapers was to disseminate information, journalists' responses indicated a responsibility to champion educational causes, to protect the students and staff, to spur uninvolved parents to action, and to act as the conscience of school boards. In these rural communities, a close relationship built upon trust, candor, and shared experiences defined the connection between schools and newspapers. Principals fostered the affiliations by providing information for articles, making staff accessible, and removing barriers to communication.

INDEX WORDS: Newspaper, Rural, Principal, Case study, Media relations

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by

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2010

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Tommy and Mary Cato, who have continually inspired me with their Christian faith, encouraged me with their work ethic and generosity, and supported me with their words and time. Without your example and sacrifices, I would not have accomplished this goal. I am indebted for your unconditional love, and I aspire to live my life in a way that makes you proud.

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educator and as a graduate student. It has been my pleasure to serve the children of my hometown for almost 20 years. I am also thankful for the faculty members with whom I work; your dedication to the students of our district motivates me daily.

To my friends and family, thank you for your patience when I had to pack the laptop instead of a good book during vacations, for offering your beach houses and mountain cabins so I'd have a better view from the kitchen table when writing, for bringing me dinner at my desk on late nights, and for proofreading again and again. To my cohort—Chip, Holly, Brandy, Barbara, Zsa Zsa, LouAnne, Tim, Darrell, Swade, and especially Pam and Neal—thank you for being my sounding board, inspiration and conscience during this race. It was a welcome surprise three years ago to see familiar faces at the initial program interviews, and I've come to believe that God brought our group together. I truly appreciate the long hours you have invested listening and commiserating in the library, on the car rides home, and over dinner after class. I am honored to be in your company, and I couldn't have completed this journey without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Tip Leads to Trio of Drug Arrests at School.” “Gun Found at Local School.” “Test Scores Dip with New Curriculum.” “After School Program Lost in Wake of Budget Cuts.” “State Issues Vouchers for Local Special Needs Pupils.” Recent rural newspaper headlines such as these both sell newspapers and shape public perception of schools. As part of the environment which influences an open system like education, simultaneously the press is both the reflection of stakeholder concerns and a catalyst for change. An effective professional working relationship between the press and educators is needed to generate support for schools, increase job satisfaction among faculty members, and articulate the mission of public schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Therefore, mindful, efficacious school leaders (Hoy & Miskel) should develop strategies which utilize the print media to communicate with stakeholders while also using the media cautiously to gauge public concerns.

Background

Media as Part of the Open Systems Model

Open systems, such as education, are defined by Hoy and Miskel (2008) as organizations which interact with and are dependent upon their environments. As task-oriented open systems, schools work with factors in the environment to achieve societal goals (Hoy & Miskel). In the strictest definition of open systems, schools are not self-sufficient and use inputs in the form of human and financial resources to create outputs such as higher student achievement and viable workers for the community. Throughout this process, feedback is provided through formal and informal communication

structures, including the media and public perception. This allows schools to correct problems such as low test scores, high drop out rates, or low staff morale.

In using the open systems approach as a lens for the challenge of educational media relations, the press is part of the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). While the boundary between the external environment and the system is often unclear, good media relations are built upon reciprocated respect and transparency (Stone, 2005; DeSantis, 2006). In fact, the open-systems relationship model between schools and the media is mutually beneficial at times. The press disseminates information for schools, and schools provide stories of interest to parents and community members, increasing newspaper circulation and television ratings (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). Often schools utilize the press to communicate with the public; for example, schools use the media to disseminate achievement test results, to solicit parental support, to advocate for legislative concerns, and to share news of upcoming events, instructional innovations, or special celebrations. In other instances, the press provides information about the perceptions of the public. This may cause administrators to make decisions reflective of the public's expectations, regulations imposed by external sources, and predictions based on existing internal conditions (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Accomplished administrators appear to use the press to build positive relationships with stakeholders, to become problem-solvers, and to market the school district by relying on honesty and an open-door policy (Carr, 2006; Kidwai, 2007).

School Administrators' Relationship with the Media

Building such relationships is not easy, however. Though many of the studies conducted have been at the higher education level, researchers have illustrated that an

effective school-media relationship improves the general public's awareness of colleges and their missions (Marek, 2005; Gyure, 2007; Bruce, 2008). It follows that such a critical relationship may also exist in elementary and secondary schools; therefore, it is not surprising that principals appear to spend an increasing amount of time attending to public relations (Brooks, 1976; Newby & Hayden, 2004). In fact, the more involved educators are in the partnership with the media, the more control the educators seem to sense (Gyure). Increased press coverage, however, intensifies attention and creates higher expectations of the leader (Cotton, 2003).

Both effective school leaders and accomplished public relations representatives are collegial, knowledgeable, proactive, strategic, and visionary (Carr, 2006). However, a lack of training in educational media relations leaves many educators without the confidence to interact with the media or to garner aid for their programs through use of the press (Gallagher, 2007; Gallegos, 2007). Principals, who are primarily responsible for marketing their schools, view educational media relations as an added responsibility which is out of place with their primary duties (Oplatka, 2007) or distasteful in nature (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008).

Even in schools and districts with established public relations programs, members of the media view these relationships as less than ideal because of differing expectations of the partnership (Moore, 1994; Dempsey, 1995; Scott, 2005). While school leaders have argued that there are far more requests than there is time to address, members of the media cited the withholding of information, lack of response, and bureaucracy as hindrances in keeping the public informed (Joly, 2007). Principals appear distrustful of the media, considering members of the press adversaries, while newsmen view

themselves in an oversight function (Newby & Hayden, 2004). Compounding this issue are conflicting views of what constitutes school effectiveness and priority of issues (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Administrators seem to perceive that local issues are of high concern to media outlets, while educational policies and social issues rank lowest (De Diemar, 1996; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). Highlighting test scores while ignoring disproportionality among schools' finances and demographics seems to have exacerbated the relationship between the press and educators (Newby & Hayden, 2004). Furthermore, administrators indicate frustration that the media reports negative items while ignoring positive news (Newby & Hayden). This media malaise likely influences educational stereotypes, both positive and negative among the public (Tillman & Trier, 2008), and appears to negatively impact citizens' views of education (Hershey-Freeman, 2008; Opfer, 2008). Consequently, tensions, lack of trust and credibility concerns grow, seemingly leading principals to adopt a reactive strategy to media relations (De Diemar).

School issues are politically charged, and the press may play a major role in impacting public opinion, including swaying politicians to create legislation to respond to perceived personal and professional threats (Anderson, 2008). According to Hoy and Miskel (2008), generating support for public schools is more important than ever as alternative educational sources, including virtual, charter, and private schools, create a more competitive market. It follows that a loss of faith in local schools also leads to an exodus of students and a corresponding reduction in state and federal funds to support local schools (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). School choice impacts educators' jobs and increases the pressure to market the school to the public (Oplatka, 2007; Bagin,

Gallagher, & Moore). The media may influence public perceptions about the effectiveness of its programs and personnel, resulting in evaluative judgments. Indeed, press reports appear to mold the reputation of the system, to attract new businesses and homebuyers, and to underscore fundraising goals (Cotton, 2003; Gallegos, 2007).

A Comprehensive Media Relations Program as an Influence on Public Opinion

To elicit a change in general public perception, school leaders must be visible within their communities as well as handle public relations by developing comprehensive, proactive, media management practices (Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Mobley, 2007; Carr, 2008; Hershey-Freeman, 2008). Besnoy (2005) advocated using a combination of print and non-print media, both within and outside of the building, to wage a continuous public relations campaign which intensifies over time. Among the nonprint resources available within the building are the intercom system, student-produced news broadcasts and announcements, word of mouth, and collegial collaboration among educators; print media within the school facility includes bulletin boards, school newspapers and bulletins, and school web sites (Besnoy; Carlson, 2007). Outside of the school, such resources include television, radio, Internet and print media.

Today's media relations forge a two-way street with the public. While principals use the press to disseminate information, media outlets encourage response from the public. Moreover, whereas some components such as school newsletters are admittedly one-sided, those outside of the system, such as print and television media, are charged with being unbiased while paradoxically responding to the demand for sensationalism which sells newspapers and supports higher television ratings.

Rural Print Media and Public Perception

While larger urban markets may rely on a more sophisticated media relations program replete with public information officers, Internet web sites, and television news coverage, such is not the case in smaller rural markets. In rural Georgia, where the population is often older and may be less inclined to utilize Internet technologies for news updates, the main sources of communication may be school newsletters, grocery store parking lot and church pew conversations, students, and the local newspapers (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). In these areas of the state, the print media and the school system appear intimately connected.

Local newspapers, free from the educational jargon found in scholarly journals, are a different ilk than those found in major markets. These publications, whose reporters and editors are likely to be residents and parents themselves, appear driven by human interest stories such as those which involve education. Letters to the editor gauge the public pulse; editorials are a call to action. By electing to print press releases verbatim, by selecting which events to attend and to advertise, and by giving priority placement in a newspaper's layout to specific stories, the press unknowingly may make decisions which affect parental opinion. Such perceptions have political, financial, and curricular ramifications that have, as of yet, not been fully explored in rural areas.

Statement of the Problem

As part of the external environment, the press is likely one factor which impacts the effectiveness of schools as open systems. Simultaneously, journalists are viewed by school leaders, who often lack training in educational media relations, as an ally and an adversary, a source of communication and the shaper of public of opinion. These

external perceptions may impact the effectiveness of the principal, the allocation of resources, curricular decisions, parental involvement, and evaluative judgments of the quality of schools. In rural Georgia, parental perceptions may be shaped largely—in the absence of public relations departments, television stations, and widespread Internet access—by the local print media. It is important, consequently, for rural school officials to understand how to build relationships with print media outlets and to make appropriate use of these best practices.

While several studies have explored the relationship between educators and the media, most of these endeavors have focused on crisis management (Dempsey, 1995; De Diemar, 1996), fundraising (Gallagher, 2007), and higher education (Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Gyure, 2005; Marek, 2005; Stone, 2005; Bruce, 2008) rather than on public perception of elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, the degree to which school leaders' relationships with the press impact parental perception has been explored only marginally using quantitative studies (Scott; Mobley, 2007) with a focus on the effects of the relationship rather than on the practices employed to create the bond. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals as viewed by the principals, print media professionals, and parents.

Research Questions

As the goal of all educational media relations is to generate stakeholder involvement, thereby improving student achievement (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008), this research study focused on the following primary question: What are the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals?

Sub-questions in this study included the following:

Sub-question 1: What do rural Georgia high-performing principals perceive to be best practices for print media relations?

Sub-question 2: What do rural Georgia print media professionals perceive to be best practices for educational print media relations?

Sub-question 3: How do parents of students in schools led by rural Georgia high-performing principals value local print media as sources of information for supporting school-family-community partnerships?

Significance of the Study

A sizable body of research supports the belief that the relationship between educational leaders and the press impacts public perception. However, much of the research to explore the open systems relationship between the press and education has focused on higher education, crisis management, urban districts, and fundraising. In rural school districts, this fundraising element is particularly important, as the press is an ally in gaining constituent support for tax levies and bond issues (Mobley, 2007). The researcher found few studies which were conducted in the elementary and secondary setting, and none which isolated the relationship between the print media and school leaders in rural areas. To that end, this inquiry was intended to identify the perceived best print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals, a matter of professional significance for the researcher.

The results of this study also may be significant to both post-secondary institutions and rural Georgia school districts. Currently, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, the licensure agency for Georgia educators, requires that

candidates for initial certification in the field of educational leadership demonstrate proficiency in using the local media to communicate to stakeholders student progress, school procedures, state law and other information (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2007). Therefore, the results of this study may be used by post-secondary institutions in developing a comprehensive educational media relations course, with an emphasis on print media relations, for aspiring leaders. Similarly, by developing an awareness of the perceptions of print media professionals and parents, rural Georgia school leaders may utilize the results of this study to create print media relations plans which promote a more effective communications relationship with all stakeholders.

Research Procedures

Research Design

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach. The researcher employed a multi-case study method, an appropriate technique for investigating phenomena using multifaceted means rooted “within the real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 11). As this study was a probe into the relationship between an open social system and the unclear boundaries of its environment, the case study method was selected because of the richness and depth of data produced through a variety of sources, which could be observed or interviewed in their natural context at a given point in time (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Yin). While the case study method acknowledges that there are many variables, such as personal experiences of both school leaders and journalists, which cannot be controlled, the method was chosen to allow the

researcher to collect data from multiple perspectives and sources, adding to the thick description of the phenomenon.

Participants

Due to the perceived close bond between the media's reporting styles and public support, it was necessary to interview stakeholders from many perspectives (Opfer, 2008). The primary participants in this multi-case study were three high-performing Georgia principals, as identified by the Georgia Department of Education between June 2006 and June 2008, who are employed in districts serving 10,000 pupils or fewer. In order to obtain more complete understanding of the phenomena, it was essential to interview additional participants, including three local newspaper journalists assigned to report on education matters in the districts where the schools are located. The newspapers identified by the researcher were published in traditional print format at least weekly. The final participants were focus groups of parents who identified themselves as regular readers of the local newspaper and whose children attended the schools selected for the study.

This study employed purposive sampling techniques (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Glesne, 2006); furthermore, as the study progressed, supplementary participants who could provide auxiliary information critical to the research were identified. In keeping with Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board procedures, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Instrumentation

The study employed face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of documents. An interview protocol to be used with all participants was developed. Face

validity was established through a review of the protocol by a panel to include the study's methodologist and a sample of representative participants. Finally, a protocol was developed to analyze newspaper articles and local board policies regarding media relations.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through one-on-one interviews with the identified principals and journalists; additional interviews with other school system or media employees were conducted if warranted. Focus group interviews with four to eight parents in each school were also conducted. Since the qualitative approach to research is intended to describe or to explain social phenomena from the viewpoints of the participants in their natural environment (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 2006), the principals, other school personnel, and parents were interviewed on-site at the respective schools, while journalists were interviewed at their newspaper offices or other mutually acceptable locations.

Following each interview or focus group session, the tape was transcribed and the researcher's field notes reviewed to gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 2006). Coding was used to identify central themes by examining phrases and words which are repeated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glesne). From these central themes and the researcher's field notes, iterative sub-themes emerged throughout the process (Creswell) and were organized into categories describing the best print media relations practices of the identified principals (Maxwell, 2005).

Moreover, a review of documents, including local board policies related to media relations as well as one year of newspaper publications, was conducted to define the best

print media relations practices of the identified principals. The protocol for content analysis of newspaper items contained the frequency and type of articles, including but not limited to, academics, extracurricular activities, announcements, and human interest stories. In order to identify patterns with regard to the type of information provided by the educators and the sort which appear in local newspapers, the researcher also examined school press releases and local board policies regarding interaction with the media.

Such triangulation enhanced the understanding of the research questions (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Yin, 2009). Member checking measures (Glesne, 2006; Borg, Gall, & Gall; Yin) were utilized to ensure that the content analysis and participants' words provide an accurate, thick description of the best print media relations practices employed by selected rural Georgia high-performing principals.

Definitions

As defined by the National School Public Relations Association (2002), the term *educational media relations* means:

a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive two-way communications process involving both internal and external publics, with a goal of stimulating a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization. Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support (p. 1).

As used in this study, *local print media* refers to newspapers headquartered outside of one of Georgia's metropolitan areas and published on at least a weekly basis.

In this project, *rural* is used to describe school districts situated in counties identified by the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau as having a population density of fewer than 100 citizens per square mile.

High-performing principals were defined in this study as those identified by the Georgia Department of Education between June 2006 and June 2008. The Georgia General Assembly noted that the presence of a strong leader was a key to improving student achievement and to creating an effective working environment (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). To that end, since 2006 the High-Performance Principals Grant has provided a one-time incentive payment for designated high-performing principals who chose to take new positions in "Needs Improvement" schools. Such "Needs Improvement" schools have not met Adequate Yearly Progress requirements, as outlined by Georgia to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), for two consecutive years. Among the criteria for the identification of the high-performing principals were the following:

- Demonstrating student achievement greater than expected (in comparison to the school's previous achievement) in four of five content areas assessed by the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (grades 1-8) or three of the four content areas of the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (grade 11);
- Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress goals for the current school year;
- Having been at their current schools for at least three consecutive years.

Delimitations

This study was confined to rural Georgia; this geographic region was selected because of the researcher's background in working with print media as a rural educator. Moreover, this study examined the relationship between educators and print media journalists only; no assumptions were made about the relationship between the findings of this study and those of previous researchers whose studies explored similar relationships with television or Internet media professionals. Furthermore, in keeping with case study methodology, which notes that observations are bounded by place and time, the content analysis of the newspapers reviewed was delimited to the most recent full calendar year of the high-performing principal's tenure.

As this was qualitative research, the experiences of the participants delimit the findings to their responses and renders the findings unique to the situations of the educators, journalists, and parents involved. Furthermore, as the researcher was the instrument for collecting the data, an element of subjectivity is acknowledged.

Limitations

The purposive sampling of this study limits the generalizability of the findings. This study's results are not generalizable to all Georgia schools or indicative of all educational print media relations.

Summary

Rural newspapers are perceived to be both oversight agencies and purveyors of information for the general public. Such discernments have been shown by previous researchers (Scott, 2005; Mobley, 2007; Oplatka, 2007; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008) to impact many decisions made by school leaders as well as the public's perception

of a principal's effectiveness. As such, it likely behooves school leaders to establish effective print media relations practices to communicate with stakeholders; however, the best practices employed by rural principals in creating such a relationship remain largely unexplored in educational research. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the perceived best print media relations practices from the viewpoints of identified high-performing principals, print media professionals, and parents. The findings of this investigation, which employed a multi-case study design, have implications for local rural educators and for educator preparation programs. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will provide insight into the effective relationship between an open system, the local school, and an element of its environment, the press, with an aim of improving communication with all stakeholders.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

Education in America has always been a local endeavor; first in homes and in private academies, and presently in public schools which are run by boards of education elected by local citizens. As such, residents have expected that those educating their children do so efficiently and effectively. In rural areas, the primary news outlet has been and continues to be the local newspaper (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). News of the progress of schools has been duly reported by local newspapers staffed by citizens who are, many times, parents themselves who pay taxes to support the schools. As such, often these citizen-reporters may view themselves as an active part of the school's governance (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore). In fact, the local press may help in creating a society's sense of identity and stimulating an individual's attachment to his community (Mullen, 1997). Local media were hailed in 1996 as providing a diversity of voices which, in the words of former FCC Commissioner Susan Ness, allowed Americans to "nurture our shared freedom, our common bonds, our local and national communities" (Chambers, 2003, p. 42). Because of the need to build this connection with the local press in an effort to improve schools and maintain a sense of community, it is essential that school leaders create effective working relationships with the local print media in order to solicit public support.

Search Strategies

In order to investigate the relationship between the press and schools and to describe the value of that relationship to parents, a systematic review of relevant literature

was conducted. Using the following key words and synonyms, a search was employed to locate full text, peer-reviewed journal articles, papers, dissertations and theses:

- Media and education;
- Mass media and schools;
- Print media and education;
- Newspaper and education;
- Rural, newspaper, and education;
- Parents, newspaper, and education; and
- Parents, media, and education.

Searches were initially made using the GALILEO and ERIC systems to locate journal articles and dissertations related to the topic. These articles were located online or in hard copy using the EBSCOhost and Academic Premier databases or using the electronic journals available through the Georgia Southern University Zach Henderson Library. Additional articles and resources were located by reviewing the references of dissertations and relevant reviews of literature.

Once located, all articles were cataloged into a researcher-generated database. For each article, the database information included the title of the research and author's name, the type of research conducted, the research findings, notes about the research design, and key search words. All articles were organized into a framework for the writing of this chapter. This review of literature will include the following sub-topics from that framework: (a) History of the American Press and Public Opinion; (b) The Open Systems Model and Media-Education Relations; (c) Mutual Benefits of the Media-Education Relationship; (d) The Media as Keeper of the Public's Trust; (e) School Administrators'

Relationships with the Media; (f) Principals and Media Relations Training; (g) Comprehensive Media Relations Programs; and (h) Rural Print Media and Public Perception.

Literature Review

The Rise of the American Press

The history of the American nation is replete with examples of how the press was utilized to inform the populace and to shape public opinion. During the colonial period, almost every major city had a weekly newspaper which printed news of interest from England, other colonies, and the local area (Norton, Katzman, Escott, Chudacoff, Paterson, & Tuttle, 1986). This fact was not lost on the nation's founding fathers who harnessed the influence of the press in stirring the hearts and minds of the populace to support the ideals of the American Revolution. Indeed, while some Loyalists viewed the upstart Americans as uneducated, the Patriots employed word of mouth, pamphlets, and newspapers to persuade the common man to join the cause of freedom (Miller, 1959). Even after the colonists gained their independence, the press continued to play a key role in American politics. When delegates to the Second Constitutional Convention refused to support the proposed United States Constitution, James Madison took the argument for a strong central government directly to the people, using The Federalist to campaign for support. It was such publications as these that demonstrated the strength of the press in both reflecting and swaying public opinion.

Largely because of their experiences with British rule, Madison and other Federalists advocated a limited federal government undergirded by a balance of power separated among branches of government and by a Bill of Rights protecting personal

liberties (Norton et al., 1986). In so doing, they sought to ensure that no one person or group would become too powerful and, thus, ignore the will of the majority. Initially, the freedom of the press guaranteed through the Bill of Rights afforded an avenue for all citizens to be informed of potential injustices and to have their grievances heard. In the 1800s, for example, mill owners used local newspapers to extol the virtues of factory life, while worker-run publications made known a litany of complaints about working conditions which invited community outrage (Norton et al.). However, as manufacturing became more mechanized, leisure time increased for American workers. Newspaper editors such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst seized the opportunity to whet an increasingly literate public's desire for both reform and amusement (Norton et al.). Publishers sought out scandals, disasters, and crimes to increase sales. Circulation continued to increase as newspapers became less expensive and added comics, sports pages, puzzles, and stories geared to women's interests (Norton et al.). Newspapers had established themselves as entertainers, keepers of the public conscience and shapers of public opinion.

As the nation aged, this power of the press did not appear to wane; instead, as America became more industrialized and education more accessible to a larger population, the press emerged as both informant and watchdog (Callahan, 1962). At the turn of the 20th century, the nation's educational system was a reflection of American culture and its corresponding forces, the strongest of which was industrialism. Business occupied a place of prized status and, as a result, greatly influenced American culture. Caught in what Callahan termed a "cult of efficiency," industries and government agencies alike found themselves accountable to stakeholders for producing desired

outcomes in an efficient manner. The mass media, through newspapers, journals, and magazines, gauged the public pulse on issues and amplified the pressure on governmental agencies, including education, to be responsible for its actions (Franklin, 1999). Other factors, such as the focus on reforming problems created by the rapid industrialization of the early 1900s, the mass media's portrayal of material success, and the ideal of the American dream emphasizing hard work and education as the keys to creating good fortune, underscored the importance of this efficiency and the mounting pressure on public schools. Adding to the misfortune of educators was the rise of muckrakers, journalists who sought to expose unfair practices in business and injustices in society (Callahan). Amidst the Progressive Era of reform, school leaders found their explanations falling upon deaf ears, as the public demanded that local superintendents adopt accountability measures, underscoring the role of the school as an open system (Callahan).

The Open Systems Model and Media-Education Relations

Schools and school districts are task-oriented open systems, cooperating with and maintaining a dependence upon their environments, and they are “created to perform some function or work in society and to achieve goals” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 257). As social systems, schools are not self-sufficient; rather, they produce outputs from inputs provided by the external environment. For schools, inputs often come in the form of human and financial resources. For these inputs, the public demands outputs, usually judged by the number of viable workers graduated by institutions. Furthermore, education trains students to become citizens and provides support of social institutions vital to a functional society. Throughout this process, feedback is provided through

formal and informal communication structures, allowing schools and districts to correct problems such as low test scores, high drop out rates, or low staff morale. Defining the environment and its contribution to the system is crucial since the system seeks a homeostatic state (Hoy & Miskel).

In using the open systems approach illustrated by Hoy and Miskel (2008) as a lens for the challenge of media relations, the press is part of the educational environment, and the boundary between the media and school systems is often unclear. At times the media are utilized as a tool by school administrators to communicate with the public; in other instances, the media provide feedback to the educational system, reflecting the concerns of the public (Broom, 1986). In the information perspective framework outlined by Hoy and Miskel, the press provides information about the perceptions of the public, causing administrators to make decisions reflective of the public's expectations, regulations imposed by external sources, and predictions based on existing internal conditions. However, as the decision making process within the school becomes more flexible in response to the perceived external environment, the structural dynamic should become less bureaucratic as the school becomes more dependent on the outside atmosphere (Hoy & Miskel).

One problem with the information perspective framework, however, is environmental uncertainty. When the press provides an inaccurate gauge of the public's perception or reports incomplete or incorrect information, the public's confidence may be swayed in the educational system (Rotherham, 2008). Moreover, relying solely on media reports as a source of information can cause school leaders to diagnose difficulties

incorrectly, to dismiss problems, to engage in a course of action, to gain support, or to exclude stakeholders (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Output is measured by citizenship and the growth and maintenance of communities, graduation rates, a viable workforce, and achievement test scores. The public, through its taxes, finances the school district's human and instructional resources and therefore demands a reasonable return on its investment. Owing to the efficiency experts of the early 20th century, the idea of equating efficiency with economy is not new (Callahan, 1962). Instead of using Frederick Taylor's scientific management system to measure how a superintendent effectively utilizes his staff, facilities, and instructional resources, today's measure is student achievement as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act's system of Adequate Yearly Progress (2001). Though the purposes are different, the intent may be the same, then and now. Succinctly, efficiency is quantified by the public in terms of outputs exceeding inputs.

In both the early 1900s and the present, the media were and are instrumental in shaping the public's perception of this efficiency and the educational system's response to the call for economy. Early in the 20th century, popular magazines, scholarly journals, conference speeches, and textbooks all created avenues for communication with a populace desirous of wealth portrayed by the media and eager to right the wrongs shared by the muckrakers (Callahan, 1962). In response to the calls for efficiency, educator preparation programs were altered to stress efficiency and scientific management. According to Callahan, the media was a driving force for the change which becomes the transformation process.

The sum of several individual systems, the transformation process is managed by school leaders who respond to feedback generated by the public, staff, and students (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). The components of the transformation process include the structural system, the cultural system, the political system, and the individual system. The structural system is comprised of bureaucratic expectations based on the roles within the organization (Hoy & Miskel). In terms of the challenge of media relations, there are formal rules which mandate which personnel in the organization share specific information with the press. This creates a structure and also a boundary with the environment, which includes the media and parents. In school systems with a public relations officer, however, the boundary between the educational system and the press does not appear to be more defined than in those without personnel devoted solely to media relations (Moore, 1994; Dempsey, 1995; Scott, 2005).

The individual, cultural, and political systems are intertwined. The individual system encompasses personal needs and beliefs which give relevance to jobs (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). This individual system can help the organization respond to the feedback provided by the environment or can serve to divide the organization when shared goals are not the norm (Broom, 1986). Consequently, providing internal sources of feedback and crafting a protocol for shared decision making are critical in creating a culture which supports the work of the group (Hoy & Miskel). Sharing goals and building consensus is especially important in utilizing the press to communicate these goals to stakeholders, who provide feedback and influence as to how outputs are measured (Broom). Creating a shared vision also minimizes the effects of illegitimate, informal political systems which can detract from the work of the organization (Hoy & Miskel).

Pressure from external influences, including the media, can result in a more bureaucratic, hindering structure (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). The conflict between the expectations of the public, as expressed by the media, and the call for professional autonomy can create a dysfunctional organization and lessen the sense of collective efficacy among the staff (Hoy & Miskel). However, more efficacious institutions learn to adapt when faced with either internal or external pressure (Hoy & Miskel). In fact, healthy schools are insulated from unreasonable outside pressures by dynamic principals who provide both support and leadership focused on high standards of performance (Hoy & Miskel). It may be argued, however, that the hierarchy of authority and formalization through rules might produce negative consequences (Hoy & Miskel). Hoy and Miskel noted that the centralization of authority could produce a dysfunctional communication system, while rigid rules and regulations could result in replacing goals with rules, interfering with the achievement of the organization's aims. Moreover, whereas a school leader might be able to elicit compliance within the organization because of his or formal authority, it would appear more difficult to do so in the external environment. Indeed, according to Hoy and Miskel, "Mintzberg agrees that the two most effective means to control an organization from the outside are to hold its most powerful decision maker responsible and to impose specific standards, usually in the form of rules and regulations" (p. 122).

The media continually provide external feedback on the work of schools, sometimes ignoring the structure imposed within the organization (Broom, 1986; Hoy and Miskel, 2008). As in traditional classrooms, the relationship between the press and schools appears to have behaviorist tendencies. For example, school systems use the

press to seek recognition, more funding, increased flexibility through site-based management, and reduced sanctions (Gallegos, 2007). When the press reports a discrepancy between actual and expected performance, then the organization seeks to maintain homeostasis by adjusting the transformation process (Hoy & Miskel). In this manner, the school is a dynamic, open social system which seeks to gain public confidence and to improve its performance (Broom).

Mutual benefits of the education-media relationship. The open-systems relationship between schools and the media is mutually beneficial at times (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Ryan, 2008). Because of the media's dual role as purveyor of information and provider of feedback, it is critical for schools to establish and maintain effective working relationships with the media. Good media relations are built upon mutual respect, transparency, and an open door policy sustained through an enduring relationship (Koeppel, 1982; DeSantis, 2006; Carr, 2006; Kidwai, 2007). For example, in a collective case study of three major universities, Stone (2005) noted that effective media relations create an ongoing professional relationship between key members of an organization and members of the press. In these instances, reporters tended to return to these trusted sources repeatedly, as evidenced in the number of times these sources were cited in newspaper, magazine, journal and Internet articles.

Furthermore, such relationships do not appear to be the result of happenstance but rather the product of well-defined public relations strategies. In a study of nine Canadian universities, Lang'at (1997) analyzed the content of printed documents, Internet web sites, and interviews generated by public relations officers. Findings indicated that the most effective university programs implemented key media relations plans to

communicate with the public, especially in times of calamity. Similarly, Mayfield (2002) revealed that planned media management practices are critical in responding to crises.

Other researchers (Marek, 2005; Gyure, 2005) have found the relationship between the press and colleges to be beneficial in meeting the institutions' goals, including sharing their missions with stakeholders. Marek's qualitative study suggested that print media outlets focus on seven aspects of colleges' missions, the majority of which are related to finances. In a single case study, Gyure interviewed collegiate faculty and media participants to explore the association between a college and local media outlets during the institution's yearlong 75th anniversary celebration. Data was triangulated to focus on the college's values, the perception of the participants on media content, and the format of newspaper and television content. This research, though not generalizable due to its qualitative nature, further suggested the open-systems model improved the general public's awareness of the college and its mission.

At the elementary and secondary school levels, the roles of the school administrator and journalist are often symbiotic. Superintendents and principals utilize the press to disseminate achievement test results, to solicit parental support, and to share news of upcoming events, instructional innovations, or special celebrations. The press publishes information for schools and features students in stories, increasing circulation and ratings for the press and improving the likelihood that the school's message will be received (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). As Cotton (2003) emphasized, a school leader's relationship with the press can be beneficial for the institution, including molding the reputation of the system, attracting new businesses and homebuyers, and underscoring fundraising goals. The press is a primary mode of communicating with

stakeholders and can serve as a reminder to school leaders of their fiscal and instructional responsibilities.

Local media, particularly those in smaller markets, are driven by human interest stories such as those which involve education. Indeed, in times of good fortune, the mass media can be an ally for school administrations. However, in times of ill fortune, administrators turn to the more authoritative, managerial role, circulating carefully worded press releases which guard the profession and their roles in it (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003).

The Media as Keeper of the Public's Trust: Differing Stories

Since the nation's birth, the press has been instrumental in reporting on issues of concern to the American public. From Thomas Paine's Common Sense to the yellow journalism of the muckrakers, the press has been a catalyst for reform in American history. However, current researchers disagree about the influence of the media on public opinion. Some (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Norris, 2000; Luke, 2003) argue that the public, particularly the less educated, are indifferent to media reports. Others (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Killeen, 2007; Haas, 2007) differ, noting that the public is greatly influenced by media reports. Educators, who appear frustrated by the perceived role the press plays in shaping public opinion, share this sentiment (Blackmore & Thorpe; Pettigrew & MacLure; Gallegos, 2007).

Public indifference to media reports. According to some researchers (Bennett et al., 1999; Luke, 2003), educators may be paying entirely too much attention to the media's coverage of schools and other governmental agencies. Citizens who were

exposed to political issues via the news media appear more knowledgeable and trusting of the government, while those who are less engaged regard the media's reports as not credible (Norris, 2000). Using data from the 1996 National Election Study and a 1997 Pew Center poll, Bennett et al. tested four models, each with a different independent variable, to explore the relationship between the media and public opinion. In this quantitative study, Bennett et al. asked respondents to rate the frequency with which they read national newspapers, tabloids, and daily newspapers and the frequency with which they watched network and local television news telecasts. Respondents were also asked how often they watched television programs such as A Current Affair and 60 Minutes. In addition, respondents, using a Likert scale, were asked to rate the degree to which they enjoyed reading and viewing each of the media, the degree to which they believed the medium accurately reported political and social issues, and the opinion of those surveyed regarding investigative reporting. All results were disaggregated by age, education, family income, race, sex, and political party affiliation.

In reviewing the data, Bennett et al. (1999) found that respondents with higher levels of education were generally more likely to express favorable opinions of the national media. Participants who enjoyed watching national television news and who believed that the media's reporting was accurate expressed more favorable opinions of national newspapers. Further, those who offered favorable opinions of local newspapers also indicated that they enjoyed reading the daily news and were more confident in the media's ability to report facts accurately. While the more educated tended to hold more favorable opinions of national newspapers, these respondents simultaneously held less favorable opinions of their local, daily newspapers, as did those with higher family

incomes and those who were frequent readers of tabloids (Bennett et al.). As for the television viewers, males and those who were more frequent viewers of tabloid television programs expressed a more unfavorable view of the press. Those who were better educated, identified themselves as Republicans, or were older also expressed unfavorable opinions of network television news (Bennett et al.). Only those who believed the media to accurately report facts held the media in high esteem.

In a concurrent phase of the study, Bennett et al. (1999) reviewed the 1996 National Election Study data, which included a four-item measure of trust in government. Further, the researchers queried respondents to determine how much attention they paid to political news stories. Using three ordinary least square regressions, the trust in government index was regressed on a set of predictor variables. In the first, predictors were exposure to various news sources, attention paid to news stories, and exposure to entertainment television; respondents numbered 1,493. In the second, these same predictors, along with trust in the media's capability to report political events accurately, were regressed using data provided by 1,460 respondents. The last regression measured these factors, along with demographic information of 1,060 participants. While media exposure alone was not a significant predictor of trust in the government, the more attention respondents paid to reporting, the less trusting of government they appeared to be, regardless of demographics (Bennett et al.). Bennett et al. dismissed the idea of a "media malaise" and chided those who credited the media with the capability of souring the public's opinion of government and its institutions.

In reviewing Bennett et al.'s study, however, several issues are raised. First, the validity of the measures was not noted within the reporting of the study. Further, the

1996 National Election Study's four-item measure of trust in government included items which expressed bias against governmental actions. This made it difficult to ascertain what relationship exists between trust in government and the media's reporting of political and social issues and whether the distrust in government expressed by some respondents was a result of reporting of the media.

Other researchers have agreed that the media are sometimes given too much credit for influencing public opinion. In a quasi-experimental study Luke (2003) examined the marketing campaign for increasing enrollment in online courses. From two universities, one traditional institution and others from a for-profit one, 526 students completed a questionnaire. The students were randomly assigned to one of five treatment groups which read a different news story regarding online courses. A different amount of information was altered in each story. Students appeared to be unaffected by the manipulation of news articles and showed no significant differences in attitudes regarding the online classes or the type of institutions showcased in the articles, regardless of how much the articles were manipulated. Consequently, Luke concluded that the media's presentation of information was less influential to the public than some perceive.

Public opinion built upon media reports. Other researchers (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Killeen, 2007; Haas, 2007) argue that the media creates a public policy discourse and, at times, interjects bias to present information. In some instances, researchers, think tank representatives, or government officials were quoted by the media, without regard to credentials (Pettigrew & MacLure). In their eight-year content analysis study detailed later in this chapter, Pettigrew and MacLure found that British newspapers used as empirical evidence statistics, policies,

and information formulated by government-sponsored bodies; this evidence was presented to the public as unbiased. Moreover, at times the press omitted details or misrepresented the work of researchers, inhibiting public debate (Pettigrew & MacLure).

Similarly, Haas (2007) contended journalists determine which sources are considered credible by reporting the opinions and research of some while ignoring others. Further, Haas stated that the professional standards for determining which educational research is scientifically sound are not shared by the press. Rotherham (2008) wrote, “Despite their central role as translators and referees for the public, few reporters claim to really understand research methodology or feel competent to judge it” (p. 377). Haas contended this confounded the public, which was unsure of who is a credible researcher. Moreover, by deeming the research worthy of attention, the press influenced which issues should receive public resources (Haas). The news media appeared to continue to report the stories it perceived to be of interest to the public and to shape the news stories to reflect what the media thought the public understood about a topic (Haas).

Exploring how the media used think tanks, Haas (2007) used a purposive sampling of seven think tanks which were found to be among the 25 most frequently referenced in the media on all topics. The seven think tank organizations were analyzed on the characteristics of staffing, financing, agenda setting, and products and then cast in one of three categories: contract research, academic, or advocacy. The organizational structures of the think tanks were then compared to self-descriptions found on their web sites; several discrepancies were found between the stated purposes of the think tanks and the purposes of the categories in which Haas placed them. However, when referenced by the media, the think tanks were presented in congruence with the self-described purposes

in 93% of the instances. Moreover, the political orientations of the think tanks, rather than their purposes, were sometimes used in describing the organizations.

Additionally, Haas (2007) conducted a search of an electronic database for news stories on education which included references to the think tanks. Content analysis was used to code more than 1500 samples with the name of the reporting news organization and type of news. From these, a smaller section of 591 news articles, most of which were gleaned from newspapers, were examined to identify the position of the think tank's reference within the text, whether the think tank's position was in support of or opposition to the issue presented, and whether the group was referenced for statistics. The analysis revealed that the news media presented the think tanks' studies and recommendations as factual, with little question as to the validity of research (Haas). In reviewing the news articles, Haas found that the news media did not challenge the response of the think tank, even when confronted with a dissenting opinion.

Moreover, representatives of think tanks were liberally described as researchers, implying credibility, regardless of the interviewee's title, experience, or training (Haas, 2007). Haas maintained that such reporting gave an air of authority to the think tanks and influenced the public's opinions on the issues at hand, as the public envisioned the think tanks as experts whose findings were grounded in established research practices. Furthermore, Haas suggested being readily available for interviews might also influence how often the think tank representatives were referenced.

Added to this was the self-promotion of the think tanks which sometimes contacted the media when a new research report was about to be released (Haas, 2007). The anticipated release of a publication appeared to result in press coverage, regardless of

the think tank's authority on the matter. Products from the think tanks appeared to be labeled arbitrarily as research. This indiscriminate labeling insinuated to the public that all of the products were equal in scope and nature and rigorous norms for academic research had been observed (Haas). Haas noted that "a receiver of the news would not be able to distinguish between the think tanks nor determine whether a think tank was referenced for information that fell within its organizational structure" (p. 89) or expertise. Further, he asserted that the news media's use of think tanks as referent experts augmented the influence of both the think tank and the policies they promoted. In other words, the press played a significant role in shaping public opinion on educational issues by choosing which stories and experts to assign credibility.

Though Haas' (2007) qualitative study was large in scope and effectively added to the knowledge base in regard to the seven think tanks studied, additional gaps in the research exist. As Haas noted, more research is needed to explore the relationship between the media and the public's understanding of the media's reporting of educational issues.

The Media, Public Opinion, and Educational Issues

Thus, the mass media may play a vital role in shaping the public's perception of the effectiveness of the educational system. The local press assists in the public's understanding of educational issues in a manner unlike that of journals, television, and radio (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997). Press reports seem to be consumed by parents and school board members alike; the mass media communicates in a manner which is easily received by those who are put off by the educational jargon which punctuates scholarly

literature. Consequently, the mainstream press may wield much influence over the public's perception of education.

Blackmore and Thorpe's 2003 qualitative study examined on a small scale this relationship between the media and stakeholders. As part of the Media/ting Change project in Australia, the researchers identified critical incidents in education over the course of one year. They then interviewed stakeholders about these critical incidents. Blackmore and Thorpe contended that the media interjected interpretations of educational policy through the language used to present the information. Further, they argued, as schools became more accountable for performance, the media gained importance. Among the 20 teachers and principals interviewed in their study, Blackmore and Thorpe found a general distrust of the media, which was viewed as an instigator of conflict among and within schools. The researchers asserted that at times the press generated conflict in an effort to sell newspapers and to increase profits.

Teachers also perceived the media to be influential in educational policymaking (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003). Further, instructors noted that media representations often affected teachers' relationships outside of the school, as teachers assumed the public accepted media portrayals of the educational system as accurate. At times the reporting of these findings appears biased, though, as Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) asserted that the media was utilized by the government to construct educational problems and, accordingly, solutions which were aligned with other governmental aims. Further, the researchers write of teachers who opposed the solutions being silenced, but data and narrative examples to validate this assertion are not located among the study's findings.

For their part, principals lamented over a lack of communication from the government, noting that they often had little warning about new educational policies until they heard of them in the press (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003). Interviewing the principals on how they mediated the press' portrayal of schools and educational matters, Blackmore and Thorpe reported the Australian principals adopted a strategy of reading newspapers and watching television news each morning in an effort to determine which issues were likely to be most problematic for them. Further, principals appeared to feel tension in communicating with the media, in part because they felt they wrestled with the state for control of the schools (Blackmore & Thorpe).

Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) also analyzed the content of two daily newspapers; however, the duration was only three weeks at a time. A more extended content analysis might have revealed more insight into the newspapers' educational coverage. Moreover, only one of the two editors of the newspapers was interviewed, along with one talk show journalist and two other education journalists. It should be noted, however, that talk shows are a different genre than newspapers, and this study's primary focus is on newspaper coverage of educational issues.

Ironically, the information from which the press generates its reports comes from the educational system itself. Dr. Vincent Ferrandino, quoted in Newby and Hayden (2004), summarized the challenge of navigating the media firestorm:

At no time in the history of our nation's education has the public's perception of schools been so critically important. School leaders catch it from all sides, contending with the sometimes competing interests of teachers, parents, central-office administrators, school boards, and community members. By and large,

what parents and the broader community believe to be true about how well principals do their jobs is strongly influenced by the media—media that are not always in tune with the positive things that happen every day in good schools. The most effective principals are able to get the right message out to the public and to engage the public in the life of the school in such meaningful ways that reality and perception become one and the same (p. 1).

Exploring the perceptions borne of press reports, Pettigrew and MacLure (1997) conducted a study entitled the PRESS Project in Great Britain over the course of a nine-year period. The investigation explored the impact between press coverage of four daily and four Sunday newspapers on grant-funded schools, to which parents could opt to send their students in lieu of traditional schools. A second issue examined was the reporting of the organization of a “standard English” curriculum, including the debate over reading standards.

Pettigrew and MacLure (1997) established the context for their study by referencing a variety of prior research on how the press had represented prior controversial issues. Furthermore, they effectively identified the gap in the literature by noting that most of the studies had not explored the press’ reporting of controversial educational issues such as the two examined in their present study. Some bias is evident in the article which detailed the results of the study, with the authors having asserted that the press was in collusion with the government to influence public opinion on non-grant funded schools. However, this was not the primary focus of Pettigrew and MacLure’s study, which was concerned with the structure of the press articles. Therefore, the methodology included only content analysis of the newspaper articles and interviews

with four journalists from the eight newspapers and six university professors whose work was reported by the press. Within the content analysis, the researchers noted the amount of space devoted to reporting on educational issues. Articles were coded as being in favor of or against the issue reviewed; the articles were then categorized by type. Pettigrew and MacLure then examined how the policies were reported in different newspapers and within single newspapers.

Pettigrew and MacLure (1997) found that, on the issue of grant funded schools, reporting was extensive in all of the newspapers, with a large number of front-page articles appearing in the eight-year span. This reflected the importance of the issue, which was at the forefront of the debate about the restructuring of schools. Furthermore, Pettigrew and MacLure's research revealed that the controversy was not used to denigrate the teaching profession but rather to attack the educational bureaucracy.

Moreover, the content analysis and categorization of the articles demonstrated that the opinions of editors were the most revealing of a newspaper's position on the issues; furthermore, these opinions were sometimes in contrast to those of the field journalists. Finally, analysis revealed, over time, the same newspapers' positions on the issues shifted and coverage intensified. Prior researchers such as Lacey and Longman (1993) suggested that coverage of issues often evolved into an ongoing series of peaks and troughs. Issues tended to decay in value even if the public interest was sustained. Pettigrew and MacLure (1997), however, argued that the issues examined in their study maintained their newsworthiness due to the actions of the newspapers, which created contention about the issues. Ultimately, the researchers argued that the issues grew less

important than the political bickering of those who supported the grant-funded schools and those who opposed them.

However, this researcher found several criticisms of Pettigrew and MacLure's (1997) work. The search of the newspaper articles was electronic and, because the database utilized was relatively new, limited in its catalog of newspapers available. In the scope of the study, interviewing journalists from each of the newspapers would have been preferable than interviewing only four. Moreover, with numerous assertions to the media's influence on public opinion, a natural progression to the study would have been to interview or to survey parents regarding press coverage of the issues, a step the Pettigrew and MacLure omit because "attitudinal impacts are rarely direct" (p. 395).

From Pettigrew and MacLure's (1997) work, however, it is clear that the media can exacerbate the work of school administrators. In a case study of urban public school administrators, Gallegos (2007) interviewed thirteen school leaders and analyzed the results to determine themes in their responses. Results illustrated the concern of school administrators with the lack of media relations training; moreover, the study indicated that news coverage can affect resources allocated to a school or district and increase the stress on the school leader.

School Administrators' Relationship with the Media

As one of the methods for communicating goals and outcomes with the public, the media are a vital part of the open system that is education. Therefore, creating an effective relationship with the media is critical in order to build public confidence in the educational system (Koeppel, 1982; Wherry, 1983). However, because educational issues are fraught with opinions and emotions, understanding the viewpoints of both the press

and school leaders is fundamental to building an effective relationship with the media. Much of the following discussion involves research conducted at the higher education level; however, it should be noted that the relationship between colleges and the media is not always generalizable to that of P-12 institutions and the media.

The press' point of view. While it may be perceived that the press often presents an innately negative view of education, such is not always the case. In a review of news stories on higher education published in 2003, Marek (2005) used descriptive analysis to categorize statements in the articles as either positive or negative. Findings revealed that over half of the articles in the study contained no positive evaluative statements, while three-fourths contained no negative statements and over one-third contained neither positive nor negative statements.

While they strive to present unbiased information, journalists perceive that school bureaucracy hinders the press from keeping the public informed adequately (Joly, 2007). Many journalists express frustration with the lack of response from schools when media requests are filed. While school leaders argue that there are far more requests than there is time to address them, members of the media cite the withholding of information, "lack of trained and responsive staff," and bureaucracy as hindrances in keeping the public informed.

Compounding this issue are contradictory opinions on priority of issues (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Administrators seem to perceive that local issues are of high concern to media outlets, while educational policies and social issues rank lowest (De Diemar, 1996; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). For example, interacting with the media during an emergency creates stress for a school administrator because what is deemed important to

the public is sometimes not aligned to the perceived agenda of the press. Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) argued the press decides which issues are important and defines desirable outcomes. De Diemar (1996) conducted a crisis communication assessment in Kansas school districts, determining the role of public school administrators in communicating with the media during a crisis and identifying those issues perceived to be of high media interest. In a survey, educators reported a lack of trust and media credibility and, consequently, 25% adopted a reactive strategy to media relations.

Even in schools and districts with established public relations programs, members of the media view these relationships as less than ideal because of differing expectations of the partnership (Moore, 1994; Dempsey, 1995; Scott, 2005). While post-secondary institutions have long promoted their academic, athletic, and other extracurricular programs through the media, discrepancies exist in the perceptions of the relationship between colleges and the media. In a quantitative study of 215 sports information directors and sports editors, Moore found that, while no serious relationship problems were reported by college public relations staffers and sports reporters, sports information directors held a higher opinion of reporters than reporters did of sports information directors. The study highlighted the discrepancies in the perceptions of the relationship between academia and the media.

In a comparative study, Dempsey (1995) examined the perceptions of public school public relations directors and newspaper education writers in regard to media relations in emergency situations. Surveying 125 public relations directors and 125 education writers nationwide, Dempsey analyzed the results to determine the ideal and actual scores on 25 descriptors related to media relations. Results indicated that

newspaper writers were significantly more dissatisfied with media relations in crisis situations than were public relations directors, though school public relations directors reported a discrepancy in their own performance when the actual scores were compared with the ideal scores (Dempsey). In fact, Scott's (2005) survey of 110 Tennessee school superintendents and community members also revealed few differences existed in administrative or public perception of those districts which devoted full-time resources to public relations and those which did not have defined public relations programs.

The principals' point of view. Visual communication through movies, the Internet, and television impacts public perception and fosters educational stereotypes, both positive and negative (Hershey-Freeman, 2008; Tillman & Trier, 2008). In a qualitative study of 73 motion pictures produced between 1986 and 2007, Hershey-Freeman examined the portrayal of 72 principals and 130 teachers. Further, Hershey-Freeman reported that portrayals of principals were generally negative while those of teachers were positive; however, discrepancies existed between the portrayals of educators and their actual job roles. Hershey-Freeman recommended that principals be more proactive in their public relations to combat the stereotypes evoked by the popular media.

Principals, however, appear distrustful of the media, considering members of the press adversaries, while newsmen view themselves in an oversight function (Newby & Hayden, 2004). The power of the media has been evident in education for years; one needs only to look the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to discern how the press can impact educational decisions. Indeed, a 2000 study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals suggested that in this age of accountability principals found

themselves spending an increasing amount of time on public relations (Newby and Hayden).

In one of the earlier dissertations published on the topic, Brooks (1976) surveyed superintendents as well television and print news professionals in a seven-state Midwestern region. All respondents worked in cities with populations of more than 200,000 and served by daily newspapers and at least one television station; a random sample of five cities from each of the states was selected after the municipalities were arranged by population. The 105 participants within the study included the superintendent of each of the school districts, the newspaper editor, and the television news director.

In her 1976 study, Brooks examined the perceptions of school-media relations among the aforementioned participants. While over 79% of the respondents perceived that relations between schools and the press were adequate or improving, some differences of opinion were noted. Brooks reported discrepancies existed between the perceptions of superintendents and news professionals in regard to the flow of information to the public, with one-third of superintendents, but only 11% of newspaper editors, rating the flow as always adequate. Though more than 80% of each group of participants reported that unfavorable school news items were reported as often as were favorable ones, fewer superintendents indicated a perception that news stories were accurate than did editors or directors (Brooks).

Brooks' (1976) self-penned six-page survey consisted of items which were refined through pilot studies with graduate students and television news professionals. However, no school superintendents, a prime segment of the participants, were included

in the establishment of the validity of the instrument, nor was the measure one which had been previously validated and assessed for reliability. This flaw in the study generates concerns about the findings. Moreover, with the participants in the study confined to Midwestern cities with populations over 200,000, questions arise about the generalizability of the findings to other parts of the nation and to smaller constituencies.

Principals worldwide feel the media unfairly compares schools and ignores positive news (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004). The 2000 study *Principals in the Public: Engaging Community Support* highlighted the disconnect between the role of the media as perceived by journalists and school leaders; principals cited the press as their worst adversaries, while newsmen indicated they were reporting what was requested by the public in its call for standards and accountability (Newby & Hayden). Principals generally felt that the media exacerbated accountability by highlighting test scores while not acknowledging disproportionalities when comparing schools; meanwhile, survey respondents indicated frustration that the media reported negative items while ignoring positive news (Newby & Hayden), a perception reported by other researchers (Brooks, 1976; Rotherham, 2008). Moreover, the “media malaise” negatively impacted citizens’ views of government and its institutions such as education (Opfer, 2008).

In analyzing the content of two daily Victoria, Australia, newspapers, Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) found the press often created a connotation of “good” versus “bad” schools through the use of language, images, and graphics such as charts and graphs detailing the academic performance of individual schools. Follow-up interviews with teachers and principals indicated that an additional time was spent managing the image of

both the schools and the educators. Further, Blackmore and Thorpe reported that educators expressed defensiveness at their portrayal in the media and a desire to improve as a result of the press' attention.

A second study by Blackmore and Thomson (2004) echoed these sentiments. In a qualitative study, the researchers reviewed a series of newspaper articles regarding head teachers in Australia. Blackmore and Thomson asserted that both government and school officials used the media for political gain but struggled with the repercussions of such entanglements. In addition, the researchers accused the media of being complicit in the labeling of schools as high-performing or under-achieving; in fact, Blackmore and Thomson observed that articles were written in such a way to force the reader to make judgments about the quality of schools. Because of the portrayals of their schools in the media, teachers at the under-performing schools felt they had to defend themselves so vehemently that they had little energy left for their students (Blackmore & Thomson).

Blackmore and Thomson (2004) raised several interesting points; however, there were noted flaws in the second study. For example, no mention was made in the journal article of how the news articles were selected for content analysis. Further, much of the research described the perceptions of the head teachers; the media's perspective in presenting the information to the public was not addressed. Finally, the researchers acknowledged their study was funded to investigate the declining number of head teachers; this admission lends itself to bias.

A leader's relationship with the press may temper the public's view of a school's, or district's, effectiveness; similarly, a principal's, or superintendent's, influence also may be colored by the portrait painted by the press. Most crucially, however, could be

the media's ability to garner public, particularly parental, support for the school's vision. Each of these critical elements is built upon uniquely dynamic, albeit human, relations between journalists and administrators. Increased press coverage intensifies attention and creates higher expectations of the leader (Cotton, 2003). At present, school leaders are in a particularly precarious position in light of demands for increased accountability. Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) concluded that there is a natural dissatisfaction with a leader's performance; as a leader moves up the organizational hierarchy, he or she is more vulnerable to criticism. However, successful leaders are those who can weather the criticism and learn from it (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson). Moreover, Gyure (2005) also concluded the more involved educators are in the school-media partnership, the more control the educators perceived. Consequently, principals spend an increasing amount of time attending to public relations (Brooks, 1976; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004).

Principals and Media Relations Training

Though principals acknowledge spending an increasing amount of time tending to their schools' public images, many feel that they lack the training to manage adequately media relations. This claim was supported by the work of Gallegos (2007), who noted the lack of emphasis on school public relations in principal training programs was one cause of the pressure school leaders perceived when interacting with the press. While myriad school districts rely upon principals and superintendents to act as media relations experts in lieu of hiring a professional public relations department, Carr (2006) explained that effective public relations experts have several qualities in common with successful school administrators. Like experienced school leaders, accomplished public relations

authorities are collegial, knowledgeable, proactive, strategic, and visionary (Carr, 2006). Carr further contended that accomplished administrators can utilize these qualities to build positive relationships with stakeholders, to become problem-solvers, and to market the school district by relying on honesty and an open-door policy. According to Hoy and Miskel (2008), generating support for public schools is more important than ever as alternative educational sources, including virtual, charter, and private schools, are providing a more competitive market in the wake of “stronger demands for technical performance...[and] a decline in demands for institutional conformity” (p. 285).

School leaders are primarily responsible for marketing their schools via the media (Kgaphola, 1999; Oplatka, 2007). In a qualitative study, Oplatka conducted a series of open-structured interviews with eight northern Israeli public high school principals, including four men and four women. Four participants worked in the state education system and the others were employed in the religious state education system, serving the children of observant Jews. In the purposive sampling, the participants, though varied in experience, age, and degrees, were from schools that were in stringent competition with other schools for students. The schools included were identified from a list of high schools provided by the Israeli government, though it is unclear from the research report if the list included all public high schools in the region. Fifteen principals were contacted via phone and eight agreed to participate in the study. A research assistant, rather than the primary researcher, conducted the semi-structured, face to face interviews at the principals' schools. Respondents were asked about marketing, school promotion activities, and the principal's role in marketing the school; transcribed interviews were

coded and central patterns identified. No mention was made of how the validity of the original questions was established.

Based on the interview data, Oplatka (2007) contended that school choice increased the pressure on the principal to market the school to the public, though administrators felt this practice was not aligned with their moral responsibilities as educators. In general, the average principal perceived himself as the person responsible for presenting the school's vision and image and, as such, recognized the importance of marketing the school. Still, the principals felt image-building was an inconvenience, one warranted only because of their schools' competition for students. To that end, the principals justified their promotion of their schools as a managerial function. Further, they viewed their promotion of their schools, partially through media exposure, as necessary to convey their moral commitment to inventiveness, principles, and improvement (Oplatka).

Both No Child Left Behind (2001) sanctions and competition from virtual and alternative schools have increased the pressure to market schools to the public (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Oplatka, 2007; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). However, despite this pressure, principals feel that media relations is a distasteful task not in keeping with their primary duties (Oplatka; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore). Furthermore, a lack of training leaves educators feeling incapable or unwilling to interact with the media (Gallagher, 2007; Gallegos, 2007). In addition to soliciting parental support and publicizing events, today's schools utilize the press to garner aid for its programs; however, educators are often ill-equipped to maximize the opportunities for media support. Gallagher's study examined the competency of music administrators and

educators to use media to support their music programs. Both administrators and educators completed a survey which measured six variables, including knowledge and effort in public relations and media relations, competence and effectiveness in advocacy, and satisfaction with the New York State Music Association's advocacy efforts. Results of the qualitative study illustrate the discomfort of educators and administrators alike in managing media relations (Gallagher).

Comprehensive Media Relations Program

In addition to training, media professionals suggest the development of a comprehensive school media relations program to market the school's image, to announce upcoming events, to recognize students and staff, and to solicit public support (Koeppel, 1982; Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Veltman, 2003; Mobley, 2007; Carr, 2008; Hershey-Freeman, 2008). To elicit a change in general public perception, Besnoy (2005) advocated using a combination of print and non-print media, both within and outside of the building, to wage a continuous public relations campaign which intensifies over time. Among the nonprint resources available within the building are the intercom system, student-produced news broadcasts and announcements, word of mouth, and collegial collaboration among educators; print media within the school facility includes bulletin boards, school newspapers and bulletins, and school web sites (Besnoy). Indeed, the school's web site not only allows information to disseminate quickly but is also a record of the school's actions (Carlson, 2007). According to Besnoy, effective media campaigns begin by defining the mission of the campaign and identifying the target of the campaign. Besnoy further noted that specific activities and a timeline must be developed

and implemented; an evaluation of the campaign must follow so adjustments can be made.

Krals' 1990 needs assessment of a Texas school district employed a survey of parents, teachers, and campus-level administrators. Results of the one-way ANOVAs, Scheffe's tests, and frequency counts revealed that parents relied heavily upon their children for information while teachers and principals received information from other school personnel. For this reason, Krals contended all educators should be public relations experts in that they influence both children and colleagues. Krals further suggested the addition of a written public relations policy and the hiring of a public relations director to spearhead the communication efforts of the district. Moreover, the director should promote the work of students, and principals should portray to the public trustworthiness, confidence and accessibility (Krals). Such status may be forged by inviting the press to attend school events, by requesting an editorial board meeting, by answering honestly and timely the questions posed by the media, and by creating a community of learners (Cotton, 2003; Kidwai, 2007).

Moreover, Rotherham (2008) advocated training for media personnel to assist them with understanding educational research in order to report results more accurately. Rotherham blamed the "growing competition from online media and increasing pressure on news outlets to report news quickly" (p. 377) on the growing number of reporting errors and for forcing newspapers to tailor products to match the interests of the primary consumers. George and Waldfogel (2003) and Applegate (2007) agreed, suggesting that as much as 70% of newspapers are composed of advertising and editorials. According to Applegate, the remaining 30% of newspaper content includes stories which represent a

small sample of the events of the day or week, giving the public a very limited view of their communities.

Rural Print Media and Public Perception

Though an urban or suburban comprehensive media relations program would likely include television, Internet, and radio sources, such is not always the case in many rural areas. As George (2008) noted, the audience for traditional newspapers has changed markedly since 1996, when Internet news access grew exponentially. As a matter of fact, according to the annual State of the News Media Report (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008), circulation decreased 2.5% among daily newspapers and 3.3% among Sunday newspapers in 2007. According to the account, the largest portion of newspapers' audiences is made up of older citizens. Indeed, George echoed this, noting that the readership of newspapers is now comprised largely of minorities, undereducated individuals, and those outside of urban areas. In her quantitative study of Internet access, newspaper circulation, and reporter assignments, George suggested that this change in readership demographics has forced newspapers to alter their focus on national issues and to devote more resources to local and human interest stories. These issues, including education, appear to be of vital interest to the local readership and, thus, coverage of these issues may increase circulation of newspapers.

Therefore, the traditional newspaper in rural areas continues to be an important part of the open system that includes education. The local newspaper remains one of the main sources of communication with stakeholders (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). Further, newspapers, being relatively inexpensive, can be used to reach mass numbers of readers whose views on education may be shaped largely by what they read (Blackmore

& Thorpe, 2003; Moses, 2007). Respondents were more positive in their responses about their local newspapers than national newspapers (Bennett et al., 1999). Less educated people, those with lower incomes, and those who were regular tabloid readers were more likely to express favorable opinions of their local newspapers (Bennett et al.). Graber (2004) noted that while television employs visuals to exploit the emotions of viewers, newspapers rely upon a more sophisticated tactics such as framing, analysis, and explanatory measures. Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen (2006) echoed these findings in their study of 41 surveys examining public knowledge of selected news stories from 1992 to 2003. The three researchers found that increased newspaper coverage of an issue resulted in increased levels of knowledge regarding the issue. In contrast, Chaffee and Frank (1996) suggested that newspapers diminish the gap between socioeconomic strata and that people who read newspapers tended to be more involved in political affairs.

However, increasingly, some local newspapers are faced with absentee owners or group ownership. In a study conducted by Chambers (2003), the number of local newspaper owners in southwestern and Midwestern small markets has decreased by 79% since 1972. Moreover, Chambers noted that, while the average number of newspapers was decreasing in small markets during the period of 1972 to 1998, the average number of television and radio stations was increasing. Chambers contended the decrease in the number of small market newspapers was attributable to the deregulation of the industry. However, using a multiple regression analysis, he found mixed results for this hypothesis. While impact of the federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 appeared to be a predictor of the number of locally owned newspapers and radio stations, the coefficient for deregulation in general was not significant. Unlike the present study, Chambers' research

was conducted in media markets with populations of 25,000-125,000 rather than the significantly smaller areas served by many local newspapers. Moreover, the assertion that an increase in corporate ownership would lead to a decrease in the divergence of ideas was not addressed.

According to Chambers (2003), the attachment between the public and the press generates an obligation to maintain and further the ideals of the community, yielding support for education, one of the primary avenues for passing on values and mores to the next generation. Similarly, Mullen (1997) contended that local media sources were critical in building a sense of community attachment. In a quantitative study employing multiple regression analysis, Mullen conducted a phone sample questionnaire of randomly selected residents in a southwestern community and also of a random sample of students at a largely commuter college located in the city. However, in both instances, the samples were not described by the researcher, making it difficult to ensure that the participants were demographically representative of the populations of either the residents of the community or the university's students. Items on the questionnaire inquired about the residents' and students' use of local media, including the city's newspaper as well as the university's mass media outlets, including a campus-based newspaper, a cable access television channel, a radio station, the university's web page, billboards, and flyers. Mullen found it was difficult to ascertain among the students which type of media had the largest impact on their perceptions of community attachment, but he did find that students watched significantly less television and read the local newspaper significantly less often than did residents. Residents and students used the university-based media sources nearly equally, with the exception of the campus

newspaper. However, reading the local newspaper and listening to the university-based radio station significantly impacted the students' sense of community attachment. Mullen found, however, it was difficult to determine the effects of the various media sources on the residents' sense of community. Analysis of the data revealed a correlation between both the residents' and the students' reading of the local newspaper and community attachment, underscoring the importance of the media. Using a lens of 10 models, Mullen explored the relationship of the residents' and students' use of the local and university-based media on the dependent variable of community attachment. However, by Mullen's own admission, many of the models poorly fit the data collected due to the large number of variables, and the research basis for the selection of the models is not outlined in the study.

In 1984 the Federal Communications Commission underscored the importance of local media in community development and in facilitating the sharing of ideas in an open forum (Chambers, 2003). Community newspapers are also a call to action, particularly in rural areas. Genck (1983) noted:

Public concern and media attention have led to a widespread, general feeling that all schools are in trouble...Because schools are naturally located within the immediate communities they serve, a national image of declining performance interacts with any local problems that may exist...And any local problems that do arise...tend to be magnified (p. 19-20).

Local school issues are politically charged, and the press appears to play a major role in impacting public opinion, including swaying politicians to create legislation to respond to perceived personal and professional threats (Anderson, 2007). Similarly, the local press

can be used to generate controversy, which results in an outcome detrimental to schools (Mobley, 2007).

To determine why a rural public school system bond issue failed, for instance, Mobley performed content analysis of documents and audiovisuals such as newspaper accounts; publicity flyers, presentations and videos; and meeting minutes. The local newspaper examined was published weekly and a radio station was also located in the community, which was near to several larger, network-based television stations. Using unstructured, open interviews, Mobley (2007) interviewed the superintendent, one local newspaper representative, one regional newspaper journalist, and one regional radio station news representative, three school board members, four bond committee supporters, and three opposition voters. Additionally, data gathered through non-recorded conversations with other community members was included in the findings. Mobley became a participant-observer, attending more than 30 meetings where the passage of the bond was promoted. In order to remove questions of bias about the researcher as a participant-observer, member checking measures were employed to ensure the accuracy of the reporting of the participants' responses. However, Mobley noted that the researcher's reactions were also included in the findings, causing the reader to question to what extent the participants' responses were mitigated by those of the researcher, who acknowledged being a resident of the community studied.

Respondents in the study indicated that the local weekly newspaper was their primary source of information regarding the bond issue; their responses also noted a lack of coverage by the radio and television stations (Mobley, 2007). Further, participants perceived the coverage of the local newspaper to be negative. In reality, however,

content analysis revealed more positive coverage than negative. Members of the media stressed the importance of accuracy in reporting. Content analysis of newspaper articles revealed that almost all were neutral in tone. Still, the ten paid advertisements and letters to the editor analyzed by Mobley contained questionable information aimed at discrediting the superintendent, an act considered unethical by the members of the media. At the same time, community members lamented the local newspaper coverage, commenting that it appeared profit was more important than accuracy.

The qualitative case study's findings revealed that those constituents opposed to the bond issue utilized negative word of mouth and paid advertisements to generate a controversy which overcame the positive press created by the bond's supporters. Respondents contended that the number of voters changed as a result of the paid advertisements and media coverage. The study, therefore, highlighted the importance of confronting negative media with a positive response rather than allowing the confusion to perpetuate (Mobley, 2007).

Summary

In summation, the press is part of the open systems model, which includes an unclear boundary between the system and its environment. As such, the relationship between the press and schools is often blurred and the dynamics of the relationship appear to differ in various settings. However, it is agreed by most researchers that the relationship between the media and schools can be mutually beneficial. Still, the partnership is often antagonistic because of differing perceptions of school leaders and journalists regarding the role of the press (Dempsey, 1995; De Diemar, 1996; Blackmore

& Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004; Joly, 2007; Hershey-Freeman, 2008; Tillman & Trier, 2008; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008).

By continuously providing external feedback on the work of schools and informing educators of the public's opinion and concerns, today's press can be either a valuable asset or a formidable force. As Hoy and Miskel (2008) have emphasized, "School decision makers monitor the environment for information and their perceptions determine to a large degree the future directions of the organization" (p. 30). Changing the public's perception of a school's effectiveness begins not outside of, but rather within, the building. In keeping with task environment theory, successful school leaders are mindful and employ tactics to protect the technical core of teaching and learning (Hoy & Miskel).

Among these tactics is utilizing press protocols where media representatives direct inquiries and solicit information through a formalized process. Effective school leaders use a variety of methods to inform the public and to gather data from stakeholders; among these methods are advisory committees, school board meetings, and public relations campaigns. According to Hoy and Miskel (2008), "promoting a positive image of the school can reduce uncertainty and dependence on the various elements in the environment" (p. 265), while encouraging teacher autonomy and job satisfaction but yet protecting the technical core of teaching and learning. By establishing favorable relationships with other organizations, including the media, schools and school districts provide information about the inner workings of the educational system to the external environment. Moreover, by forming these relationships, schools "increase organizational power, reduce uncertainty, increase performance...and protect the organization" (Hoy &

Miskel, p. 267). Using partnerships, collaboratives, coalitions, political interest groups increases a school's influence on policy makers, who are inside government, and public perception generated by outside government, which includes the media (Hoy & Miskel).

Education is prime fodder for press coverage, though educators and journalists often disagree on what is newsworthy (De Diemar, 1996; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004; Wallace, 2007; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). While some researchers (Bennett et al., 1999; Luke, 2003) argue that the impact of the press on public opinion is not significant, many others (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Norris, 2000; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Killeen, 2007; Haas, 2007; Anderson, 2007) disagree. Nonetheless, this discrepancy among researchers may be one reason school leaders indicate spending an increasing amount of time on public relations (Brooks, 1976; Cotton, 2003).

Learning to cooperate with the press does not appear to be an easy task or one taught formally in most principal preparation programs. This fact compounds the misconceptions of principals or public relations officers (Dempsey, 1995; Scott, 2005; Joly, 2007) and the press (De Diemar, 1996; Hershey-Freeman, 2008; Tillman & Trier, 2008). Lack of training in media relations subsequently yields an unwillingness to interact with the media (Gallagher, 2007; Gallegos, 2007; Oplatka, 2007).

Regardless, researchers (Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Veltman, 2003; Besnoy, 2005; Mobley, 2007; Carr, 2008; Hershey-Freeman, 2008), suggest that a comprehensive media relations program is most effective in communicating with stakeholders. In rural areas, that media relations program hinges upon the local newspaper (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008); in fact, Mullen (1997) contended that such local media sources were

essential to building a community. Therefore, it is imperative to determine the best practices employed by rural principals in building and maintaining these relationships with local newspapers.

However, there is little research on the media's relationship with K-12 schools and even less on the relationship between school officials in rural communities and local newspaper agencies. While much of the research conducted on the relationship between the press and educators has been done at the collegiate level (Mullen, 1997; Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Gyure, 2005; Marek, 2005; Stone, 2005; Bruce, 2008; Ryan, 2008), little research (Brooks, 1976; Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003) exists in exploring this relationship at the elementary or secondary level. Furthermore, only one qualitative study (Mobley, 2007) has addressed the relationship between a rural school district and its community newspaper, a fact that points to one gap in the literature which may be explored through this study.

In the age of accountability, the relationship between stakeholders and school systems seems more critical than ever; moreover, the public appears more supportive and appreciative of school leaders who make their work transparent (Newby & Hayden, 2004). This clarity may build a level of trust in the school administrators, who are empowered to focus on student learning. As Sergiovanni (1994) noted, building a community of learners, which includes those outside of the building, is the key to creating a sense of efficacy among principals, who are in turn portrayed by the media as capable. This, in turn, demonstrates to the public that pupils are the first priority, fostering stakeholders' confidence in the educational system.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This research study aimed to examine the effective print media relations practices of high-performing rural Georgia principals. This chapter describes the methods and materials used in conducting this study. The chapter is presented in the following sections: (a) Research Questions, (b) Research Design, (c) Research Procedures, (d) Participants, (e) Instrumentation, and (f) Data Collection, and (g) Data Analysis.

Research Questions

As the goal of all educational media relations is to generate stakeholder involvement, thereby improving student achievement (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008), this research study focused on the following primary question: What are the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals?

Sub-questions in this study included the following:

Sub-question 1: What do rural Georgia high-performing principals perceive to be best practices for print media relations?

Sub-question 2: What do rural Georgia print media professionals perceive to be best practices for educational print media relations?

Sub-question 3: How do parents of students in schools led by rural Georgia high-performing principals value local print media as sources of information for supporting school-family-community partnerships?

Research Design

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach using a collective case study method. According to Yin (2009), the case study

method is applicable when the researcher aspires to generate a direct understanding of people or to capture the meaningful characteristics of contemporary events. Moreover, the case study method is an appropriate method for gathering information when the phenomenon to be studied is descriptive in nature, especially when describing why or how a phenomenon occurred (Yin, 2006) or when an event is bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2003).

Yin (2009) contended that the case study method is especially useful “when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 11). As this study was a probe into the relationship between an open social system and the unclear boundaries of its environment, the case study method was an appropriate research strategy. Unlike in experimental studies whereby the phenomenon studied is separated from the context by a series of control measures, the case study’s strength actually lies in using the context to provide a thick description of the event constructed through the words of the participants (Yin, 2009). Rather than relying on data derived from statistics alone (Yin, 2006), the multi-case study method is used for investigating phenomena in their natural settings. Such was the case in this study as the participants were identified as a purposive sample of high-performing principals, identified as such because of their schools’ making Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001) guidelines for multiple years.

Additionally, the case study method acknowledges that each situation is unique and, while similar results may occur in cases, these may be the result of varying forces present in some situations but absent in others (Yin, 2009). Moreover, the case study method is appropriate when the researcher has little or no control over the situation (Yin,

2009). While case study method researchers recognize that there are many variables, such as personal experiences of both school leaders and journalists in this instance, which cannot be controlled, the technique was chosen for this study to permit the collection of data from multiple perspectives and sources, adding to the description of the phenomenon. Using the case study method allows the researcher to report a 360-degree view of the occurrence (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). In the case study method, the emic perspective of the research participants is represented through interviews. This perspective, coupled with the examination of documents, assists in providing a thick description of the experiences reported by the participants (Borg, Gall, & Gall).

Research Procedures

Participants

Yin (2009) observed that the first responsibility of case study researchers is to identify the unit of analysis to be investigated, using the research questions as the basis for this determination. In the multiple cases to be investigated in this study, the unit of analysis was the school principal. However, in order to generate a thick description of the practices employed by the principals, it was necessary to interview stakeholders from many perspectives (Opfer, 2008). Among the additional proposed participants were local journalists, parents, and other educators.

This study employed purposive sampling techniques (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). The primary participants in the proposed collective case study were three high-performing Georgia principals, as identified by the Georgia Department of Education between June 2006 and June 2008, who were employed in districts serving 10,000 pupils or less. By nature, in collective case studies the situations investigated have a measure of

homogeneity but yet are heterogeneous (Gerring, 2007). The researcher sought data which illustrate the differences among the cases and to highlight the similarities to gain insight into the phenomenon (Gerring).

To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Further, in keeping with Institutional Review Board requirements, informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Similarly, if required by local policy, permission from local school boards was secured as necessary to conduct interviews on-site with principals and parents. Demographic data on each participant's school enumerated below was collected using the School Data Collection Form found in Appendix B.

The first participant, East County Elementary School Principal Monroe (pseudonym), was named to the Georgia High Performance Principal list twice. According to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2008), there were approximately 1200 pupils enrolled in the school in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth. Of this number, over half classified themselves as African-American, while over 40% as identified themselves as White. Approximately 2% categorized themselves as Hispanic or multi-racial. During the 2007-2008 school year, over 20% of pupils received special education services, while less than 15% were enrolled in the elementary Early Intervention Program, and around 3% of students received gifted services. The school employed fewer than 100 full-time employees, including four administrators, all of whom had more than 21 years of experience. Approximately 95% of the school's certified employees were white. For the 2008-2009 school year East County Elementary (pseudonym) and its district as a whole met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The second participant, Principal Charles (pseudonym), was also named as a Georgia Department of Education High Performance Principal twice. In the 2007-2008 school year West County Middle School (pseudonym) served fewer than 400 pupils in grades six through eight. Of this number, fewer than 40% identified themselves as African-American and less than 1% as multi-racial. White students comprised the majority of the school's population. Among the school's students, less than 15% received special education services and fewer than 10% were enrolled in the remedial education program, while almost 8% received gifted services. The school employed fewer than 40 teachers in 2007-2008; of this number, more than three-fourths identified themselves as White. West County Middle School made AYP for the 2008-2009 school year; however, the district as a whole did not.

Located in the southeastern portion of the state, South County High School (pseudonym) was led by Principal Leslie (pseudonym), who was also named Georgia Department of Education High Performance Principal twice. South County High School served over 1000 students in grades nine through twelve in the 2007-2008 school year. Of this number, more than one-third identified themselves as African-American, and most of the remainder as White. Less than 1% of the total student population classified themselves as multi-racial, Hispanic, or Asian. Schoolwide, approximately one of every eight students were served in special education programs, while less than 10% were enrolled in remedial education programs or in English for Speakers of Other Language classes. Of the school's population, over 5% of pupils received instruction in the gifted program and almost three-fourths of South County students were enrolled in vocational education classes. The school employed fewer than 100 certified faculty members,

including three full-time administrators, with over 75% of these staff members identifying themselves as African-American. For the 2008-2009 school year, South High School and, subsequently, the district did not make AYP.

To attain a thorough understanding of the relationships between the principals and local newspapers, it was necessary to interview additional participants, including local journalists assigned to report on education matters in the districts where the schools were located. The newspapers identified by the researcher were published in traditional print format at least weekly and were the legal organs of their counties. In East and West counties (pseudonyms), the communities were served by single weekly newspapers which are published on Thursdays. In South county (pseudonym), the single weekly newspaper was published on Wednesdays. All of the newspapers were published in the county seats of the districts; these cities also served as the headquarters for the school board offices. All of the newspapers published their editions on the Internet as well as in traditional format.

The third group of participants was a purposive sample of parents. Included were parents who met the following criteria: (1) identified themselves as regular readers of the local newspaper, (2) had a child who attended one of the schools selected for the study, and (3) were involved in school activities through membership on the school council, Parent-Teacher Organization, school booster club or other advisory organization or who served as designated classroom or school volunteers. These focus group interviews took place at the selected schools at times which coincided with school events selected by the principal, including a school council meeting, field day, and an after school meeting.

Instrumentation

This study employed face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of documents. The primary instrument for data collection was an interview protocol used with principals, journalists, and parents. Face validity was established through a review of the protocol by a panel including the study's methodologist and a sample of representative participants. This protocol was piloted with a principal, journalist, and a parent and then reviewed by the study's chair prior to implementation with participants. Since case study methodology implies a research design which can be flexible throughout the data collection period (McDonnell, Lloyd, & Read, 2000), the accompanying open-ended interview questions found in Appendix C were designed to be presented in a semi-structured format. Case study interviews allow the researcher to question respondents about their opinions as well as the events at hand (Yin, 2006). Additional queries were presented as an opportunity to clarify responses and to probe deeper in to the topic of study (Glesne, 2006). Interviews lengths varied based on participant responses, ranging from 45 to 90 minutes.

In addition to interviews, the content analysis protocol included in Appendix D was used to examine the content of the local weekly newspapers. One year of newspaper articles, excluding athletic coverage, was examined to determine the type and frequency of articles included in local newspapers. The purpose of the content analysis was to clarify the responses of the participants and to document the quantity of coverage devoted to various issues. Moreover, the content analysis allowed the investigator to determine if the newspapers' coverage of the schools was congruent with issues of perceived

importance to parents. A summary of these results is reported in table format in Chapter IV, along with a narrative description of themes evident.

Data Collection

The multiple case study method was selected because of the richness and depth of data produced through a variety of sources (Gilham, 2000; Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), the case study's strength is its ability to manage a wide variety of evidence, including documents, artifacts and interviews. The case study method has the potential to illuminate a particular phenomenon by allowing the researcher to collect data from multiple viewpoints (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the case study method permits the investigator to modify the data collection plan during the course of the study, electing to include more participants to resolve conflicts among the sample in the observations and interviews conducted previously (Yin, 2006). Likewise, the case study method allows for the re-interviewing of participants to clarify the data reported (Yin, 2006). Furthermore, the researcher is able to allow a line of questioning to evolve from the participants' responses, adding to the richness of the information reported (Yin, 2006).

Chief data for the study was gathered through one-on-one interviews with the identified principals and reporters; additional interviews with other school system or media employees were performed if necessary. Focus group interviews with four to eight parents in each school were also conducted. Since the qualitative approach to research is intended to describe or to explain social phenomena from the viewpoints of the participants in their natural environment (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 2006), the principals,

other school personnel, and parents were interviewed on-site at the respective other agreed-upon locations.

Moreover, a review of one year of newspaper publications was conducted to describe further the best print media relations practices of the identified principals. Content analysis of newspaper items included the frequency and type of articles, including but not limited to, academics, non-athletic extracurricular activities, announcements, and human interest stories. Newspaper articles were photocopied and catalogued by theme (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Kohlbacher (2005), content analysis uses a “controlled approach in order to deal with the complexity and gradually reduce it” (p. 18) with the purpose of identifying patterns. In order to describe more fully the relationship between principals and local journalists, the researcher also examined local board policies regarding interaction with the media. In an attempt to determine the frequency with which local journalists publish information provided by the school studied, school press releases were also catalogued and cross-referenced with articles published in the local newspapers.

Data Analysis

According to Glesne (2006), the reporting of data may be more holistic in a case study than in other qualitative measures. In the multiple case study method, the unit of analysis is at least two or more instances of a phenomenon (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). Each of several cases may be examined separately and then in comparison to one another to identify patterns across the phenomenon. Further, Yin (2006) observed that the multiple case study method may further illuminate the findings of the researcher from the original case, adding to the certainty of the findings.

Creswell (2003) suggested the following steps in analyzing qualitative data:

1. Organize the data, including transcribing interviews;
2. Read through all data to determine a sense of general meaning;
3. Code all data into “chunks” of meaning and organize the “chunks” into categories;
4. Use the codes to create a description of the people, setting, and events studied;
5. Determine how the data will be represented for the reader;
6. Interpret the data and draw conclusions.

Data analysis “is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data” (Creswell, 2003, p.190). Therefore, throughout the interview process, the investigator maintained notes regarding potentially emergent themes. Following each interview or focus group session, the audio tape was transcribed and numbered by line and the themes updated. The researcher’s field notes were reviewed to gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell; Glesne, 2006).

According to Hartley (2004), data must be organized around central research questions and examined to determine how it fits the categories and themes. Following transcription, recurring words and phrases were identified and organized into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Gilham, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Glesne). Stake (1995) wrote that these patterns of repeated words and phrases usually point to importance. This search for consistency among situations is called “correspondence” (Stake). In keeping with Creswell’s notes, these key words and phrases were compared to the original themes developed from the researcher’s notes and revised throughout the data analysis process.

Stake (1995) suggested that investigators create “naturalistic generalizations” in which they interpret patterns in the data using their own experiences as frames of reference. Indeed, Creswell (2003) cautioned that the researcher’s reflexivity is an important component of qualitative research. According to Burawoy (1998), however, researchers should explain a case in a wider societal context. Therefore, in order to ensure accuracy of data analysis, the researcher triangulated the principals’ responses with data from the newspaper content analysis and the interviews with journalists and parents. “Examining evidence from...[multiple] sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes” will help to establish credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). This allowed the investigator to determine if the principals’ perceptions of their print media relations practices corresponded with the perceptions of the other stakeholders (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Yin, 2009). Furthermore, member checking measures (Hartley, 2004; Glesne, 2006; Borg, Gall, & Gall; Yin, 2009) were utilized to ensure that the content analysis and participants’ words provide an accurate, thick description of the best print media relations practices employed by selected rural Georgia high-performing principals.

Summary

For the purpose of this study, the collective case study method was selected because a thick description will make the phenomenon more understandable (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, the collective case study method is applicable for the study as the research questions involve describing the practices of a select group of school leaders. As Creswell (2003) and Yin (2009) noted, such questions take place in the natural setting of the participants and require multiple points of access. In this study, those points of

access included interviews with the principals, local journalists, and parents as well as content analysis of newspapers. The research strategy was emergent (Creswell), with each subsequent interview or content analysis refining the original suppositions.

Moreover, the descriptive nature of the study lent itself to the multiple collective case study method. This interpretative character required that the researcher view the phenomenon studied holistically (Creswell), creating a narrative image for the reader. In the following chapter, the findings are presented in a manner which acknowledges the biases and interests of the investigator but also ensures the credibility of the conclusions through triangulation (Creswell). In short, the goal of this collective case study was to provide, through a variety of points of view, a rich description of the print media relations practices employed by selected rural Georgia high-performing principals.

CHAPTER IV

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the study's purpose and methodology are revisited. Additionally, participant interview responses and newspaper content analysis results are included. Finally, based on these findings, the researcher's analyses of the data are aligned with the research sub-questions and embedded in this chapter.

Introduction

While several studies have explored the relationship between educators and the media, most of these endeavors have focused on crisis management (Dempsey, 1995; De Diemar, 1996), fundraising (Gallagher, 2007), and higher education (Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Gyure, 2005; Marek, 2005; Stone, 2005; Bruce, 2008) rather than on public perception of elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, the degree to which school leaders' relationships with the press impact parental perception has been explored only marginally using quantitative studies (Scott, 2005; Mobley, 2007) with a focus on the effects of the relationship rather than on the practices employed to create the bond. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals as viewed by the principals, print media professionals, and parents.

The research design was qualitative in nature and utilized a multi-case study method. Prior to implementing this study, pilot interviews were conducted in the researcher's home school district. These pilot interviews included audio-taped responses from a local newspaper reporter, an elementary school parent, and an elementary school

principal. Following these pilot interviews, the research protocol was revised by the researcher and reviewed by the committee chair.

Within the present study, the researcher employed purposive sampling to identify three rural Georgia principals, each of whom had been named to the Georgia high-performing principal list for at least two consecutive years. This participant group included one elementary, one middle, and one high school principal, each in a different school district. All three principals were females with over 20 years of experience as educators and more than five years experience as principals at their current institutions, which were all Title I Distinguished Schools. A second group of participants was comprised of parents identified by the principals as serving on the school council or extracurricular activity committees. Moreover, all of these participants indicated they were regular readers of their local weekly newspapers. The final group of participants was composed of local newspaper journalists (two female, one male) assigned to cover the selected schools. Each parent was assigned a respondent number (referenced by number and district pseudonym in this chapter), and each principal and journalist was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. In order to develop a richer description of the phenomenon, additional interviews were conducted with the journalism teacher at South County High School (pseudonym) and with a staff member at The South County Telegraph (pseudonym).

Table 1 shows the interview schedule for all three participant groups. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants' schools and offices over the course of three and one-half months using the protocol developed to ascertain the answers to the study's guiding questions. Follow-up questions were posed for clarity when appropriate.

Table 1

Interview Schedule

Participant	Interview Date
West County Middle School Principal Charles	Wednesday, March 3, 2010
South County High School Principal Leslie	Thursday, March 11, 2010
East County Elementary School Principal Martin	Tuesday, June 8, 2010
West County Middle School Parent Focus Group	Wednesday, March 3, 2010
South County High School Parent Focus Group	Thursday, March 11, 2010
East County Elementary School Parent Focus Group	Tuesday, May 25, 2010
<u>The West County Gazette</u> Reporter Janworth	Thursday, April 8, 2010
<u>The South County Telegraph</u> Graphic Designer	Tuesday, April 6, 2010
<u>The East County Herald</u> Publisher Addington	Tuesday, June 29, 2010
<u>The East County Herald</u> Publisher Addington	Thursday, July 1, 2010
<u>The South County Telegraph</u> Reporter Edgewood	Wednesday, July 14, 2010

Note. All names of participants, schools, and newspapers have been replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

The interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. After reviewing the tapes several times to ascertain patterns in responses, the transcriptions were coded for themes. These themes are reported in the findings that follow and are used to answer the study's primary research question and sub-questions. The coding process is addressed later in this chapter.

In addition, artifacts, including photographs, articles, announcements, and letters to the editor, were reviewed for each of the newspapers in the study. These items were cataloged in a spreadsheet created by the researcher. The spreadsheet included the date, title, type of artifact, author/photographer if credited, number of words and photographs included, school employee quoted, and the theme(s) of each artifact. Data gathered using this newspaper content analysis protocol in Appendix B is also reported in Chapter IV. Local board of education policies relating to media relations were reviewed, if available.

Research Questions

This research study focused on the following primary question: What are the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals?

Sub-questions in this study included the following:

Sub-question 1: What do rural Georgia high-performing principals perceive to be best practices for print media relations?

Sub-question 2: What do rural Georgia print media professionals perceive to be best practices for educational print media relations?

Sub-question 3: How do parents of students in schools led by rural Georgia high-performing principals value local print media as sources of information for supporting school-family-community partnerships?

Findings

Included in this section are descriptions of the physical settings and demographics of each of the communities and schools included in this study. Subsequent sections are organized by findings for each of the research sub-questions, as supported by the participant interview responses and newspaper content analysis.

Case One: East County Elementary School

Situated in eastern Georgia, East County (pseudonym) is bounded on the east by a major waterway. The county's population is less than 20,000, with a population density of fewer than 25 persons per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population is declining; a loss of approximately 2% was reported in the last ten years. Approximately 55% of East County's residents are White and over 40% identify themselves as Black (U.S. Census Bureau).

Though over 75% of East County residents have attained a high school diploma or higher, the median income is less than \$35,000 per household; over 20% of East County's population lives below the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), a fact illustrated as one drives through the outlying regions that are not adjacent to the downtown area. These neighborhoods and commercial areas are filled with a mixture of mobile homes and income-assisted housing complexes. These regions abut nearby railroad tracks, industrial plants, car dealerships, abandoned shopping centers and motels built on a once-thriving thoroughfare. In contrast, the area near downtown is comprised of stately homes erected in the Georgian architectural style and surrounded by well-manicured lawns and blooming foliage. These residences are juxtaposed with shotgun houses and 1950s era homes leading to the center of town. The picturesque downtown

area, lined with flowering trees and shrubs and locally owned storefronts, is centered around the veteran's memorial park. The approach to the downtown area is met with streets lined with memorials for veterans, a testimony to the town's Civil War heritage and its current patriotism.

Located on a four-lane divided highway on the outskirts of town, East County Elementary School (pseudonym) serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through five. The sole elementary school in the district, the institution provides an education for a diverse population of students from the county seat to the smaller unincorporated areas within the county's borders. A large building is divided into wings for each grade; student work and colorful murals adorn the walls. As the researcher arrived, the principal and assistant principals were visible, greeting each adult visitor and making time for the questions of their young pupils; additionally, students and parents met the visiting researcher with friendly smiles and pleasantries.

Principal Monroe (pseudonym) has led the school for the last ten years, serving as assistant principal for one year prior to being named principal. All of her administrative experience has been in East County. In all, she has over 25 years of experience as an educator. Principal Monroe has a master's degree in Educational Leadership and holds teaching certification at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Table 2 details the demographic information on the parent participants for each of the cases outlined. In East County, where the interview was conducted with four parent volunteers on field day, all of the participants were white females; one identified herself in the 18-34 age group, while the remainder placed themselves in the 35-45 age group. Seventy-five percent of the participants in this interview group held bachelor's degrees.

As shown in Table 3, all reported reading the newspaper in hard copy on a weekly basis. Though all owned a computer, responses, as illustrated in Table 4, varied regarding accessing the school website, local newspaper, and national news websites online. Additionally, most did watch local and national news programs on television. These data are included in Table 5 of this chapter.

In publication over 120 years, The East County Herald (pseudonym) has a small staff, including the publisher/editor, a staff writer, an advertising account executive, a business manager, and a distribution chief. In addition, a high school teacher contributes weekly articles on athletic contests. While the primary coverage area is East County, The East County Herald is a subsidiary of larger corporation which owns several newspapers in both rural and metropolitan areas across the nation. The East County Herald circulation is approximately 4,400 with a market saturation of around 64%. Hard copies of the Thursday weekly editions are available in all of the East County municipalities as well as in surrounding counties. According to the publisher, copies of The East County Herald are mailed to subscribers across the country and around the world.

Publisher Addington (pseudonym) has been employed by The East County Herald for ten years. Originally from north Georgia, he worked for another newspaper out-of-state until relocating because of family reasons and the newspaper's proximity to his collegiate alma mater. He shared, "Besides...being one county over from where I went to college, it also sits halfway between both sets of our children's grandparents."

Table 2

Demographic Data for Parents

	East County Parents	West County Parents	South County Parents
	<i>n=4</i>	<i>n=5</i>	<i>n=5</i>
Gender			
Male	0	0	1
Female	4	5	4
Age			
18-34	3	1	2
35-45	1	4	3
46-62	0	0	0
63 or older	0	0	0
Education Level			
High School Diploma	0	2	2
Bachelor's Degree	3	2	2
Master's Degree	1	1	1
Specialist Degree	0	0	0
Doctoral Degree	0	0	0

Table 3

Frequency of Accessing Print Edition of Local Newspaper

	East County	West County	South County
	Parents	Parents	Parents
	<i>n</i> =4	<i>n</i> =5	<i>n</i> =5
<i>Reads Local Paper/Print Edition</i>			
Weekly	100%	100%	0%
1-3 Times/Month	0%	0 %	100%
Never	0%	0%	0%

Table 4

Frequency of Access to Selected Websites

	East County	West County	South County
	Parents	Parents	Parents
	<i>n</i> =4	<i>n</i> =5	<i>n</i> =5
Owens a Computer	100%	100%	100%
School Website			
Daily	0%	0%	20%
Weekly	0%	100%	60%
1-3/Month	100%	0%	0%
Never	0%	0%	20%
Local Newspaper			
Daily	0%	0%	0%
Weekly	25%	0%	0%
1-3 Times/Month	25%	40%	0%

Never	0%	60%	100%
National News Websites			
Daily	0%	0%	60%
Weekly	50%	0%	20%
1-3/Month	50%	40%	0%
Never	0%	60%	20%

Table 5

Frequency of Watching Television News Programming

	East County	West County	South County
	Parents	Parents	Parents
	<i>n</i> =4	<i>n</i> =5	<i>n</i> =5
Local News			
Daily	25%	60%	0%
Weekly	75%	40%	100%
Monthly	0%	0%	0%
Never	0%	0%	0%
National News			
Daily	25%	60%	75%

Weekly	75%	40%	25%
Monthly	0%	0%	0%
Never	0%	0%	0%

Case Two: West County Middle School

Located near a major waterway and largely supported through the tourism and logging industries, West County (pseudonym) has a population under 10,000 and a population density of less than 40 individuals per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the population of West County declined by over 5% since 2000. Approximately one-fifth of the residents are under age 18 and over 75% of West County's inhabitants have, at minimum, a high school diploma and the median household income is less than \$40,000 (U.S. Census Bureau). Almost two-thirds of the residents of West County identify themselves as White, while most of the remainder classify themselves as Black (U.S. Census Bureau).

As one approaches West County, the eye is met by lush green forests, rippling waters, and rolling hills. The landscape is filled with family-owned farms, old homesteads, Revolutionary War historic sites, and well-established churches. With fewer than five franchised businesses and no major retailers, the small idyllic downtown is dominated by locally owned restaurants and storefronts.

West County Middle School (pseudonym), the lone middle school in the county, is located at the end of long, wide street in a residential area. Currently housed on the same campus as the high school, West County Middle School serves grades six through eight. The institution occupies an addition to the main high school building and shares some teachers with the upper grades. Narrow white cinder block hallways are filled with student work punctuated with teacher feedback, and, as the researcher arrived, the offices buzzed with staff members, parents, and students who were met with easygoing smiles of the receptionist and school administrators.

Principal Charles (pseudonym), who has been an educator for over 20 years, has been at the helm of West County Middle School for the last ten. She has one assistant principal who was completing his first year of experience at the time of this study. Prior to becoming the leader of West County Middle School, Principal Charles had served as an assistant principal and teacher in neighboring district. For Principal Charles, who holds an education specialist degree in Educational Leadership and teaching certification at the middle and high school levels, instructing students was a second career.

Table 2 shows the demographics of parents included in the interview, conducted after school. Parents were recruited by the principal for participation in the study. The group included one African-American female and four white females. All but one participant placed herself in the 35-45 age group. Within the group, two held high school diplomas, two bachelor's degrees, and one, a master's degree. All respondents in this group reported reading the local newspaper in hard copy on a weekly basis (see Table 3). Though they all owned computers and accessed the school website on a weekly basis, responses, as seen in Table 4, were mixed on the questions regarding use of the computer local newspaper's website, and national news websites. Sixty percent reported never accessing the local newspaper or national news websites using online access. Conversely, sixty percent reported viewing on television the local news daily and national news programming weekly. These data are detailed in Table 5.

In publication over 100 years, The West County Gazette (pseudonym) is locally owned and has a circulation over 2,000. The coverage area includes all of West County and any items submitted from surrounding counties. The paper is published weekly on Thursdays. In addition to the owner, there is a single reporter who also serves as the

paper's editor. Reporter Janworth (pseudonym) is originally from a neighboring county but has family in West County as well. Though trained as a chaplain, she has worked for The West County Gazette for 20 years. Reporter Janworth noted that she arrived at the job by happenstance:

A writer just gradually sort of quit coming to work and that's how I got into writing. My boss is also one of my best friends from childhood and he always told me I needed to be a writer and so...that's how I got here and have been here almost twenty years.

Case Three: South County High School

One of Georgia's largest counties in area, South County's (pseudonym) flat, sandy landscape is filled with miles of sprawling soybean farms. Situated in the center of this agriculture is the county seat, which is home to several locally owned businesses as well as a few franchised restaurants, discount stores, and retail establishments. The population of South County is less than 20,000; and the population density is fewer than 40 residents per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the county's population has increased over 2% in the last ten years.

Demographics of the county reveal that the median household income is less than \$35,000; over 75% of the residents have attained an education at the high school diploma level or above (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Around 70% of the population classifies itself as White; while most of the remaining residents identify themselves as Black (U.S. Census Bureau).

Just off the main street is located South County High School (pseudonym), a well-kept, extensive building organized by teaching departments and bounded by woods on

the rear and a two-lane road on the front. South County High School is relatively new, having moved from its previous location—now home to the district’s middle school—just five years before. Throughout the school are encouragements for students to pass mandatory state assessments, bulletin boards maintained by students, and offices with windows to the hallways, allowing administrators and the school resource officer to monitor security at all times.

Unique among the schools in this study, South County High School has a student-run journalism class which meets before school each day. Pupils earn credit toward graduation by taking the class, for which they must apply. The application process includes an assessment of the student’s technology skills, providing a writing sample and two teacher recommendations to the journalism teacher. Interestingly, the class was started by the current South County High School Principal Leslie, a participant in this study, and is now operated by an English teacher who once reported for a larger daily newspaper and for The South County Telegraph. Principal Leslie stated, “I started the journalism class and then another teacher took over and it’s now [South County journalism teacher’s] first year in working with it.” Asked why the teacher was selected, the principal replied, “She used to work for the newspaper.”

According to the journalism teacher, the class currently has 19 students, fifteen of whom are on the writing staff. Each student has a writing assignment for the school newsletter which, according to South County Parent 3, “is mailed once a quarter to about 350 people.” Some of these articles, such as the Student of the Month and the Staff Member of the Month, also appear in The South County Telegraph with the students’ bylines. “We can include things about our school only in the newsletter. It’s also posted

online on the school's website," noted Parent 3, though the researcher could not locate any newsletter editions online. The journalism students are also responsible for maintaining the school's marquee, bulletin boards, website, and televised daily morning announcements.

South County High School Principal Leslie (pseudonym) has been the head of the school for eight years. Before taking this position, she served as an assistant principal and teacher at South County High School. Principal Leslie has over thirty years of experience as an educator and holds a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. Additional data in this case was provided by the journalism teacher and the office manager/graphic designer at The South County Telegraph.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the parent interview group. This interview was conducted at the monthly school council meeting. The participants included one white male, one African-American female, one Pacific Islander female, and two white females. Of the participants, 60% held a bachelor's degree or higher. Three of the participants categorized themselves in the 35-45 age group, while the remaining participants indicated their age group as 18-34. Table 2 shows the data of the participants regarding the frequency of access to print editions of the local newspaper as well as frequency of access to school, local newspaper, and national news websites and to local and national news programming (see Table 5). All owned a computer but none reported accessing the local newspaper's website on regular basis, as illustrated in Table 4. Three of the participants noted that they did access national news sites on a daily basis and the school website on a regular basis.

Locally owned by a native of South County, The South County Telegraph (pseudonym) has been in operation over 20 years; however, the newspaper bought its leading competitor, which subsequently closed, three years ago. The competing newspaper had been in operation over 120 years. In addition to the publisher/editor/owner, The South County Telegraph employs a graphic designer/office manager, an advertising director, and a production manager. With a print circulation of approximately 5,000, the coverage area includes all of South County as well as surrounding counties. According to the graphic designer, The South County Telegraph's market saturation is approximately 88% of the households in South County. In all, the paper's staff covers meetings and events in seven municipalities. The majority of the subscription base is in South County, though the weekly Wednesday publication is accessible via the Internet for paid subscribers in any location. Hard copies of the weekly editions are mailed to distant locales within and outside of the state.

The South County Telegraph Reporter Edgewood (pseudonym) discounts herself as a writer. Originally, she worked for a major utility company but was transferred to South County. With her husband, she opened The South County Telegraph, in his hometown.

I was an accounting major...When we started the newspaper, it was a dream of [my husband]....He can write a story and take a picture for days...Me, I can sell snow to an Eskimo. I was not a writer, do not claim to be a writer.

Analysis of Data: The Coding Process

Each of the interview protocol questions provided data needed to answer the study's sub-questions and primary research question. Table 6 shows this correlation.

Table 6

Correlation of Interview Questions to Research Sub-questions

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Research Sub-question	Interview Question
1. What do rural Georgia high-performing principals perceive to be best practices for print media relations?	A1, A2, A3, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
2. What do rural Georgia print media professionals perceive to be best practices for educational print media relations?	A1, A2, A3, J1, J2, J3
3. How do parents of students in schools led by rural Georgia high-performing principals value local print media as sources of information for supporting school-family-community partnerships?	A1, A2, A3, C1, C2, C3, C4

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Note. A denotes a question asked of all participants; P, question asked of principals only;

J, a question asked of journalists only; and C, a question asked of parents only.

Following the transcription of the interviews, the researcher reviewed the raw data, highlighting common words and phrases among the participant responses to each of the interview questions and then assigning each a code name and number. According to Glesne (2006), as researchers

work with data gathered through qualitative inquiry, each major code should identify a concept, a central idea... There should be as many major codes as needed to subsume all of the data, appreciating that more may develop than will hold up as separate codes. The blending of codes occurs over and over (p. 153).

These common phrases comprised the first iteration of the codes to emerge from the data.

Codes were then organized by research sub-question. From these initial codes, patterns emerged among responses and codes were merged, re-organized, or separated further to develop the major patterns, marking the second iteration (Glesne, 2006). At this juncture of the data analysis process, all participants' responses shared some major themes; however, there was variation among the perspectives of the participants in regard to others. Therefore, it was important for purposes of reporting data to ensure that the coding was both precise enough to explore these differences yet broad enough to answer the primary research question. In keeping with the work of Creswell (2003), the researcher employed an ongoing cycle of examining the interview and newspaper content data, reorganizing the codes, and developing a broad interpretation of the themes. This third iteration was critical to answering the research sub-questions and developing the conclusions outlined in Chapter V. On the following pages Table 7, read from bottom to top, shows the emergent coding and major themes revealed in the data and their relationship to the research sub-questions.

Table 7

Code Map: Three Iterations of Data Analysis (to be read from bottom up)

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(Research Sub-Questions 1, 2, and 3)

SQ#1: Principal Perceptions SQ#2: Journalist Perceptions SQ#3: Parent Perceptions

Common Themes among All Participants:

A. Responsibilities of the Local Media

B. Practices for Relationship Building

C. Unique Connection between Rural Newspapers, Schools, and Community

D. Impact on Public Opinion of Schools' Effectiveness

(Third Iteration: Application to Data Set)

Effective Print Media Relations Practices of Georgia's Rural High-Performing Principals

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(Second Iteration: Pattern Variables)

1A. Obligation to Report Good, Bad, & Ugly	2A. Role of the Media in Communicating with the Public	3A. The Newspaper: Purveyor of Information
1B. Shared Experiences Supplement Honesty	2B. Candor & Trust Define Relationship	3B. Integrity & Cooperation Under Gird Relationship
1C. Recognizing the Press' Relationship with Rural Communities	2C. Press as Protector, Champion, & Partner	3C. Symbiotic Relationship
1D. A Tenuous Relationship	2D. Power of the Press	3D. Conflicting Press Impact

(First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis)

1A. Provide Information	2A. Disseminate Facts	3A. Reliance on Local Paper for Information
1A. Recognition/Students	2A. Communication Accessible to Public	3A. Good and Bad News Wanted
1A. Recognition/Staff	2A. Recognition/Students	3A. Pupil Recognition Items
1A. Recognition/Community	2A. Motivate Students/Staff	
1A. Reporting Unflattering		

Details	2A. Annual Routine of Seasonal Articles	3A. Desire to See Curriculum at Work
1B. Prompt Responses	2B. Trust Built over Time	3B. Aware of Reporters' Identities
1B. Honesty/Openness	2B. Off- versus On-the-Record	3B. Accessibility of School
1B. Accessibility	2B. Accessible Staff	3B. Cooperation of Schools
1B. Shared Professional Backgrounds	2B. Transparency	3B. Open Communication
1B. Common Personal Experiences	2B. Multiple Contacts	3B. Respect for Reporters' Integrity
1B. No Formal Training	2B. Not Journalists by Trade	
1B. Distributed Responsibility for Communications	2B. Desire to be Accurate	
1B. Candid Conversations	2B. Removal of Barriers to Communication	
	2B. Direct Feedback from Schools	
	2B. Welcome Environment Needed	
	2B. More Curriculum Coverage Desired	
1C. Affinity for Journalists	2C. Personal Pride and Satisfaction in Job	3C. Understaffing Leads to Superficial Coverage
1C. Understaffed Press	2C. Tales of Virtue	3C. Reliance on Schools to Send Information to Newspaper
1C. Local Newspaper Content Different from Major Dailies	2C. Responsibility of Press to be Accurate	3C. Schools Control Content of Newspaper Articles
1C. Principals as Overseers of Newspaper Content	2C. Understaffing Problems Breed Reliance on School	
1C. Respect for Journalists	2C. Community Pride	
1C. Fair, Protective Treatment of Rural Schools	2C. Mutually Beneficial Relationship for Rural Papers/Schools	
	2C. Protector of Schools	
	2C. Champion of Schools	
	2C. Confronting Ineptitude and Lack of Cooperation	
1D. Hesitance in Building Relationships with Media	2D. Uninvolved Parents	3D. Small Percentage of Newspaper Content Devoted to Schools
1D. Sensationalism	2D. Community Expectations of Rural Media	3D. Emphasizing/Creating Negative Stories
1D. Educating the Press	2D. Newspaper Referenced	3D. School-Paper Enmity
1D. Different from Other Partnerships	2D. Meeting Attendance Up	3D. Uninvolved Parents
	2D. Increased Sales	3D. Lack of Explanations
	2D. Fair/Accurate Reporting	
	2D. Lack of Sensationalism	

DATA

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Responses to Research Sub-questions

Using the interview protocol responses, the research findings were used to answer each of the study's sub-questions as illustrated in the participant responses. For reporting purposes, parent respondents were identified by school and an assigned number.

Journalist and principal responses were identified by pseudonyms referenced earlier in this chapter.

Sub-question one: Principals' perceptions of best practices. Principals interviewed for this study identified four major themes related to best practices for print media relations. The first was developing an understanding of the responsibilities of the local media, including determining what parents expected of the local media. Secondly, principals described an appreciation for a protective and mutually respectful relationship between small town newspapers and rural schools. Next, they identified general qualities needed to cultivate this unique relationship with local newspapers. Finally, principals acknowledged the power of the press in impacting public opinion. Each of these themes is illustrated in the words of the principals below.

Responsibilities of the local media. All principals interviewed in the study indicated that the primary responsibility of local newspapers was to disseminate information to the public. Said Principal Leslie, “[The South County Telegraph publishes] announcements, like about testing week. They print the honor roll and Student of the Month pictures.” Seconded Principal Monroe, “[The East County Herald does] ... a very good job with advertising for us when we're having special events. They're good about giving credit to businesses when they've contributed to some kind of fundraiser.” Principal Leslie of South County High School noted that the responsibility of the local

newspaper is “to keep the community informed. They are to keep the parents up-to-date on recognitions and events. They come out and cover Title I parent events, ball games, and award events.” Added Principal Monroe of East County Elementary School:

I think they need to report, of course, test scores. They need to report the goings on in the school ... Although we never want them to do negative, we try not to let that happen too often, but they need to do both [positive and negative stories]. Everybody needs a clear picture of what’s going on in the schools. So they need to help us advertise when we’re having family events or parent events, like when open house is going to be, when kindergarten registration is going to be... I want them to be a positive influence and portray the school in a positive light, but yet if there’s something that got a controversy going on—say dress code—I think they have the obligation to let parents know about that too.

However, Principal Charles of West County Middle School acknowledged that sometimes the data the newspaper must publish were not flattering to the school system.

[The newspaper’s main responsibility is] to tell what’s happening in the schools, to keep parents informed, to let them know some of the things we are doing, and, I guess, if our test scores don’t come back as well as they should, to inform the public about that. I just think they need to report the facts of what the school’s doing.

Principals perceived student recognition to be one of a local newspaper’s primary functions. Principal Monroe of East County Elementary School proclaimed, “The kids enjoy that too, seeing their pictures in the paper.” Principal Charles agreed:

I think what...[The West County Gazette tries] to do for us is to get out the word of the good things that we're doing here and the things we're doing for our children. I think that's built the bond [between the school and the newspaper].

She added:

I think [parents] enjoy it when we feature their children and when they see things, stories about what's happening at the school...Our clubs do a lot of community services, and I think the community is very appreciative of that. And having a local paper put those in... [parents] see we're doing some good things here. They also see our test scores. We have a chance to brag.

Principal Leslie of South County High School added that parents "like to see recognition for their students. They like to know what's going in the school...Parents liked to see their students acknowledged."

Staff and community members were also recognized, another fact that principals acknowledged as important. According to Principal Monroe:

We do the Newspapers in Education thing...Businesses contribute to that and then [The East County Herald provides] newspapers for every third grade student, every EIP [Early Intervention Program] student, and every special education student in fourth and fifth grades...They each get a newspaper each week. Every student. And the teachers will use that sometimes in some kind of language arts activity or even if they don't use it, the kids get to take the newspapers home, so the families are getting the newspapers.

She continued:

[Community members] do enjoy that, as well as too when like the fire department comes, and they show the pre-k and kindergarten. They like the publicity that they're doing things for the community too. And once or twice a year, [Publisher Addington will] highlight our school [system] resource officer doing something positive, not always just having to arrest somebody.

Practices for relationship building. The recognition and public information functions of the school-media relationship were undergirded by specific beliefs. Openness, two-way communication, and accessibility were consistently cited by all of the principal participants as qualities needed in order to facilitate an effective working relationship with local rural newspapers. Principal Charles of West County Middle School noted that rural schools and newspapers share a unique relationship that defines their interactions in small towns.

[The schools] pretty much have to be visible. You can't live in this town and not be transparent. You're always under the microscope when you work here. And the paper, I think they realize that too. We have a good relationship with them. And if we don't, we pick up the phone.

Continuing, Principal Charles added, “[Reporter Janworth] takes pride in what she does, and, as far as problems, in ten years, I haven't run across them.”

Moreover, prior personal and professional experiences seemed to play a role in the development of effective working relationships between the principals and the local press. Commented Principal Charles of West County Middle School:

My first degree was journalism/public relations. And I didn't realize it at the time, I didn't need an education degree, to be honest with you...because public

relations is the majority of what [principals] do...So, I guess, because [Reporter Janworth and I] had the same background, we shared some things.

She added, "Because I have a journalism degree, I can kind of call that bluff too. I know what to say and [the newspaper knows] I know." Meanwhile, South County High School Principal Leslie said her understanding of how to build an effective working relationship with The South County Telegraph was grounded in

trial and error. When I started the journalism class, I learned a lot but mostly it was just trial and error on who to call, what would be printed, what format was needed...[My skill set comes] mostly running the journalism class and working here so long.

The relationships developed over time and the effective ones were composed of lessons learned from prior experiences. For example, East County Elementary School Principal Monroe described her relationship with a previous The East County Herald editor as "very similar [to the one shared with current Publisher Addington] but not as open. Like we were always inviting him to come; he wouldn't come for one thing...He did not have children so he was just not as interested in schools." Further, Principal Monroe commented that her experience as an assistant principal who facilitated public relations as well as her tenure as an educator in general shaped the type of relationship she holds with The East County Herald. "I guess experience is part of it. Just learning to get along with all types of people." Said she of emphasizing sensitivity to The East County Herald Publisher Addington:

He had to learn that, though. Like one week, he put the front page a picture of a guy who'd been riding a bicycle around [town] naked. It didn't show anything,

but it showed a picture of the guy and talked about it. We didn't give that one out [to students as part of the Newspapers in Education program] because, again, of relationships. After that is when he became a little more sensitive.

A lack of professional training in educational leadership programs complicated the development of the relationship. In regard to working with the media, Principal Charles stated that she was training her first-year assistant principal to build an effective working relationship with the local reporter by delegating some communication-related responsibilities to him.

I think he [the assistant principal] sees it's more of a public relations type job.

And I understand all the other things you learn as an administrator when you're going through school...but you really don't learn until you get on the job.

In South County, Principal Leslie noted that before she became the school's Career, Technical, and Agriculture Education director and assistant principal, she was an English teacher at South County High School. During that time, "I started the early morning journalism class...and that's where I learned a lot of how to work with the press."

Principal Monroe of East County Elementary School responded that leadership preparation programs do not address building effective working relationships with media outlets. "No, it's something you learn by swimming," she said.

In an effort to build teacher-leaders and to disseminate information more efficiently, the principals have adopted a practice of allowing multiple staff members to communicate with the local media. The removal of barriers to direct communication between educators and journalists appeared to be a key facet in developing an effective working relationship. Regarding the primary points of contact for communicating with

The West County Gazette, Principal Charles replied, “It’s different. If it’s systemwide, usually the superintendent picks it up. If it’s schoolwide, then I do a lot of the communicating with that. Well, the teachers if it’s specific to a teacher.” Principal Leslie of South County High School said, “The journalism class does a lot of the work, supplying [The South County Telegraph] with the information and pictures. The newspaper will come if we call them, though.” In East County, Principal Monroe divides the responsibility with her fellow administrators and her teachers. In fact, she has an “assistant principal for parent involvement and publicity...But we’ll all three [administrators] call...if we think of something. We just divvy up the responsibilities... We just kind of share [the job of notifying the press of school events].” She added:

And sometimes even the teachers will call and say, “I’m doing this in my classroom. Can you come?” So...we allow them to do that. Every now and then they don’t tell me, but most of the time, they tell me. And they know that’s fine.

South County High School Principal Leslie said much the same: “Well, everyone is responsible. We all represent the school, but primarily it’s the journalism class.” Noted West County Middle School Principal Charles, “[Reporter Janworth] knows that if she has any questions, she calls me...If it’s curriculum matters, our curriculum director may do that so it comes from, I guess, the people that are kind of [in charge of an event].”

Unique connection between rural newspapers, schools, and community.

Perhaps because they live in the communities on which they report, journalists were perceived to share a responsibility to contribute to their local neighborhoods. Of The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth, Principal Charles said, “She’s very caring.

She's helped some of our at-risk kids as well... She's a big [West] county supporter, even though she lives in [a neighboring county].”

The principals' responses indicated an acknowledgement of the rural newspapers' attempts, though understaffed, to be available. One of the strengths of the relationship between South County High School and The South County Telegraph, said Principal Leslie, was accessibility. “They come when we call. They cover sporting events. They print what we send to them. They are user-friendly.” East County Elementary School Principal Monroe recalled, “Sometimes we don't always think ahead and we'll call [The East County Herald Publisher Addington] and he comes running on over.”

Furthermore, school administrators mentioned the ability of local newspapers to afford space to items not found in larger, urban papers. Said Principal Charles of West County Middle School:

We put the honor roll in there, stuff that you really couldn't put in a lot of the other papers. Used to, everybody published honor roll, but I think the smaller papers still do those kinds of things for us... We don't have to pay for that, [and it] takes up their print space. Sometimes they call us and say, “What's happening? We don't have enough news.”

Added Principal Leslie of South County High School, “What's in the paper about the school sells papers. We're just a small town; it's a big rural county so there's not a lot going on outside of what happens with the schools.”

Moreover, in rural communities, the principals and school systems seemed to enjoy an oversight function in relation to their local newspaper content, in part because the schools supplied a significant portion of the articles, information, announcements, and

photographs which were published. Principals and superintendents retained the final approval of what was sent to press from the schools. Referring to The West County Gazette, Principal Charles noted, “[Reporter Janworth] usually will not print anything until [the school] has had an opportunity to look at it, which is absolutely wonderful... That we appreciate.” The principal continued, “That’s the reason I don’t worry too much. If I call [Reporter Janworth] and I ask her, ‘We’ve got some stuff going on,’ or she calls me...she lets me look over it.” Further, principals seemed to believe that the newspapers separated issues at the central office and board level from those that are at the school level. Declared Principal Charles, “Now, there’s some [controversial] things that have been reported at board meetings, but really it was...nothing from our individual school.”

In fact, the principals appeared appreciative and trusting of the working relationship with their local newspapers, feeling that the newspapers were protective of the school system. Such a situation existed in West County, according to Principal Charles.

Our little paper comes out once a week, and they’ve been very good about taking announcements and running things. We’ve never had to pay for anything like that. Very supportive when we’ve asked them to come take pictures and we didn’t have a camera available, they would come take pictures. They put in a lot of things just to get our name out there. They’ve been always supportive. I’ve never had a real problem with any of the things they’ve published.

Moreover, the principals sensed that the local reporters recognized the importance of protecting individuals as well as the school system. According to West County Middle School Principal Charles, little anonymity survived in a small town.

The bad thing about it is if you say...well, I'll just use sixth grade math, and we have one sixth-grade math teacher, and if their scores go in [the newspaper], then they [community members] say, 'Oh, that's so-and-so.' That's the bad thing about us [being in a small town]. We have one teacher per grade per discipline per subject.

Principal Charles further noted:

I really think [The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth] looks after us... [West County is] famous for anonymous letters. And I know there's [*sic*] been times she wouldn't print them because she didn't know if they were factual...If they can't publish their name, she will not print them...because a lot of people like to throw mud with anonymous letters...It's gone as far as people writing letters and [mailing] them out...because she wouldn't print what they asked her to print. So she looks after us because we are the number one employer.

A similar situation was reported by East County Elementary School Principal Monroe, who said, "He's [The East County Herald Publisher Addington] called and said, 'This is going to be in the paper.' Or he'll call and warn us that somebody wrote a letter to the editor that isn't very nice."

Moreover, the casual and trusting nature of the relationship allowed for both principals and journalists to be candid in their conversations. East County Elementary School Principal Monroe shared:

I think open communication [is the key]...Every now and then, [The East County Herald Publisher Addington] flubs something up and we feel comfortable telling

him, ‘What in the world did you say this for?...What were you thinking when you said that? Didn’t you know what it would do?’”

Continuing, in reference to East County’s award-winning Newspapers in Education Program, she said:

[Publisher Addington] is good at letting us know...because he knows that sometimes we don’t give out the papers because it’s...very sensitive...like I said, a third grade student’s parent was arrested and it’s on the front page. He knows that that particular paper we may not send home that week. And here about two weeks ago, we had a great big drug raid, and...55 out of the 60 people that they had been following for two years got arrested. A lot of children across the schools had their parents arrested and some juveniles were arrested too from the high school...He knew were not going to give that one out. So he didn’t even deliver that week but he called and told us.

In summation of her candid conversations with Publisher Addington, Principal Monroe commented, “We have to be able to tell him things and tell him, ‘This is something newsworthy; come on.’ We need to let him know how we feel about certain things.”

The principals also seemed to appreciate their local newspapers’ efforts to be accurate, fair, and unbiased when reporting on school issues. Principal Charles expressed her gratitude toward the hometown newspaper and The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth:

She’s been very fair to us. If she sees we’ve sent something that’s not quite right, she’ll say, “Did you leave a word out?”...We have that close relationship...I never worry about, “Oh my gosh, what did she write this week?” And I can’t

imagine having to work with somebody who has that fear... We trust her; she trusts us. And helps us. She's called me before and said, "You know, I've got to get this in the paper and I'm running late. And it's the same stuff as you had last year. What do you want me to leave in? What do you want me to take out? Listen, I've said this and this and this" or "Come by here and mark out what you don't want." And it'd be the day it has to go to press, but we have such a good relationship that she knows what I need done here. She's done it ten years for me.

Furthermore, principals appeared to recognize that journalists felt compelled to report and to confront what they viewed as wasteful spending, bureaucratic inefficiency, and injustices in the school system. Referencing The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth, Principal Charles declared, "At board meetings, they've had to bang the [gavel] on her because she just says, 'Y'all are crazy!'" In fact, regarding the value of The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth as both protector and conscience of the school system, Principal Charles laughingly added, "She's applied for a job here before. We told her no because the main reason was we needed her there [at the newspaper]."

Impact on public opinion of schools' effectiveness. Principals were still cautious in their approach to building relationships with local newspapers, however, sensing that rural journalists could be friend or foe. Said East County Elementary School Principal Monroe:

The big thing is I know it can work against us or it can work for us. And I always try to make it work for us...And comments...one negative parent can cloud a whole church's opinion of a school...So it's very important to get that good news out there...I think it has a big weight on how the public thinks of the school...We

[the school system] had a little controversy going on when that SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) was trying to be passed and it was passed with no problem. But we also had to raise the millage rate here a couple of years ago and, of course, people were opposed to that and had all kinds of negative things to say. But [The East County Herald Publisher Addington] did an excellent job with promoting how the school system did use the funds and we had this and this and this because of the SPLOST funds. You know, [with] the millage rate increase, we were able to keep all of the AP classes at the high school and all the enrichment classes at our school. And he did an excellent job in writing articles about that and influenced many people in the community.

However, Principal Monroe opined that one weakness in her relationship with The East County Herald was the publisher's tendency to sensationalize, a claim the publisher disputed.

The only weakness—and I know this is just journalism—but...is sometimes he tries to sensationalize something. Like we had a coach and he was arrested...and it was like every opportunity [the newspaper] had, he would bring up, “Formerly so-and-so was arrested for DUI”... “Formerly this...” “Formerly that....” Just kept on and on about that...And you know, he was probably just honed in on doing what he needed to do and whatever. Just kind of ticked us off.

The East County Elementary School principal continued about a relationship with a former publisher:

When they first started announcing AYP, we didn't make it that first year. We had our special education kids didn't make it, so we didn't make it. And I mean

that was big, giant letters, “Local System Does Not Make AYP.” The other thing about it is, now that we’ve made AYP every year since, it’s somewhere in the paper instead of front page.

Some principals also indicated the relationship with their local newspapers differed from other school-community partnerships. West County Middle School Principal Charles surmised:

I think it’s because we’re so small. We depend on [The West County Gazette] to get the information out that we need to get out...I grew up in a small town, and [the newspaper] was where parents went to get the information...And we don’t have a television station...It’s really the only way to communicate.

Added Principal Monroe of East County Elementary School:

I guess there’s more risk with the newspaper because you can become news. Any relationship you have with any business or the fire department or police department or [grocery store] which provides our...booster program, it’s usually just one-on-one with those people. With the newspaper, you could have an editorial written about you; you could have an article published. You kind of have to tread a little more carefully.

However, South County High School Principal Leslie disagreed about the relationship between her school and The South County Telegraph differing from other school-community partnerships. She stated, “We don’t have a local [television] station but sometimes the [larger metropolitan area] stations will cover us but it’s not often. I don’t know that the relationship is different that the other partnerships.”

Analysis of data: Sub-question 1. A review of the data from the principal interviews revealed four major themes. The first reflected the principals' perception of the general responsibilities of the media. All of the principals agreed that the primary responsibility of the local rural newspaper was to keep the public—and parents in particular—informed. The responses indicated that school administrators expected the local media to publish announcements regarding upcoming events as well as photos and articles about student and staff recognition. The school leaders all indicated that parents most desired public acknowledgement of their students' achievements. Surprisingly, the principals did not specifically mention using the media to showcase student learning or to provide visual examples of the curriculum.

The second theme evident in the principals' interviews was that a unique relationship exists between rural newspapers, schools, and their communities. The principals noted that rural weekly newspapers can publish items, particularly student recognition items coveted by parents, to which larger daily newspapers could not allocate space. Moreover, responses indicated that principals felt their local newspapers were protective of schools in their communities, with journalists even providing school and district level administrators with editing capabilities in some instances. Principals described journalists as advocates for students and yet simultaneously as the conscience of the community in regard to the more abstract school system. Additionally, the principals appeared to view the journalists as contributing and vital members of their communities. The close relationship between principals and journalists in these small towns contained an element of candor that may not be present in metropolitan areas.

Principals cited several characteristics necessary to build effective working relationships with local rural journalists. First, they noted that schools and newspapers alike must be accessible. Principals declared that they invited their local newspaper staffs to their schools on a regular basis; they also said they submitted items frequently for publication. Secondly, principals noted that experience was perhaps the best trainer in learning to build an effective relationship with local media professionals. Absent formal training in media and public relations, principals relied upon their instincts, interpersonal skills, and personal experiences to forge these relationships. The relationships appeared to be strengthened when the principals and journalists found a common ground such as when the journalist had a child in the principal's school or the two individuals had similar journalistic experience.

The principals also indicated that being proactive often prevented inaccurate information from reaching the public. Furthermore, principals empowered other employees—assistant principals, coaches, teachers, club sponsors—to communicate with the press, trusting both the educators and the journalists to portray the schools in positive lights. Moreover, the principals and superintendents in these districts removed barriers to communication, allowing journalists to visit schools unannounced and to speak directly with staff members.

Finally, the principals' interviews addressed the impact of the local media on public perceptions regarding school effectiveness. All principals indicated that relationships with local newspapers can be tenuous. However, careful trust-building and candid conversations appeared to remove elements of uncertainty, to increase accuracy in reporting, and to decrease the likelihood of negative publicity for the school.

Sub-question two: Print media professionals' perceptions of best practices. Journalists also provided insight into the four major themes identified by the principals. The responses of the reporters assisted the researcher in more clearly defining these elements and also in identifying points of disagreement among the participants.

Responsibilities of the local media. According to journalists, the chief responsibility of any newspaper, as summarized by Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette, is “to keep people informed about what’s going on in our schools and what’s going on at the administrative level.” Pronounced The East County Herald Publisher Addington:

Definitely in a community setting where you have one school system and everybody who lives there has some kind of connection with the school system—either they have students, children who go to school there, or they were a former student—there’s a connection of some sort. We feel it is imperative that we have something about our school system in our paper...From a news standpoint, the public obviously needs to know what...is going on with their school system.

According to The South County Telegraph Reporter Edgewood, the job of weekly newspapers is “to give parents and the public the facts of the good, the bad, and the ugly...And let them have their own opinion to talk to their school principals or counselors or their school board members.”

When publishing items, the newspaper personnel declared that they were careful to communicate with the public in a manner that was widely accessible. Said Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph, “You write a newspaper on a fifth or sixth

grade level because that's what the average person that reads the newspaper's education is, if you combine grandparent with new child."

Like principals, print media professionals seemed to perceive student recognition to be another of a local newspaper's primary functions. The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth shared what she believes the public wants from her publication. "We have to print the not-so-good stuff too...[but] the most important thing is seeing their child's picture and/or name, without a doubt." Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph verbalized that she sometimes found herself at the schools because "a parent called and said they were doing so-and-so [at school]" and the principal, when contacted, responded, "Just go ahead and do what you want to do."

This recognition, as principals noted, could be a motivator for students and teachers. Declared Reporter Janworth about students, "They love seeing their pictures... it just really tickles them." Similarly, Publisher Addington of The East County Herald viewed his newspaper as both a motivational and an educational tool.

We definitely know that the students want to know what's going on with their community as a whole. The fact of the matter is, they love seeing photographs of themselves. They eat that stuff up...If that gets them excited to actually pickup the paper...then we've accomplished something because...they're learning. They may not think of it as learning, but knowing what's going on and something to protect themselves [is learning].

He continued, "You'll go places and [students will] say, 'I want to be in the paper.'" The publisher added, "Just running photos of children every once in a while doing things and smiling about going to school because they enjoy it" is important.

Staff and community members were also recognized, another fact that journalists recognized as critical to building a strong school system and community. Publisher Addington of The East County Herald noted, “If we...show some teachers doing... different things, then it’s actually beneficial because it makes the school system look good...Other teachers...might be saying, ‘What a great idea! I wish I’d thought of it myself.’”

Practices for relationship building. Journalists agreed with principals and parents that trust was a key component of the relationship between weekly newspapers and rural schools. Learning to trust one another takes time, the newspaper personnel declared. The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth said:

I don’t expect [the schools] to share all of the information. There are things I can’t talk about...[However,] something that impacts the community, I do expect it...We all know we have jobs to do...but there’s that mutual respect there. They don’t always like the headlines we write...but we all get over it.”

Related Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph:

I talked to a board member last night and I said, “This is on the record.” And we discussed something [else] and I said, “Now, this is off the record.” And I gained the trust [of] my board and...my principals and...my school system...If I tell them I’m asking them something off the record, they can trust that it will not be printed...And that’s just built over time.

In addition to honesty, another best practice mentioned by the journalists was accessibility. Speaking of Principal Charles, Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette responded:

She's very open, very accessible. I like the accessibility...I walk the halls [of the school]. If I need a teacher, I can go and knock on the door. It's made my job a lot easier because everybody recognizes me...Something about middle and elementary school teachers, they are very conscientious about getting you what you need when you need it.

The South County Telegraph Reporter Edgewood voiced this sentiment:

I personally think we have a good relationship with the high school...I've got all of the principals' cell phone numbers. I can call them when I need them. I've got the athletic director's cell phone number. I can call him when I need him. I can e-mail him at any time. And unless something has happened or they're out of town, within 24 hours, I've got a response to my e-mail.

She shared, "I've had two instances in 20 years where I printed that so-and-so was not available at press time for a comment."

One of the major components of the relationship between the journalists and the principals was availability of information. The journalists commented on their local schools' provision of items for publication, for example. The West County Gazette kept parents informed about upcoming events through a community calendar and special articles about events like kindergarten registration, and, according to Reporter Janworth, "Right before the beginning of each year, we do a huge article featuring everything people need to know." Said The East County Herald Publisher Addington of East County Elementary School's ability to supply information regarding upcoming events:

The do provide us with things that are coming up, that may affect certain parents or may affect all the parents of the students. We get those in and, if we find out

early enough, we can tell people multiple times. And that may not be anything more than running it in a community calendar kind of set up or it may be a full story of telling people or it may be multiple stories, depending on what it is... We hope that we're perceptive enough to notice things as well, [but] we don't mind somebody telling us that some things are coming up.

He added, "They're always telling you things that are going on and if they have schoolwide events that are happening...you mention that. The school system is always putting out information and sending it home with the children." Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph noted:

We've pretty much got a contact at each school. They have designated a representative to send us the news...They have special things going on where they recognize a student or recognize a teacher or a classroom...and they invite us to come and take those pictures. But most of the time, the schools submit them themselves.

Like the principals, the journalists elaborated on unique professional experiences and personal convictions that forged the working relationships they now shared with the schools in this study. Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette described how she became a journalist and the connection she feels to the people on whom she reports.

A writer just gradually sort of quit coming to work and that's how I got into writing. My boss is also one of my best friends from childhood and he always told me I needed to be a writer...That's how I got here and have been here for almost 20 years...My granddaddy was mayor here. I partly grew up here...I feel

at home when I cross the [West] County line, even though I live in [a neighboring county].

Her seminary training as a chaplain has also shaped her work as a journalist. “I guess with my background, I’m probably...interested in the kids and the feelings. How they perceive things, how they’re doing, trying to give them the ‘attaboys’ I think they deserve and need,” the journalist shared. Succinctly, Reporter Janworth said, “The relationships are very personal. These are people I care about so if there’s any part of my experience that’s shaped my relationship [with West County Middle School], it’s in getting to know these people and feeling I can trust them.” Said The East County Herald Publisher Addington of the experience which defined his philosophy on the importance of the school-newspaper relationship:

The elementary school had this program where they were going around in the morning hours and congratulating certain classrooms for meeting their AR [Accelerated Reader]...goals. And if you got to this certain percentage and everybody met this goal, you got...an ice cream party...And they called [me] and...I said, “Well, I’ve got to be there.” And it’s always priceless when [students] hear that they’ve won...I remember we were going to the different [classrooms]...and we got to...second grade. There was this one child who came over to me—out of all the adults who was [*sic*] in the room. And I had nothing to do with any of these prizes...and [he] came over to me and...hugged my legs... and, as soon as he did that, he went back to his seat, sat down and didn’t say a word to anybody...That was the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen...From then on, [when] they have events and programs...it wouldn’t be unusual...[for] one of the

assistant principals...[to say], “Did you get your hug today?”... We must be doing something right.

Moreover, the presence of reporters in schools did not go unnoticed by students, parents, teachers, or principals. Journalists recognized that they must be available on a regular basis in order to be informed on school issues and to build trust with the principals. Publisher Addington of The East County Herald said:

It helps that I go over to the school on a very routine basis if nothing else than to take my children to school....Every year, you’re going to have new teachers come in who don’t know me fully, and I won’t know them, but there’s a whole bunch of other great teachers who work on the same hall and they’ll say, “He’s such-and-such from the newspaper...” If I go to the school...and I haven’t been there for a while, they’ll go, “Where have you been?”

As with the principals, the print media professionals acknowledged that understaffing could be a problem with rural weekly newspapers. Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette cited the amount of assistance she receives from the school system: “A lot of times, I’ll have them bring in just some notes and then I’ll write it. I’ll ask some other questions. It just saves me time with it just being” one writer on staff. Later, she elaborated, “Tuesday and Wednesday are crazy and I can’t get over there...but a lot of times I’d rather take pictures myself so I’ll know...what it is” that’s being covered in a story or photo. Furthermore, Reporter Janworth added, “I am very tired and burnt out. I don’t spend as much time at the schools as I used to... You just get tired. There are a lot of meetings” a small town reporter must cover—school board, county commission, city council, and others. Publisher Addington stated, “[The schools] have

lots of things on their mind, and I have lots of things on mine. We sometimes...both forget...no matter how many notes we take.” He declared, “I’m only one person...and I apologize for not being able to get everything in, but we are a weekly paper.”

Because of understaffing concerns, the open correspondence between the schools and the journalists is all the more important, said the newspaper professionals. All the journalists indicated that an unencumbered line of communication was available to each of the principals. When asked about communicating directly with local principals, Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph responded:

[The superintendent] does give [principals] freedom to communicate directly with me. I think there’s [*sic*] been some issues with outside newspapers...where things were not reported exactly or correctly. And I think that pretty much goes through [the superintendent], but as far as...me locally, I can call my principals and they’ve always given me...the answers...I’ve needed. They’ve never told me that I have to go through [the superintendent].

Though it was listed as a strength by all of the participants, communication also was a source of constant improvement. Said Publisher Addington:

It’s just that you want to, at the beginning of the school year, just send out an e-mail to all the teachers: Just keep me in mind...but we do also have a number of teachers who may not call us on every single thing...but they’re very good with getting word to us when their students are working on projects.

Moreover, the journalists reported receiving feedback from their local school board members as well as school administrators. Like the educators and students on

whom they report, the journalists seemed to relish the compliments. Publisher Addington of The East County Herald declared:

I hear from school board members from time to time and they'll say, "We appreciate what y'all do for...the school system and telling people what's going on." And...a name gets thrown out at school board meetings...and [they'll say], "Y'all may have already seen it in the newspaper." They've been nothing more than appreciative of what we do. I can base that off of...Newspapers in Education where students receive the papers in the school system from elementary all the way up through high school...If we were not doing what we should be doing, they wouldn't be so inclined to have the papers in schools.

The East County Herald publisher also acknowledged, "In my position, I know that covering different things, people aren't always going to be pleased with what we do."

Regarding advice she would give to practitioners, The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth lamented what might have been.

I wish [schools] would call me more...A lot of times schools don't know what would make an interesting picture...And I have addressed groups, at least one group of new teachers, and said, "Please be aware of what would make a good photo opportunity or a good neat story." One time they did an Olympics unit...at the elementary school and they raced in shoe boxes...I just wish they would let me know more of those kinds of little things that are going on. Those are interesting to me.

The South County Telegraph Reporter Edgewood also noted that being a parent of South County students impacted her coverage of schools.

When [my children] were at South County Elementary [pseudonym], I was at South County Elementary. When they were at the middle school, I was at the middle school and all over it. When they were at the high school, I was all over the high school...I can honestly say as a parent and as the newspaper [reporter], I have followed my children...I actually had one of the principals say, “You don’t come see us any more since [your children] aren’t here.” I said, “Well, you don’t invite me. At least when they were there, y’all invited me to come.”

Of the practices rural principals must employ to build successful working relationships with their local newspapers, Reporter Janworth listed these qualities:

Number one, accessibility. Number two, it’s nice when there is one person who’s kind of the catch-all person, who knows what’s going on in the classrooms and what good photographs are...just somebody where part of their job is devoted to that because the pats-on-the-back that the kids get and just keeping the public informed---good, bad, whatever—is important...Accessibility, transparency, and designating a person who’s...[a] contact person.

Reporter Edgewood underscored that schools must make parents and reporters “feel welcome there.” Elaborating, she declared that principals should “return their phone calls and always be honest.” As both a parent and a journalist, Publisher Addington has observed Principal Monroe in action, and he commented on the recommended best print media relations practices for new principals:

It takes people who really want to do a good job...You have principals who are out there when [the students are] coming to school in the morning and they’re saying, “Hey, Mrs. Monroe! How are you?”...If their principal wasn’t

concerned...they'd just go, "There's such-and-such. You think I want to go say hi to him or her?"...[School personnel] set that good environment for learning when they get to the classroom.

Unique relationship between rural newspapers, schools, and communities. The connection between the rural school systems and their local newspapers was not altogether unspoken. Said Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette, "School is one of the biggest things we have going here, and there's a lot of interest in things that happen." She later added of the public's interest in educational issues, "I think it's because you have to have schools, whereas you don't have to have a factory or you don't have to have a church...People want a school." Publisher Addington also acknowledged the strong connection between newspapers and schools in rural communities: "We try to be in tune with what the school system is doing because there's a connection between the two of us."

Moreover, journalists indicated that the mere number of individuals who come into contact with the school system meant education warranted additional newspaper coverage. According to Reporter Janworth, "I can cover things that a paper in a larger town can't do...We can devote the space and they don't have it to cover these things." Said Publisher Addington.

I believe [the school system is] the second-largest employer [in the county]... When you have an employer that's that big, it's beyond informing people what's going on with their schools and their students...It affects people's lives as in their being able to afford things, being able to live and have a roof over their heads.

Publisher Addington further observed that the relationship he shares with East County Elementary School is not like that of some larger newspapers and school systems.

Not every newspaper looks at education the way I do...I just see lots of value for it...Some reporters, editors...it's just almost like they're scared to go into the school system...It just may be the makeup of the person...And they just miss the fact that...a part of our job is to cover the community, and the major part of that community is your school system. It all interacts. Those people who graduate from that school system, they go and work at these plants. They stay in this community. People don't normally move to East County just to be moving to East County...There's a reason you're here. There's a connection here.

Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph described the mutual benefit relationship between her publication and South County High School. The journalism teacher, a former intern at the newspaper,

has actually had several of her students do articles to be submitted in the newspaper...We try to work with the school to help them if they've got students who are interested in writing. And the annual, we work with them doing the photographs, as far as the sports and the clubs...When they take the individual pictures or the group pictures, they provide those to us. We work together.

One of the hallmarks of the partnership between the East County community and The East County Herald manifests itself in the Newspapers in Education program. The Newspapers in Education partnership has won

six national awards in four years...It's based on [the newspaper]. It's based on the school system. It's based on the community. It's a collective thing. We have

sponsors from businesses, from organizations, groups, individual members of the community, who sponsor a paper and the papers go to schools. The schools are actually willing to have the papers come in there. It's a very community-oriented program.

Moreover, according to Publisher Addington, he envisioned the use of the newspapers as a teaching tool. He noted, "I've seen some very interesting ways of using the newspapers by teachers...They're...cutting out proper nouns...I give them little suggestions every once in a while."

Moreover, print media professionals interviewed for this study appeared to view themselves as an integral part of the community both as professionals and as private citizens. The South County Telegraph graphic designer noted the newspaper's commitment to schools and the community's support of students as well.

The Bank of [unnamed city] sponsors a Junior Board of Directors member each week in the paper. I mean, that's a \$100 ad right there. You have to be a member of that group, but that's a big investment. The [school system's] superintendent writes an article every week too."

Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette emphasized, "It's not my story. It's not your story. It's their story...And I want it to be right...And it's my community. And everybody knows that." She added that working with the school system has

been my joy. I've gotten to watch kids grow up into wonderful adults and I've gotten to know people that I would never otherwise in a very stressful as well as very relaxed situations...I have thoroughly enjoyed it and I can't think of anybody that I do not like who is in our school system. They're just good folks.

As a parent, Publisher Addington of The East County Herald noted:

You want the best for your children...The people [of East County Elementary School] want to do something to help your child. They are willing to work with them...The school system has been very good with that, on a personal level.

Indeed, the journalists' responses indicated a desire to champion the school system and to educate the public regarding its needs:

Our school system doesn't have a lot of money...The school system does a lot of grant writing. We got some big grants because they're well-written. We don't have a lot of money. We have a high poverty rate...We have breakfast and lunch at the schools because you're below the poverty level. By getting grants, [the school system gets] a lot of technology. Students get a chance to use a lot of things beyond computers—small computers, laptops, iPods—different ways they're trying to keep kids educated...I go to the schools. There are lots of smiling kids.

Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph echoed a similar situation regarding school finances:

Right now there's a lot of uproar going on because of the budget cuts, but yet spending...SPLOST funds for certain things. And [the superintendent] and I are trying to work together...his articles going one way and mine going another but ending up at the same place—to let people know that SPLOST funds can only be used for certain things.

In fact, Reporter Edgewood's coverage of local school board meetings was supplemented by the superintendent's weekly column. She noted that "recently, in the last six to eight

months, it's been more on the budget cuts and what the system is trying to do to salvage everything they can." Publisher Addington's words conveyed his pride in the local East County School System, "If you go visit our school system, we have a lot of stuff. Whatever it took to get it here legally, we did...Our high school has more AP [Advanced Placement] classes than anybody in the area. It's mind boggling." Indeed Publisher Addington expressed the sentiments of the journalists with this statement: "We really do want to do what we can to make sure that the school system is promoted the way it should be, that it is covered the way it should be."

Additionally, journalists' responses reflected a concern for individual educators and staff members and a responsibility to commend educators in print. The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth provided examples as well:

We write articles. One of the more recent ones was that our high school was named an AP [Advanced Placement] Honors School. And we really try to play those things up because we're proud of our school system...Our middle school does a project here every Christmas...where they collect canned goods and money. The money is for the Secret Santa program to help children in [West] County, to give them gifts...they wouldn't ordinarily have because the parents can't afford it. And then the money is given to the food pantry. And they do that every year, the Junior Beta Club.

Publisher Addington noted:

We also understand all the good, wonderful things that actually happen in every classroom on a daily basis. There's [*sic*] teachers who are working very hard with the constraints that they have on them these days to educate the children...

Nowadays, teachers have to be extremely creative because they're trying to keep the attention of students who go home and do things on a computer...so we have to explain...how creative these teachers are and all the new advances that they're doing so these children can learn better. You try to find a way to get people involved as much as you can, from the students to the teachers to the principals.

Continuing further, the East County journalist added that the newspaper's publicity regarding curriculum matters benefits teachers in the wake of budget cuts and furloughs in place at the time of this study. "It gives you job security...It's hard to justify somebody...being taken out of a room as a teacher if you're going, 'Look at all the stuff they're doing.'"

Furthermore, the newspaper professionals appeared compelled to report and to confront what they view as wasteful spending, bureaucratic inefficiency, and injustices in the school system. Several journalists reported going as far as to interject questions and opinions in the midst of board meetings. Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette offered, "I'm very straightforward! Always have been!" The West County journalist provided an example:

I've gotten lately...more outspoken...[Principal Charles] probably told you this, but at board meetings, I'll just blurt stuff out...because I can stand it no longer... [For example,] they had a one-time price on a bus so finally, it's like [some board members] couldn't grasp that if they didn't buy the bus, the price wasn't going to be there. So I said, "Please, buy the bus!"

Publisher Addington noted:

When we do have things that are somewhat difficult to deal with...we always try to call and say [to school and district administrators], "What are you doing to improve this?"...or...saying it came down from the state level, "Do you have an idea of how you're going to handle this?"

However, Publisher Addington further cited the importance of a cooperative school system in partnering with the local newspaper to keep the public informed.

If you have a school system that seems so defiant...it's almost as if they want to keep themselves in a little shell and they're not willing to bring the newspaper in, which doesn't bring the community in, then it's hard to do anything with that.

Moreover, the journalists, along with the principals, recognized the importance of protecting individuals as well as the school system in small, rural towns. Said The East County Herald Publisher Addington, "Around here, [if] you write something in the paper, you'll run into that person in the grocery store." The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth echoed, "When you see the quotes, you know that person, so what does that mean? [Readers will ask the person quoted,] 'Why did you say that?'" Of the newspaper's protective nature in regard to the school system, Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph stated:

I feel comfortable enough in talking with my board members and with my school principals and my counselors and saying, "Okay, this [issue] is coming up. We need to nip this one in the bud. I need to know what's going on with it." And they do. They're very honest.

Furthermore, within this study, print media professionals indicated a desire to compel the community at large to become more involved in education. Said Publisher Addington of The East County Herald:

As far as [the newspaper staff is] concerned, it's [a] priority that the entire community is involved in the education of a student. It doesn't end when you finish the school day and they get on a bus and go home...If you actually have people who understand what's going on in the school and...you're a parent...reading it...then [the newspaper] has opened the door for them to actually have a discussion.

He elaborated on the newspaper's role in generating parental involvement, even through happenstance:

You have...parents who may not be that involved in different things going on at the school, but...we give them extra information they may not know. Whether they want to get it or not, if they buy the paper to read that somebody got arrested...on that same page about two inches below it...I just thought I'd tell you that this particular class won an award for...doing recycling projects...Parents need to know what their students are doing so they can help them out.

Continuing, he added:

There's a lot of hard work going on across the board [at all the schools]. At that point, you can actually sit down and say [to school officials], "What are you doing to do this? How are you pulling this off?" which gets parents saying, "I didn't know that they had after school sessions for this or they have to do this to do." It's a way to make sure the community truly knows everything they possibly can about

what is important to them so it actually hits home with them. And, again, we all think the primary thing is to raise a child...to be a quality citizen...And to do that, you have to know what they're doing in kindergarten all the way up to when they're a senior in high school.

However, Publisher Addington was aware that, even with his newspaper's best efforts, some parents would not be reached.

You can tell very quickly which parents are going to be involved and they're going to pay attention and know what's going on or want to know what's going on. And there are going to be other ones who you could tell 150 times ...and they'll go, "Well, I didn't know."

Later, he added:

The more people who know the events that are coming up, it helps...Certain people may not actually see the paper. They may just not pick it up that week. They may be out of town. But somebody else says, "Are you going to such and such?"

"Oh, I didn't know."

"Well, it was in the paper last week,"

"Oh, yeah, I guess so. I'd better do that."

Impact on public perception of school effectiveness. Indeed, journalists seemed keenly aware of the relevance of local newspapers in rural areas. Said The East County Herald Publisher Addington:

In a small community, we're looked at possibly more than in a big community because, if you think about all the ways people possibly will [obtain local and

school news]...They will use the Internet, being as the school system has a website with upcoming events, but...we've had this newspaper for [over 120] years. And people here are kind of used to it, which is something I'm glad to say. Thursday come [*sic*] along, people are going to the store and they're getting that paper because they've got to have it...Every week we want to make sure it's something they want to pick up...Again, if they have those school events in there, it tells people what's going on.

Further, the journalists disagreed on the impact local newspapers' coverage of schools had on parental perception of the schools' performance and effectiveness. Asked what she believed parents valued about The South County Telegraph's coverage of schools, Reporter Edgewood replied:

That I give them the facts when I write my stories...I don't write my articles with my opinion. I write my articles using nothing but the facts that have happened at a meeting or to let you know background information in reference to lawsuits against the system. And give them the facts to keep them informed so they can question their board members.

The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth thought that the newspaper coverage affected public opinion "a good bit. Because we'll get letters to the editor... 'It says here in [The West County Gazette]' or people will stand up in a meeting, 'It says here in [The West County Gazette].'" However, she added, "My hunch would be that the parents' experience with the teachers and their child would have more impact than the paper." According to Publisher Addington of The East County Herald, the newspaper had a great impact on public perception.

I think it does a lot, and the reason I say that is because we're [not] a community...where lots of people go to board meetings...We may be the only avenue that they have to find out what in the world's going on...I'm a true believer that if you send paperwork home with your child, that does not mean it will ever get in the hands of your parents.

Agreeing, Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph noted:

I can say that when the school board meets...or I have updates on lawsuits that have been filed...there are a lot more papers sold because people are trying to keep up with it. Twenty years ago, I was the only person at a school board meeting...Now it's gotten where there may be 10 or 15 people, sometimes 30 or 40 people, at a school board meeting. And I think that is wonderful that more people are trying to get involved.

Additionally, when faced with reporting difficult or controversial issues, integrity, fairness, and accuracy were key principles found in the journalists' responses. Declared Publisher Addington of The East County Gazette:

Sometimes we have to report some things that are bad. And, unfortunately, those kinds of things happen from time to time...It may be a...budget issue. The money's tight and the board's going to have to try to figure out how to take care of things. They may have to cut programs. They may have to raise taxes. And those things can kind of be looked at as...difficult to deal with...But those are the hard-news type things that every newspaper has to deal with.

Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette acknowledged the power of the press and her own duty to report information in an unbiased manner. "I feel a very great

responsibility too because what I write can affect somebody's life...[As a journalist,] you can write a story that brings some comfort...You have a responsibility to...be as accurate as you can be.”

The journalists who participated in this study disagreed with principal and parent perceptions of sensationalism in local newspaper, however. In reference to the school system, Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph continued, “I’m going to give them the benefit [of the doubt]. If [a newspaper] can’t print the facts and the truth, then don’t print something [negative] just to be printing [something].” The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth stated:

We’ll put bomb threats in the paper...People aren’t totally happy with that...No place is perfect...and the faculty and staff did not create the news...We protect... if there are mitigating circumstances...We put it in there but we try to maybe keep the worst part out of the headlines. We don’t sensationalize...We’re right down the middle...Sometimes you catch a lot of grief for it...Fair and balanced...It’s a struggle but hopefully we’re not on the side [to] make things sensational. And there’s [*sic*] movements and things that maybe we could have blown up, but these are people’s lives that we’re writing about.

Publisher Addington said, “We don’t...run gruesome photos on the front page,” in part because of the Newspapers in Education program, which distributes copies of the paper to East County Elementary School. “People...have to go and...put themselves in a situation of ‘What is this going to do for that particular child?’ It’s not that particular child’s fault at all” that something unfortunate happened to his family. Still, a parent himself, the journalist noted, “children at that age...are just...relentless” in their taunting

of others; therefore, because of the Newspapers in Education program, he is careful to alert Principal Monroe when controversial and embarrassing issues are addressed.

Publisher Addington acknowledged, however, that

I'm just not big on boring. I just don't like boring papers...I just don't want to give somebody the opportunity to go, "Well, you just...didn't have anything [in this week's paper]." No, you want them to look at every single thing. If you hold their attention for a few seconds, you have a chance to...have them look at things they might not have looked at before. Pictures help wonderfully with that.

Responding to questions about sensationalism, Publisher Addington said:

Well, we have a personal sounding board where I start going, "Well, it's interesting, but ...nah, can't do that." And if you have something that you question, you ask somebody else in the office...It's a relative term when you use the word sensationalism. Some [complaints] are very blatant and some are "You ran this headline bigger than that headline..." But it's also basic layout 101 that this headline needs to be bigger because there's a continuous flow down the page. This one right here and this one over here. This headline was a little bigger because it didn't have a photo...But...we're not necessarily going to run dull headlines if we can avoid it.

Analysis of data: Sub-question 2. According to journalists, the major responsibility of local media outlets was to keep the public—and parents in particular— informed regarding events and issues affecting the school system. Print media professionals indicated that local newspapers were conduits of information from schools to parents. In addition to reporting on local school board meetings, the newspapers in

this study published announcements and photographs for schools on a regular basis. Furthermore, reporters voiced a duty to communicate with the public in an accessible, easy to read manner. Journalists contended that they had a duty to spur the public to action by building an informed populace. Finally, journalists perceived that student and staff recognition was an important function of local newspapers, citing this recognition as a motivator for both pupils and teachers.

Journalists cited many relationship building qualities present in these cases. First and foremost, journalists indicated that their relationships with the principals in this study were established on a foundation of mutual respect and trust built over time. Like the principals, journalists verbalized that similar backgrounds, shared experiences, and a common mission to provide a quality education were important factors in building this faith in one another. They cited the principals' forthrightness and accessibility as strong factors in maintaining effective working relationships with local schools. Furthermore, the print media professionals noted that the school leaders each maintained an open door policy and had removed barriers to communication. For example, journalists commended principals for allowing them to come into the schools with little or no notice, for inviting the journalists to visit, and for allowing multiple staff members to communicate with reporters. Finally, journalists valued the feedback and praise they received from the school system and principals.

As with the principals, journalists articulated elements of a unique relationship between rural newspapers, local schools, and their communities. Journalists portrayed themselves as integral parts of the community, both as professionals and as citizens. Recognizing that the school system's decisions affect the whole community appeared to

be the motivation for the type of coverage afforded to it by the newspaper. For example, journalists noted that the school system acted as one of the county's largest employers and that its decisions affected students, teachers, parents, and taxpayers. To that end, the journalists reported that local newspapers and rural school systems maintained a mutual benefit relationship. In fact, many of their responses used the first-person plural "we" when referencing the school system. The newspapers kept the public informed, provided a forum for publication of student work, shared services such as photography with the school systems, and spearheaded the Newspapers in Education program (for which the newspaper won awards).

Moreover, in rural communities, the journalists' responses acknowledged the good faith efforts of the schools to provide a quality education for students while facing monetary and social constraints. Indeed, the print media professionals expressed a desire to champion the needs of the school system, to advocate for the educators, and to protect individuals and the school districts. Additionally, the newspaper reporters revealed a desire to compel the public to become involved in education, while acting as the public conscience in confronting issues of excess and inefficiency in the school system.

Though journalists noted the importance of their publications on public perception of the schools' effectiveness, they disagreed regarding the extent of the impact. At least one journalist contended that parents' experiences with their children's schools likely impacted perception more than newspaper coverage. However, others differed, citing the increased number of newspapers sold during weeks in which school board meetings are held and the growing number of citizens at school board meetings. In fact, local newspaper professionals perceived that their publications were widely read and even

referenced in letters to the editor and school board meetings. Moreover, they declared that items sent home with children often did not get to parents, making the newspaper coverage of schools all the more vital. Nevertheless, journalists disagreed with principals regarding charges of sensationalism. According to the print media professionals, they made significant attempts to avoid yellow journalism, though at least one acknowledged seeking more eye-catching headlines in an effort to increase sales. In all, however, the journalists' responses expressed concern for educators and students, who were viewed as familiar faces, unlike the more abstract school district.

Sub-question three: Parents' perceptions of the value of local print media for supporting school, family, and community partnerships. As with the principals and journalists, parent responses were coded and, subsequently, the same four overarching themes emerged. The words of the participants demonstrated the parents' views on the relationship between the press and local schools.

Responsibilities of the local media. Parents interviewed for this study clearly relied upon their local newspapers for information related to schools. The responsibility of the local newspaper, according to South County Parent 1, was "to keep the community updated...I expect to know what the school system is doing for my child, how they're performing." Added Parent 2 of West County, "If [the school system is] good, we want to hear it. But, if there are problems, we want to hear it also." Local newspapers, said Parent 2 of South County, should "publish events. We don't always see notes sent home." This sentiment was echoed by West County Parent 2 who offered, "Sometimes the newspaper will give news that sometimes might have been sent home from school, like in a flyer or something...It may not make it home from child to parent." Asked how

the local newspaper helps the school communicate with parents, South County Parent 1 replied with an example: “They advertised the online grades and attendance program in the paper.” West County Parent 5 elaborated, “They give us detailed information on...the budget, academics...how much [*sic*] funds we have for certain programs...They keep us in touch with Family Connection. It’s [*sic*] just a lot of other things that the newspaper help [*sic*] us with.” Of The East County Herald Publisher Addington, East County Parent 2 said, “I think he covers every program we have.”

Additionally, parents listed school board meeting reports, supply lists, calendar dates, health and safety updates, bus and sports schedules and school menus as being items they expected to see in their local papers on a regular basis. East County Parent 3 noted, “I know our newspaper is good about going to the board meetings so anything that happens...whether it’s good or bad, they do publish it...The facts are the facts, I guess.” West County Parent 5 declared, “Some parents are...not able to go to all board meetings, and the paper is always there.” Parents in all three case studies voiced this sentiment.

Moreover, parents appeared to value opportunities to see the curriculum in action by reading articles and viewing photographs of their children in the classroom. Of The West County Gazette, Parent 5 of West County noted, “They are also willing to put in... projects that...the children do. And you see what’s being done in the classroom.” West County Parent 2 replied, “Any class projects that they do, that’s [*sic*] fun or interesting, Reporter Janworth] will come and do a write-up.”

Parents also relished public recognition of their students. In East County, Parent 1 shared that The East County Herald will “usually come and take pictures of...the student if they have some kind of award or something like that. And the people

involved.” Added East County Parent 3, “They’re real good about coming the first day of school and taking pictures.” At South County High School, Parent 3 proclaimed that the community valued “recognition of students. We like to see our kids’ pictures in the paper.” Echoed West County Parent 5, “I think we’re very lucky in that...because you pick up [a daily newspaper located nearby], you don’t get to see your child’s picture and their balloon car...You don’t get to see their student council picture or who made... cheerleading.” South County Parent 2 also appreciated “acknowledgement of good things. [The South County Telegraph publishes] things like Character Counts, like a random acts of kindness thing.” The South County Telegraph graphic designer agreed, noting:

I grew up in a neighboring county...and [The South County Telegraph was] always at the school taking pictures. That’s one of the things parents like about The South County Telegraph. If you were in the [larger metropolitan area] school system, you’d never see your kid’s picture in the paper because they can’t feature every child.

Parents seemed to underscore the ability of their local newspapers to motivate students and teachers through recognition in their publications. Said Parent 1 of East County:

I know that working with students in the arts...letting the community know, letting teachers know...The creative minds of children is [*sic*] very important. It gets them involved. They’re interested. It’s amazing how many parents love to get into the arts with their kids and they love to see what’s going on there.

Of motivating students to achieve and teachers to invite the media into their classrooms, East County Parent 1 noted that the school had “done better about contacting them because the kids love to see their pictures in the paper...[They] put things in there because they [students] enjoy reading it.”

Unique relationship between rural newspapers, schools, and community.

Parents also mentioned the responsibility of the school to communicate with the local newspaper and acknowledged that rural newspapers were often understaffed. Because of limited staff, East County Parent 4 stated, “More [the reporters] come because of our requests...the board meetings are kind of where they seek out information.” In West County, Parent 1 repeated this notion; “The teachers—typically or the club sponsors—will take the picture and then send it in...[but]...if you call them...[Reporter Janworth] will be there.” South County High School parents were aware of the role the school’s journalism class played in working with The South County Telegraph. Said South County Parent 3, “We have a journalism class that meets at 7:30 each day. They manage the school’s marquee, take photos and write stories for the local paper.” Echoed Parent 1 of South County, “That’s a lot of what’s in the paper.” In fact, added South County Parent 2, “[The class will] bombard the paper with things. That class also publishes a newsletter. [The newspaper does] a good job, but that’s because [the schools] send them information.”

Some residents, however, complained of lack of depth in their local publications.

Parent 1 of West County noted:

It’s just a small-town fact. They don’t have a really big workforce there. And you have a very limited office so...investigative reporting is not going to take

place...I guess that maybe that is a weakness in that what gets reported is the board meetings and...there's not going to be any digging, any questions... Sometimes [the newspaper reads] like a Sunday bulletin. You know, telling everything that has happened...And sometimes, by the time it comes out, everybody already knows.

Said the South County High School journalism teacher, "I want more information from the newspaper. They have a small staff, and I understand that, but there's no real depth on politics or major stories. It's almost like it's canned. Sometimes major stories are not even covered." Asked for an illustration, the teacher elaborated, "For example, there was a man who used his fourteen-year-old daughter as a car payment. That was not even in the paper." However, The South County Telegraph graphic designer noted that what gets submitted gets published, saying, "The parents and community have a lot of ownership over the things published in the newspaper because they submit the items."

Practices for relationship building. All parties interviewed acknowledged that students, staff, and parents were aware of who covered their schools for the local newspapers. Of The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth, West County Parent 6 noted, "She's very unbiased!" Parent 1 of West County added, "We all know who she is...and the kids know her." In East County, Parent 2 declared, "There's [sic] probably a few other people that work there, but we see one person all the time." Assessing the connection between the school and The East County Herald, East County Parent 4 uttered, "For the most part...it's a pretty good relationship...we socialize, like at the ball park" with the journalist and his family. In South County, said Parent 2, "everybody is family."

Furthermore, parents commented on the cultivation of the effective working relationship between newspapers and rural principals. As with principals, parents cited accessibility, communication, and cooperation as keys to developing an effective working relationship with local newspapers. For example, of The West County Gazette Reporter Janworth, Parent 5 of West County pronounced, “Sometimes she’ll just come by to see if there’s anything going on.”

Parents, furthermore, appeared to respect the integrity of local reporters. Of Janworth, West County Parent 4 said, “She will not report anything that she don’t [sic] check back into. She will not do it. If I say, ‘I heard this,’ she will not [report] it” without checking the facts. West County Parent 5 enthused, “And if she forgets anything or makes a mistake, it will more than likely be in the next week’s paper.” Indeed, the West County journalist’s penchant for protecting the school system is noted by the parents. Said West County Parent 5, “I do know that one time some people had requested like you see in [a daily newspaper], the Rants and the Raves...and she was like, ‘No!’” because she did not want people to attack others anonymously.

Impact on public opinion of schools’ effectiveness. Asked to estimate the percentage of the newspaper which addressed school-related matters, East County Parent 4 replied, “As far as school goes, I wouldn’t give it a big number.” Even so, most parents expressed concern about how their local newspapers’ coverage of school events and issues impacted public opinion. Said South County Parent 1, “In general, bad things end up in the news.” Added Parent 3 of South County, “They need to promote more positive things in the community. Don’t just always report the negative things that are

happening.” East County Parent 4 declared of her local newspaper’s reports of board meetings and ensuing community reaction:

[The newspaper tends] to be more biased, I think, against the board [of education] or against the decisions than somebody who’s actually in the field would be. I hear a lot of people [parents] say, “Well, I don’t think that should have happened...”

East County Parent 2, who is also a teacher, added of the perceived antagonism between newspapers and schools, “I did hear a couple of board...office people make little general comments. Like something that was said in the newspaper, ‘That didn’t happen at all’ or ‘It was not said this way’ or ‘They left something off.’” Parent 3 of South County elaborated on the newspaper’s influence: “They have a great impact on the public’s opinion of schools and their effectiveness. They are the public’s window into the school.” Participants appeared most concerned about those parents who were not actively involved in the schools; succinctly, South County Parent 2 said:

If people aren’t here, then they don’t know what is going on in the school. People who are not involved in the school don’t know if the things they read are entirely factual. The average person trusts the newspaper to report the facts but the facts can be twisted. Because they are not involved in the school, the only truth they know is what they read.

According to East County Parent 4, “Parents that are not directly involved with the school, like we are, are probably more concerned with the controversial stuff.” Added West County Parent 1:

If you just read the summary of the board meeting, I mean, you might draw a conclusion...[because] you didn't know that something else happened...that facilitated that [decision]. I just think it's difficult for people who are not affiliated with the school in one aspect or another.”

East County Parent 2 echoed, “The people who aren't here don't get it. They only believe what they read in the newspaper and then they get all fired up and run with it.”

She further elaborated:

We actually had an experience directly with something like that. [It involved] this parent, who had always been very friendly with us...When this thing came up last year about the millage rate, she comes flying in one day and was just all upset...“People's [*sic*] trying to steal my money!” I said, “Who?” And she said, “Teachers!”

When faced with uninvolved parents who use the newspaper articles as fodder to bash the schools, “It makes me a little more defensive...as a parent. I try to be proactive about it to the people who may confront it, which a lot them don't,” replied East County Parent 4.

Others blamed the newspapers for ignoring the impact their publications have on schools and for creating controversy to increase sales. With incredulity in her voice, Parent 4 of East County emphasized, “You anticipate that on CNN but in our little town, you kind of think, ‘Really?’” Parent 1 of West County opined, “I think if things are negatively reported, I mean, you want to know about it. But sometimes if you're not affiliated with the school, meaning parents, teachers, whatever, you might draw a conclusion that might not be” factual. West County Parent 1 continued:

I think one thing about it. A newspaper, if it's done correctly, is a great situation. If it's done incorrectly, it can make or break a school system. I really do because if you get enough people on the bandwagon...against you, they're just going to feed off of it...So I think if you have it—a well-run newspaper—and you have this open communication, it's a partnership. But if not, I think it can be a breakdown in communication all the way around. That's just a parent's point of view.

“Sometimes,” added West County Parent 5, “things are reported but explanations are not given.” When asked who held responsibility for providing an explanation, the same participant replied, “I personally think that, if it's a release, our superintendent or assistant superintendent—and they are the experts—that they should go a little bit further and explain in layman's terms, exactly what this means.”

East County Parent 2 suggested that the newspaper solicit input from school officials or create “a separate section for kids...If you want the front page hoo-ha, then have that and then a community section the children could always look at.” Parents seconded this need to protect their students from embarrassment among their peers. Said East County Parent 1:

I know one issue we always have is the type of articles that are in there...We've had days when the principal said, “Please withhold the newspaper because of something on the front page that the kids don't need to see.”

Analysis of data: Sub-question 3. Similar to those duties cited by principals and journalists, parents identified the responsibilities of the local media. According to parents, they valued information on test scores, upcoming events, board meetings, school

menus, supply lists and athletics. As with the journalists, parents mentioned that students often failed to deliver information sent home from school; therefore, the newspaper announcements proved critical. Moreover, in order to understand the standards to be mastered by their children, parents craved photos and articles demonstrating the curriculum in action. Most importantly, parents named student recognition as their chief reason for purchasing the local newspaper. Parents noted that showcasing students and staff in local newspapers motivated both to perform at a higher capacity.

The relationship between rural schools and their local newspapers was described as unique by the parents. They too noted that understaffing was a problem in rural areas and stated that weekly newspapers relied heavily upon items submitted by schools. Parents lauded teachers, principals, and the journalism class for sending items to the local newspapers. Simultaneously, parents questioned the accuracy and lack of depth in articles in these publications, stating that they desired more investigative reporting from rural journalists. Still, parents perceived that the community had ownership over what was published in the local newspapers because the public submitted the items. Finally, the personal touch of local newspapers did not go overlooked by parents, who declared that they and their children knew the reporters' names and faces, a statement which seemingly underscores the journalists' availability to the schools and commitment to the local schools.

Parents verbalized several qualities principals needed to employ in order to build effective working relationships with local newspapers. According to parents, the first characteristic of these relationships was accessibility. Parents expected principals to be available to answer journalists' questions; moreover, they seemed to believe that

journalists had a responsibility to be available to cover the schools. Furthermore, communication was also cited as a key factor in these relationships. Parents stressed the responsibility of principals and district level administrators to provide thorough explanations in language comprehensible by the general public. Finally, the parents acknowledged cooperation and mutual respect as the basis for an effective relationship between schools and their local media. An understanding of the bond's strengths—such as open communication and feedback—as well as its limitations—such as understaffing—is necessary, proclaimed the parents, to foster the relationship's growth.

Newspaper Content Analysis

The East County Herald contains on average 20 pages per week, with special issues for graduation and local festivals. Publisher Addington explained, that the average number of pages increases slightly during the school year:

Basically, like every weekly newspaper in America, I think, during the summer, things slow down a little...unless you are a weekly newspaper that operates in an area where the tourists come in for the summer....If you operate at the beach, then your number of pages may go up in the summer because people want to advertise...because they've got an influx of people...For the most part, papers in America all go down in the summer months...Businesses decide they're going to use their advertising dollars usually in February. They've come out of Christmas and they're not going to do anything in January. They do stuff from February up until the end of the school year...It's all that correlation between...advertising" and local events.

The A section of The East County Herald is comprised of local government, business and school news; crime logs; an editorial page with letters to the editor included; social announcements, including marriages, births and engagements; obituaries; and advertisements for local businesses. The B section contains community and church announcements; a television guide; a weekly recipe; and classified ads. However, the section leads with sports stories. According to East County Elementary School Principal Charles, many of these articles are submitted by “a contributing editor who is actually a sports writer for the school system too...He writes all kinds of articles for him, reporting on the basketball, football, golf, tennis, whatever it is we’re playing...so there’s a whole section on sports that he has each week.” The East County Herald also includes a magazine distributed through all of the weekly newspapers in the corporation’s holdings as well as advertising circulars for both area and metropolitan stores.

Content analysis revealed 86 items concerning the East County School District (pseudonym) in the calendar year from May 29, 2009-May 28, 2010. Of these items, the majority were columns and photographs related to school board meetings and student recognition. In fact, 217 photographs related to students and schools—mostly student recognition items—appeared in The East County Herald during the time period reviewed. Forty-nine of the items related to districtwide events or issues, while 25 were devoted to the high school. Eight articles were solely linked to East County Elementary School. Of the district items, 32 were linked to budget, regular school board meetings, the school calendar, or dress code. An examination of the items revealed that 23 items were associated with recognition of students or staff, while 18 were budget-related. Other major issues on which multiple items were found included the dress code, school board

elections, and graduation. The dress code and budget were mentioned by parents as controversial issues addressed throughout the year by the newspaper. A review of the articles substantiated the claim that articles were published for several consecutive weeks on these topics; however, no evidence of reporter bias was found by the researcher in reading these articles. As indicated in the interviews, at least four articles addressed the community-school-newspaper partnerships seen in the Newspapers in Education program, promotion of United Way, and use of the school facilities by Head Start.

Fifty-nine of the columns were authored by Publisher Addington; seven were contained the byline of another reporter at The East County Herald. The remaining items were submitted by the schools. The average number of words devoted per item was 613. The most quoted school officials were the superintendent (23 times) and school principals (three each for elementary and high school principals and four times for the middle school principal). The board chair was cited five times; teachers, ten; a parent, once; and students, three times.

The West County Gazette is 12 pages in length each week and contains a single section. Within the pages of the paper are found local government and school news as well as a community calendar, obituaries, church and announcements, classified ads, legal notices, advertisements for area businesses, and an editorial page where letters to the editor are also published. The Gazette also contains several weekly columns written by residents of its outlying and unincorporated areas. Additionally, the pages contain articles from state agencies and wire services. Circulars for major retailers in surrounding cities are included as well.

According to West County parent interview group participants, the coverage of school varies by season. Said Parent 5:

Like at the close of the school year, when all the honors days are going on, you'll see tons of stuff on academics. In the summer, obviously, there's not any. Then football season rolls around, and there's a lot about football.

Added Parent 3, "I would say it's pretty balanced" between academics and athletics.

A content analysis of The West County Gazette, covering the period of May 7, 2009-June 24, 2010, yielded 278 items related to the school system. Of these, one was an editorial; 103 photograph captions; 152 articles; and 22 letters to the editor. The average location for the items was page five; however, 89 of the artifacts reviewed appeared on the front page. The mean number of words in the items was 400, with articles reporting actions taken at board meetings being the lengthiest items. A total of 246 photographs connected to the school system appeared in the pages of the newspaper during this time period. Forty-three entries related to the elementary school; 52 to the middle school; 117 to the high school; and 66 to the district. The superintendent was quoted 17 times; the assistant superintendent, eight times; the high school principal, seven; Principal Charles of West County Middle School, four; the middle school assistant principal, once; and the elementary school principal, six. Teachers throughout the district were quoted 17 times; board members, nine; central office staff, four; students, ten; and parents/citizens, 11.

None of the items cataloged from The West County Gazette contained a byline and several, such as those related to extracurricular organizations, were written in first-person point of view. This verified the principal and journalist accounts regarding the schools' submission of items, while the reporter covered monthly school board meetings.

Of the items reviewed, the most prevalent theme was student recognition (81 items), followed by extracurricular activities (59 items). Thirty-one items were classified as pertaining to the district's budget, while 34 items showcased the system's curriculum in the form of class projects, student writing samples, and guest speakers. Twelve items were categorized as relating to the new high school facility being erected at the time of this study, and six items recognized staff for achievements. Another six items demonstrated the partnership between the school system, the local food pantry, veterans, civic organizations, and a major hospital in a nearby county. Only five items were specifically devoted to test scores, and one of these saluted West County Middle School for its outstanding results on the state-mandated Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. This belied the negative emphasis regarding student achievement that parents reported. Most of the letters to the editor addressed budget issues and opposition to the new high school facility, while a single letter from a parent lauded Principal Charles and her staff for providing an outstanding educational environment for students.

The South County Telegraph contains 20 to 22 pages per week on average. According to Reporter Edgewood, the number of pages varies but the paper is lengthier "during the school year. Usually January and June are the least amount of pages but it has the least amount of news and the least amount of advertising." She further elaborated, "I don't print pages just to print news. The advertising is what pays for the newspaper."

Two sections make up The South County Telegraph. The A section includes local government and school news, crime and 911 reports, church and social announcements, obituaries, advertisements for local businesses, weekly columns by a local minister, the senior citizens center director, and the school system's superintendent. The editorial page

includes weekly syndicated columns and a political cartoon as well as letters to the editor. Many of the articles come from wire reports or national news services. Section B is comprised of sports stories, legal notices, classified ads, comics, horoscopes, crossword, and trivia. Circulars for local and major retailers in surrounding cities are included. According to The South County Telegraph graphic designer, excluding the items with bylines by the paper's owners, most of the items in the paper are submitted. She reported, "I've never worked at a paper that had no reporters. We do have someone who comes in on Monday and Tuesday to help us get the paper out. And I do the design of the ads."

Content analysis of The South County Telegraph from July 12, 2009-July 7, 2010, yielded 205 items, including 71 articles and announcements, 112 photo captions, six letters to the editor, 15 editorials, and a special graduation section. Principal Leslie is quoted four times in these items and the superintendent ten. Nine of the items were attributed directly to the byline of Reporter Edgewood; three were credited to high school students, while the remaining items were submitted by schools. The average number of words in the items was 237. The distribution of items among the various school levels was as follows: elementary, 45; middle, 40; high, 86; and district, 34. One hundred fifty of the items reviewed appeared in the A section of the newspaper, with 22 being published on the front page. Thirty-nine items were found in the B section. The major themes present in the artifacts studied were student recognition (115 items), staff recognition (16 items), and the school system's budget (14 items). There were also 19 items related to the partnerships the school system shared with various entities such as the Ronald McDonald House, a Reading is Fundamental corporate sponsor, the American

Heart Association, a local bank, and the city government. Additionally, the newspaper was utilized to solicit support for the high school band and athletics program.

Analysis of Data: Newspaper Content Analysis

Content analysis of the three newspapers included in this study revealed similar elements. The newspapers were between 12 and 20 pages in length on average. All print media professionals indicated that the number of pages increased during the school year and declined during summer months. Additionally, all of the publications reported that their coverage areas were primarily comprised of the counties in which the newspaper offices were located. Weekly editions typically included stories about the school system, government entities, sports, obituaries, and announcements.

In regard to the coverage of the school system, a review of the newspapers revealed that monthly school board meetings were attended by the journalists, whose articles recounted the details for the public. Excluding athletic coverage, the majority of the remaining items were submitted by schools, particularly those related to student recognition. School officials were rarely quoted except in articles generated by the journalists. In these cases, the primary point of contact was the superintendent of schools or principal, though teachers and students were quoted in regard to clubs and special recognitions. In keeping with the responses obtained during the interviews, some evidence of the school-community-newspaper partnership was found in the items reviewed. Students and clubs were showcased for their benevolence to their communities, and the rural citizens were solicited for support for both academic and extracurricular events.

Summary

This qualitative study utilized a multi-case study design to address the overarching research question: What are the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals? In order to answer this question, three sub-questions were developed and from these and the review of relevant literature, an interview protocol was developed.

Using this protocol, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Georgia rural high-performing principals selected through purposive sampling methods. Additional interviews were conducted with parents of students in these principals' assigned schools and with local weekly newspaper journalists. To maintain confidentiality, each principal and journalist was assigned a pseudonym and each parent a respondent number. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. The data gathered from interviews were coded and analyzed to determine themes consistent among the participants. Consistent among the interview participants were themes reflecting responsibilities of the media; common practices for relationship building; unique factors found in the relationship between rural newspapers, schools, and communities; and impact of the media on public opinion of schools' effectiveness.

In regard to responsibilities of the media, all participants agreed that the primary responsibility of the local newspaper is to disseminate information to the public at large and to parents in particular. Parents indicated that they relied upon the local newspaper for information about upcoming events and student achievement data as well as routine matters such as menus and bus routes. Principals reported using the media as a conduit of information to reach parents who might not utilize the school's website, go to board of education meetings, or come to the schools. Furthermore, all participants indicated that

parents valued student recognition highly, and parents cited a desire to see more examples of academics in action. Principals and journalists also noted that recognition of staff was a motivational tool, encouraging teachers to take more risks in the classroom. Finally, journalists reported a responsibility to communicate in a manner readily accessible to all community members.

Secondly, all participants indicated that relationships between rural newspapers and their schools and communities differed from that of larger, urban markets. All participants cited the lack of personnel at the local newspaper offices; however, principals and parents commended journalists for being cooperative and available on short notice to cover school events. Parents were appreciative of local newspapers' ability to publish photos and allocate space to events that would not warrant coverage in larger metropolitan newspapers.

Moreover, because of the small town atmosphere, all participants noted a personal connection between the newspapers and their schools and communities. Principals and parents stated that students knew journalists by name and face, a fact that would likely not occur in larger settings. More tellingly, journalists cited a responsibility to maintain a fair, unbiased perspective when reporting on individual students and staff members. Because they identified themselves as part of the community, the journalists were champions of the school system, writing articles to spur the public to action. Furthermore, the journalists' responses indicated that they sought to protect students and staff members from criticism. Yet, they simultaneously assumed the role of conscience, confronting school board members—often publicly—on matters they deemed wasteful or inefficient. While the principals seemed to appreciate the journalists' efforts to engage

parents in the educational process, parents perceived the reporting to be more negative in nature than positive. The newspaper content analysis, however, did not support this assertion; instead, the vast majority of the articles and items reviewed were reports of regular board meetings and student recognition photographs and articles.

Finally, the participants addressed the impact of the media on public perception of schools' effectiveness. On this point the participants diverged. Principals and parents felt the media impacted parental perception negatively, leading to a treacherous path for principals. Parents referenced the perceived inaccuracies in reporting, potential for sensationalism, and lack of parental involvement as problematic in battling negative public perception. Journalists, conversely, cited the increased number of parents at school board meetings, higher newspaper sales, and references to articles in the newspaper as evidence of the impact of the media on public perception.

All of the participants cited similar practices to promote the relationship between the local newspapers and schools. Among these practices was availability. Journalists noted that principals were willing to provide information and material for articles. Moreover, principals removed barriers to communication, allowing several staff members to speak directly with the media, and also extending a standing invitation for journalists to visit the buildings at any time. Another practice identified by the participants was mutual respect. All respondents indicated that the responsibility of keeping the public informed is a shared one. Finally, the relationships between the principals and their local newspapers in these three cases were built upon trust which had evolved over time. This trust was supported by honesty on the part of the principals and candid feedback from both journalists and school leaders. It was supplemented by shared professional

experiences and similar personal backgrounds. A full discussion of these findings will follow in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within this chapter, a brief summary of the study findings introduced in Chapter IV is presented, followed by discussion of the findings. This section of the dissertation also includes implications, recommendations, and concluding thoughts.

Introduction

Hoy and Miskel (2008) described schools as open systems which interacted with their external environments to adjust the internal transformation process, converting raw materials and resources into finished, productive outputs. In short, schools assume the responsibility for teaching children to become effective members of society. The feedback schools receive from the external environment in the form of parental and public opinion allows them to adjust budgets, write curriculum, and master expectations to best fit the needs of the community at large. Thus, as part of the external environment, the media inform parents of the events and progress of schools, impacting public opinion and furthering the ideals of the community (Chambers, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial that principals develop effective relationships with media outlets. Indeed, several researchers (Brooks, 1976; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004) found that principals spend an increasing amount of time attending to public relations.

However, many of the studies which have investigated the open systems relationship between the press and education have focused on higher education, crisis management, urban districts, and fundraising. Few studies have been conducted in the elementary and secondary setting, and fewer still isolated the relationship between the print media and school leaders in rural areas. To that end, this qualitative study explored

the following overarching research question: What are the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals?

The following sub-questions guided the research:

Sub-question 1: What do rural Georgia high-performing principals perceive to be best practices for print media relations?

Sub-question 2: What do rural Georgia print media professionals perceive to be best practices for educational print media relations?

Sub-question 3: How do parents of students in schools led by rural Georgia high-performing principals value local print media as sources of information for supporting school-family-community partnerships?

Summary of the Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify the effective media relations practices employed by Georgia's rural high-performing principals as perceived by the principals, journalists at weekly newspapers, and parents of students in the schools led by the high-performing principals. Using three case studies—one each at the elementary, middle, and high school levels—the researcher employed purposive sampling techniques to identify rural principals who had met the high-performance principal criteria, as defined by the Georgia Department of Education, for multiple years. Once identified, the interview protocol approved by the dissertation committee was utilized to conduct interviews. Additional participants included focus groups of parents of students in schools led by the principals and journalists at local weekly newspapers located in the districts served by the principals. Following the audio-taped interviews, all participant responses were transcribed and coded for patterns. Content analysis of one year of newspaper coverage

was also conducted in each of the three cases. Using the identified patterns and newspaper content analysis results, four major themes were identified. Each of these themes and corresponding sub-themes is discussed below.

The first theme that emerged was that all participants believed that the role of local rural newspapers was to keep the public and parents informed of school events, student achievement, and budget matters. The second theme illustrated how participants perceived the relationship between rural schools and weekly newspapers to differ from that of urban and suburban school districts and daily newspapers in larger markets. Thirdly, participants highlighted the practices of availability, access to information, honesty, and mutual trust and respect as necessary components for relationship building. Finally, the impact of the local media on public opinion was addressed.

Responsibilities of the Local Media

Many studies (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Ryan, 2008) have contended that the relationship between schools and local media is beneficial to educators. Cotton (2003) noted that school leaders use the press to report assessment data, to inform parents of upcoming events, to honor students and staff, and to illustrate curricular innovations. Participants in this study likewise noted that the responsibilities of the local media primarily were to keep the public informed of educational matters and to recognize students and staff. Interestingly, however, participants longed for more coverage of curriculum matters.

Informing the public. Participants concurred that the chief duty of the local newspaper in regard to educational matters was to keep taxpayers and parents informed. Journalists noted that they were charged with reporting student achievement data, school

board meetings, and judicial matters related to the school system. Principals perceived that, while some parents might not utilize the school's website or attend board meetings, these parents could remain informed by reading the local newspaper. To that end, principals reported supplying the publications with announcements, school menus, student achievement data, and pupil and staff recognition items. Principals further acknowledged an understanding that local newspapers were forced to report issues which were sometimes unflattering.

Recognition of students, staff, and community members. Principals also accurately gauged that parents most appreciated student recognition items. To that end, principals and their designees sent multiple items related to clubs, extracurricular activities, service learning, award ceremonies, and competitions for publication in local newspapers. Principals also noted that student recognition resulted in free advertising and recognition for community members who sponsored the recognition programs. For example, the East County Elementary School (pseudonym) Newspapers in Education partnership with The East County Herald (pseudonym) has resulted in families receiving the newspapers, even if they did not subscribe to the publication.

However, their responses clearly indicated a preference for student and staff recognition as well. All participants commented on the local newspaper's ability to provide space for individual student recognitions, a luxury not found in larger publications. Additionally, reporters commented on the use of recognition as a motivator for both students and staff, observing that students often asked to have their photos published and that teachers are able to see creative ideas at work in other classrooms.

Showcasing the curriculum. Surprisingly, the principals did not report contacting the media often to underscore curricular concepts, to illustrate the Georgia Performance Standards in practice, or to showcase lessons. Instead, many of the photographs reviewed in the content analysis were submitted by schools and did not show learning activities but rather recognition of students from competitions and citizenship programs. Journalists indicated that they preferred to be invited into the schools more frequently in order to share curricular artifacts with parents and the public. Parents too requested more coverage of the performance-based learning projects evident in the Georgia curriculum.

Unique Relationship between Rural Newspapers, Schools, and Community

All participants indicated that association between rural weekly newspapers and their schools and communities differed from that of larger, urban markets. Among the multiple facets of the unique relationship addressed by participants were understaffing issues, journalists as active community members, and the tendency of local newspapers to protect schools and staff members.

Understaffing at rural newspapers. Journalists acknowledged the symbiotic relationship between schools and newspapers. Because understaffed newspaper offices were unable to cover all school events, local rural newspapers relied upon schools to provide information for stories and, oftentimes, full article copy for weekly editions. Nevertheless, principals and parents extolled journalists for being available on short notice to cover school events.

Journalists as community members. Mullen (1997) opined that the local press was key in creating a society's sense of identity and stimulating an individual's attachment to this

community. Journalists, principals and parents alike commented on the local newspaper's responsibility to contribute to the community. The principals noted that even when understaffed the journalists would come to cover events at the school when called. In addition, journalists' responses evidenced their pride in their school systems' commitments to individual students, including their own children. Beyond this, the reporters shared anecdotes of how they developed connections with students in the schools, attending recognition programs, being invited to become honorary members of school clubs, and celebrating the graduation of their children's peers.

Perhaps part of the reason journalists reveled in this recognition is because they were parents themselves. Reporter Edgewood has two children, including one who was enrolled at South County High School at the time of this study. In addition, Publisher Addington had four students enrolled at East County Elementary School during the time of this study. This connection with the schools appeared to create a familial relationship between the schools and newspapers.

Recognition of symbiotic relationship between schools and rural newspapers.

In addition to disseminating information to the public, rural newspapers interacted with schools in a variety of ways. Journalists reported sharing photos for school publications, supporting the Newspaper in Education program, and providing a forum for student articles. This reverberated the findings of Marek (2005) and Gyure (2005), who observed that the relationship between schools and the press can be beneficial in meeting the goals of the institution.

While journalists stated that advertising was the primary source of revenue, principals and parents stated that the role of schools in selling newspapers was much

more pronounced. This is supported by the work of Bagin, Gallagher, and Moore (2008), who contended that increased circulation improved the likelihood that the school's message would be received. In fact, all of the principals commented on how their local newspapers would often contact the schools in an effort to ensure that all available publication space was used each week. Said Principal Leslie (pseudonym) of South County High School (pseudonym), "What's in the paper about the school sells paper... there's not a lot going on outside of what happens with the schools."

Publication oversight by local school system. Within this multi-case study, the principals proudly acknowledged that they often enjoyed an oversight function with their local newspapers. Outside of school board meetings, most of the education-related content in the publications reviewed was submitted by the schools themselves. Therefore, superintendents, principals, and even teachers controlled the content of what was published. Moreover, principals reported that local journalists often contacted them not only for additional information but also to verify facts. Principals also contended that journalists notified the schools when controversial issues arose, providing the educators with an opportunity to plan an appropriate response.

Newspapers as protectors of the school systems. Within rural school systems, principals recognized that local newspapers acted as protectors of the districts, their employees, and their students. Often, in these smaller school districts, the number of employees is limited and, as Principal Charles (pseudonym) emphasized, anonymity is lost. The principals' responses reflect the findings of Gyure (2005), who concluded that the more involved educators are in the school-media partnership, the more control and satisfaction the educators perceived.

Lack of formal media relations training among rural principals and rural journalists. All of the principals indicated that lack of pre-service training led to anxiety when interacting with the media. This underscored the work of Gallegos (2007), who asserted that lack of media relations training increased the stress upon school leaders. Interestingly, among the journalists, only Publisher Addington (pseudonym) had any formal training in the field. Reporter Janworth's (pseudonym) background was that of a chaplain, and Reporter Edgewood (pseudonym) worked as an accountant for a major utility company. This lack of training, coupled with understaffing concerns, seemed to excuse, among the parents and community, errors in reporting.

Practices for Relationship Building

Because there appears to be a mutually beneficial relationship between rural schools and newspapers, participants identified several practices for cultivating this relationship. This mutual respect and trust was based upon transparency, shared experiences, accessibility to information, availability of staff, and the removal of barriers to communication. These qualities were in keeping with the work of Carr (2006), who described accomplished public relations authorities as collegial, knowledgeable, proactive, strategic, and visionary.

Personal and professional common ground. All of the principals interviewed in this study had a professional connection with their local newspapers. Principal Monroe (pseudonym) of East County Elementary School, for instance, was formerly the assistant principal in charge of publicity for her school; Principal Charles of West County Middle School (pseudonym) held a degree in Public Relations; and Principal Leslie of South County High School began the school-based journalism class which currently

produces the school newsletter and provides articles for The South County Telegraph (pseudonym). Similarly, the journalists shared a connection with the communities in which they lived. Publisher Addington of The East County Herald had four children enrolled at East County Elementary School; Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette (pseudonym) had long-time family connections in West County (pseudonym); and Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph (pseudonym) had a child enrolled at South County High School. It was because she was a parent that Reporter Edgewood thought she received invitations to her children's schools.

Furthermore, the principals noted that many of the practices they employed with current journalists were built upon lessons learned from past experiences. For example, Principal Leslie drew from her experience as the high school teacher who began the journalism class, while Principal Monroe derived her expertise from experiences with prior newspaper publishers. Principal Charles noted that her training as well as her tenure as a school leader taught her that the principalship was a “public relations job.”

Transparency built upon honesty and mutual trust. Researchers (Koeppel, 1982; DeSantis, 2006; Carr, 2006; Kidwai, 2007) noted that good media relations are built upon mutual respect, transparency, and an open door policy sustained through an enduring relationship. Principals in the present study readily acknowledged—often with trepidation—that rural schools must operate with transparency. Shared Principal Charles of West County Middle School, “Schools pretty much have to be visible. You can't live in this town and not be transparent. You're always under the microscope when you work here. And the paper, I think they realize that too.”

Because of deep and common connections, the principals and journalists in this study had developed bonds of mutual trust and honesty. This mutual trust was manufactured through candid conversations, with both journalists and principals questioning and learning from one another. Principal Monroe illustrated this facet of the relationship by saying, “We need to let him [Publisher Addington] know how we feel about certain things.” Similarly, reporters indicated that they could trust their local school officials to provide them with accurate information whenever possible. However, the journalists acknowledged that sometimes schools could not share certain information and, likewise, the reporters often asked questions “off the record,” trusting that school officials would still be candid in their responses.

Removal of barriers to information and staff. While some researchers (Kgaphola, 1999; Oplatka, 2007) have contended that school leaders are primarily responsible for marketing their schools via the media, the principals in this study adopted a different approach. Each of the principals had begun delegating responsibilities to other staff members—including other administrators, teachers, and club sponsors—for communicating with the press, contending as Krals (1990) had earlier, that all educators are responsible for keeping the public informed. Journalist responses also readily acknowledged that principals allowed them to enter the schools without invitation and to speak with staff members without prior knowledge of the principal. They mentioned having the principals’ cell phone numbers and the quick responses they received when they requested information of the principals. This removal of barriers gave way to accessibility to information and availability of staff members. This was in contrast to the

work of Joly (2007) who reported that journalists perceived school officials to be a hindrance to keeping the public informed adequately.

Impact of Public Opinion on Schools' Effectiveness

A final theme referenced by the participants was the impact of the media on public perception of schools' effectiveness. Cotton (2003) emphasized the importance of an effective working relationship with the press, contending that a positive reputation for the school system could attract new businesses and homebuyers and underscore fundraising goals. While principals in this study felt local newspapers influenced public perception adversely, parents concurred, referencing sensationalism fed by a lack of parental involvement. Journalists, on the other hand, disagreed, citing the responsibility to act as a public conscience as outweighing claims of embellishment.

Newspapers as public conscience. Broom (1986) contended that school administrators' use of the local media plays many roles: communication with parents, to obtain information on the school's performance, and to ascertain the concerns of the public. Principals and journalists acknowledged that newspapers have a responsibility to act as the public conscience, questioning government entities in regard to finances, planning, and personnel. Within these interviews, stories abounded of journalists interjecting questions and comments at local school board meetings. In correlation, Newby and Hayden (2004) noted that newsmen view themselves in an oversight function—keeper of the public's trust. Mullen (1997) and Chambers (2003) concurred, stating that local media sources are critical to sharing ideas in an open forum and for yielding public support for education. Indeed, journalists' responses resonated with the responsibility to spur parents and community members to action. They pointed to

increased school board attendance, higher newspaper sales, and references to newspaper articles as evidence of their impact on public perception. This seemed to contradict the work of Bennett et al. (1999) and Luke (2003) who maintained that the media had little effect on public opinion but to support the findings of Jerit, Barabas, and Bolson (2006), who argued that increased newspaper coverage resulted in a proportional increase in knowledge on issues addressed.

However, some parents felt their local newspapers did not provide enough depth of coverage. Parent 1 of West County noted that her local newspaper reads “like a Sunday bulletin.” And the South County High School journalism teacher noted that “sometimes major stories are not even covered.” On the other hand, because of understaffed newspaper offices, what gets submitted gets published, said The South County Telegraph graphic designer.

Newspapers as school system advocates. Gallegos (2007) pointed out that school systems regularly use the press to seek recognition, more funding, increased flexibility and reduced sanctions. Journalists touted their local newspapers’ commitment to their communities. Bagin, Gallagher, and Moore (2008) contended that citizen-reporters may view themselves as part of the school’s governance. Indeed, many of the journalists in this study the word we when referring to the school system. Their responses—rife with references to Advanced Placement honors and technology-infused classrooms—illustrated their pride in their local school districts. Moreover, the reporters spoke of helping the public to understand nebulous concepts such as millage rate and Special Purpose Local Option Sales Taxes. Chaffee and Frank (1996) also suggested that newspapers diminish the gap between socioeconomic strata, motivating readers to

become more involved in public affairs. Most importantly, the reporters interviewed seemed to have a personal connection with their communities and schools, viewing the school district not as an abstract entity but rather focusing on the individuals—students and staff—within the district. In fact, The South County Telegraph provided a forum for the school system superintendent.

Sensationalism. Several researchers (Pettigrew & MacLure, 1997; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Killeen, 2007; Haas, 2007; Mobley, 2007) argued that the media creates a public policy discourse and, at times, interjects bias to present information. It was this tendency to sensationalize that makes principals and some parents less comfortable in navigating a common course with the journalists. As a matter of fact, Rotherham (2008) argued that the press' lack of accuracy can result in diminished public confidence in the school system. However, journalists in this study all spoke of making efforts to protect the local school system. Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette stated, "I feel a very great responsibility...because what I write can affect somebody's life...You have a responsibility to...be as accurate as you can be."

In regard to sensationalism, participants seemed most concerned about parents who were not involved with the schools. Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen (2006) found that increased newspaper coverage resulted in increased levels of knowledge regarding an issue. This body of knowledge, however, was shaped by the newspaper coverage. In keeping with Opfer's (2008) findings, parents in this study wondered aloud if the media coverage of schools would negatively impact other parents' views of local schools. Principal Monroe and East County Elementary School parents related concerns of how they perceived their local newspaper to concentrate on negative matters, publishing

repeated stories on controversial issues. This practice was one also identified by Pettigrew and MacLure (1997), who argued that newspapers created contention on issues in order to maintain the newsworthiness of the matters, leading to increased sales. Many researchers (Brooks, 1976; Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Newby & Hayden, 2004; Rotherham, 2008) also contended that the media unfairly compares schools and ignores positive news. This was a charge that Publisher Addington denied, stating that stories are organized according to basic journalism practices, rather than hidden agenda. Still, he acknowledged that he did not care for “boring papers.”

Differences between rural school-newspaper relationship and other partnerships. Most principals surmised that the relationship between rural newspapers and local schools was different from that of other school-community partnerships. Principals noted a reliance upon weekly newspapers to keep parents informed, in the absence of radio and television stations. Moreover, the school leaders perceived that they had to traverse carefully with the local media because, unlike with other partnerships, schools exerted less control over the publication content in newspapers. Additionally, principals observed that the partnerships schools shared with local businesses and government agencies, for example, were in place purely for the benefit of the schools. Conversely, the partnerships they shared with the newspapers were mutual benefit relationships.

Even in the pilot study conducted prior to these interviews, parents noted that the relationship between the schools and other local media sources—such as television and radio stations—differed from that of the schools and newspapers. For example, news is aired only at specific times in the other media; however, it was available at the reader’s

convenience in the newspaper. Moreover, newspapers, said one parent, could insert pictures to help parents understand the content, whereas radio could not.

Discussion of Findings

Sub-question One: Principals' Perceptions of Best Practices

Researchers have advocated several key practices for effective media relations practices among larger, urban school systems and daily newspapers and television stations. Among these practices were timeliness, accessibility, and transparency. The responses of the principals in this study echoed these same habits, noting that rural schools do not enjoy the luxury of anonymity afforded larger schools. Moreover, because schools are the heartbeat of communities—and perhaps particularly so in rural areas—principals expected their schools to be featured in the local newspapers on a weekly basis.

School leaders are primarily responsible for marketing their schools via the media (Kgaphola, 1999; Oplatka, 2007). On this matter, the three principals interviewed agreed somewhat with previous researchers. However, the participants in this multi-case study also delegated responsibility to their fellow administrators, to teacher-leaders, to students and to club and co-curricular sponsors. In fact, several of the articles reviewed in the content analysis contained the bylines of pupils at South County High School or were written in first person account, submitted by the students at West County Middle School.

A lack of media relations training exacerbates the connection between principals and the press, leaving principals feeling incapable or unwilling to facilitate a relationship with the media (Gallagher, 2007; Gallegos, 2007). Despite the Georgia Professional Standards Commission requirement that school leaders effectively use media to

communicate with stakeholders, only one principal in this study enjoyed any formal training in journalism. Her training, though, was through a degree program in media relations rather than in educational leadership courses. However, all commented on the on-the-job training they received in facilitating a relationship with the local media. Perhaps because of this lack of official training, the principals have shared the responsibility with others in their building, creating leadership opportunities for other educators.

Within this study, principals had built a relationship over time with local print media professionals. Their responses indicated that they respected the expertise of the journalists. Furthermore, they commented on the understaffing conditions at local newspapers and hinted that the schools' provision of items helped to fill vacant spaces in the publications.

Principals in this study spoke of the responsibility of the local media to keep the public informed, including on matters which were unflattering to the schools. They utilized the local newspapers to announce forthcoming events, to distribute lunch menus and supply lists, and to recognize students and staff. Indeed, pupil recognition was the primary reason that principals reported contacting the local press. Perhaps because education is a humanistic endeavor, principals, parents, and journalists all indicated that the recognition of children was the strongest of the functions of the newspaper in regard to education.

Principals also reported using the local newspapers to garner financial support from businesses and to solicit parental involvement. On a larger scale, content analysis of the local newspapers revealed that districts also used the local newspapers to inform

parents on controversial issues such as dress code, budget matters, and SPLOST funds. This was in keeping with the work of several researchers (Koeppel, 1982; Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Veltman, 2003; Besnoy, 2005; Mobley, 2007; Carr, 2008; Hershey-Freeman, 2008).

According to much of the literature, the relationship between school leaders and the press is antagonistic for many reasons. Educators in general perceive the general media to foster negative stereotypes of educators (Hershey-Freeman, 2008; Tillman & Trier, 2008). This belief undergirds the mistrust of the media, whom principals consider adversaries (Newby & Hayden, 2004). In fact, principals reported that media relations was a distasteful but necessary task not in keeping with their curricular duties (Oplatka; Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). Said Principal Monroe of East County Elementary School, "The big thing is I know it can work against us or it can work for us. And I always try to make it work for us... One negative parent can cloud a whole church's opinion of a school." However, Gyure (2005) found that the more involved educators are in the school-media partnership, the more control the educators perceived. This assertion appeared accurate in the present study as well. Principals noted that they enjoyed an oversight function with their local newspapers, often being allowed to edit content before publication and sometimes being notified by the local journalists when controversial and negative matters were on the horizon. Furthermore, school leaders commended journalists for their attempts to be fair, unbiased, and sensitive to students.

Moreover, principals in other studies contended that many of the news stories published in larger papers were inaccurate (Brooks, 1976). Conversely, the principals in the present study noted that much of the content in the local newspapers was generated

by schools and therefore controlled by the district. They also recognized that journalists felt compelled to act as the public conscience and confront wasteful spending, bureaucratic inefficiency, and injustices in the school system.

School leaders in previous studies have contended that the media unfairly compares schools (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003) and ignores positive news (Brooks, 1976; Newby & Hayden, 2004; Rotherham, 2008). Some participants in this study argued that this was the case with their local districts as well, citing examples such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) announcements being printed on the front page when negative and elsewhere when flattering to the school system. At least one principal in this study contended that the local newspaper sensationalized material, continually publishing stories on controversial issues such as dress code. Content analysis of that particular publication revealed articles for successive weeks on the topic.

Sub-question Two: Print Media Professionals' Perceptions of Best Practices

George and Waldfogel (2003) and Applegate (2007) suggested that as much as 70% of newspapers are composed of advertising and editorials. The remaining 30% includes a small sample of the events of the week, giving the public a very limited view of their communities. Within this study, content analysis of the local newspapers appeared to substantiate this assertion, with advertisements, social announcements and obituaries being staples in the weekly publications. A review of the school-related items reveals that between 26-56% of the artifacts were related to student recognition.

Indeed, the journalists in this study perceived their primary role to be public informant. Within this task, the journalists noted their responsibility to recognize students and staff and to communicate with parents in a manner that was widely

accessible. These findings seemed to bear out those of Pettigrew & MacLure (1997) who contended that the local press assists the public's understanding of educational issues in a manner unlike that of journals, television, and radio. Graber (2004) similarly contended that television relies upon visuals to exploit the emotions of viewers, while newspapers rely upon more sophisticated tactics. All reporters indicated that parents valued seeing their children's names and photographs in local newspapers. Journalists observed that recognizing students publicly could be a motivational tool. In fact, the participants seemed to relish the opportunity to report positive stories, unlike what researchers in previous studies have asserted (Brooks, 1976; Newby & Hayden, 2004; Rotherham, 2008).

Many researchers (Krals, 1990; Cotton, 2003; Kidwai, 2007) advocated inviting the press to attend school events and emphasized timely and honest responses to questions posed by the media. Journalists in this study echoed these suggestions. Participants in the current study commented on the availability of school officials to provide information in a timely manner and the continuous flow of information which is accessible to journalists. While they seemed appreciative of the information provided by local schools, they preferred to be invited into the schools. As Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette said, "I'd rather take pictures myself so I'll know...what it is" that's being covered. Furthermore, the journalists enjoyed the unencumbered line of communication with teachers as well as with principals. However, they remarked that they would like to be invited into schools even more, recognizing that school officials often did not know what would make a good photo opportunity.

Journalists emphasized that trust developed over time was a key component of the relationship between local newspapers and rural schools. Stone (2005) found that reporters tended to turn to trusted sources repeatedly, having built these relationships over time. Trust, according to the journalists, was borne of multiple incidents in which they assured local school officials that items would not be printed without their knowledge, of allowing principals editing capabilities, and of warning principals of impending controversy.

The journalists seemed aware of the relevance of local newspapers in rural areas. Said The East County Herald Publisher Addington, “In a small community, we’re looked at...more than in a big community because...people here are...used to” reading the weekly newspaper. However, at least one journalist thought the impact of the newspaper on public opinion was negligible, contending that teacher-parent interactions were more influential than newspaper coverage. This is in opposition to researchers such as Opfer (2008) who discussed a “media malaise” that colored public opinion negatively. Still, other reporters emphasized increases in newspaper sales and in board meeting attendance as evidence of the impact that local newspapers have on their readership. Even when faced with controversial issues, the journalists acknowledged that their profession is a noble one, commenting that they have a duty to report the facts in an unbiased manner.

Perhaps the most surprising finding among the journalists was their identification with the school system. They recognized that the local school system was one of the major employers in the counties studied, and, as Reporter Janworth of The West County Gazette stated, “Whereas you don’t have to have a factory or you don’t have to have a church...people want a school.” None of the studies reviewed in the literature indicated

that journalists envisioned themselves as a part of the school system. However, within the journalists' responses the word we was found multiple times. In fact, Reporter Edgewood of The South County Telegraph provided an illustration of how the journalists collaborated with the local school system:

I feel comfortable enough in talking with my board members and with my school principals and my counselors and saying, "Okay, this [issue] is coming up. We need to nip this one in the bud. I need to know what's going on with it."

In fact, The South County Telegraph publishes a weekly column from the local school superintendent as well as articles produced by the South County High School journalism class.

Newby and Hayden (2004) maintained that members of the press viewed themselves in an oversight function. As members of the community, the journalists' responses in this study supported this assertion. They spoke of interjecting questions and comments in local school board meetings, of reporting on controversial issues, and of publishing unfavorable letters to the editor. However, the journalists in these rural communities appeared far more likely to champion the school system rather than detract from it. They emphasized their roles not only as reporters but also as community members, speaking fondly of watching young people grow, of collaborating with the school system to inform the public, and of spurring parents to action in support of education. Moreover, the reporters proudly listed the many programs available to students and awards earned by the school systems, again using the term we often.

Rotherham (2008) advocated training for media persons to assist them with understanding educational research in order to report results more accurately. Like the

principals in this study, two of the three reporters had no official training in journalism. This seemed to force them to rely upon their experiences as parents and longtime community members as well as training in other fields to create the interpersonal relationships with local school officials. However, their anecdotes regarding experiences in the schools were most telling, giving faces and names to programs and institutions that were only abstract to some readers before. Essentially, the journalists appeared to view themselves as community archivists and storytellers.

Sub-question Three: Parents' Perceptions of the Value of Local Print Media for Supporting School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Researchers have suggested a comprehensive media relations program to market the school's image, to announce upcoming events, to recognize students and staff, and to solicit public support (Koeppel, 1982; Lang'at, 1997; Mayfield, 2002; Veltman, 2003; Besnoy, 2005; Mobley, 2007; Carr, 2008; Hershey-Freeman, 2008). Parents in the present study likewise valued such a comprehensive program. They noted that children often did not produce materials sent home from school; thus, the local newspaper served as a reminder of events. Additionally, their responses indicated that they expected to be informed about academic progress and services provided by the school. They also recognized that some parents were unable to attend school board meetings and used the newspaper as a source of information. Though for the most part parents seemed pleased with their local publications, parents did request more coverage of curricular matters.

By far, however, parents valued the recognition of their students in local newspapers above all other functions. They commented on the ability of local rural newspapers to publish photographs and stories that were absent in larger publications.

Said The South County Telegraph graphic designer, “If you were in [another larger] school system, you’d never see your kid’s picture in the paper because they can’t feature every child.”

Parents seemed to appreciate the efforts of the local newspapers to try to cover schools even when understaffed. However, parent responses emphasized that most of the education-related items appearing in local newspapers were generated by schools. The content analysis and journalist interviews supported this contention. Most of the artifacts cataloged did not contain bylines and, when asked, journalists replied that the absence of a byline indicated a submitted item rather than one produced by the newspaper staff.

Principals have long feared that the negative stories generated by the media result in a “media malaise” which impacts citizens’ view of government and its institutions such as education (Opfer, 2008). While some parents in this study complained of the negativity of their local newspapers, others mentioned a lack of in-depth investigative reporting. This appeared to contradict the findings of Opfer, as the parents actually dismissed as inaccurate some of the stories published in their local papers. Still, they perceived, as South County Parent 1 said, that “bad things end up in the news.” All of the parents interviewed worried about the impact local newspapers have on parents who are not involved in schools. Rural newspapers, interjected Parent 3 of South County, “are the public’s window into the school.” Added South County Parent 2, “If people aren’t here, then they don’t know what is going on in the school...Because they are not involved in the school, the only truth they know is what they read.” And East County Parent 4 noted, “Parents that are not directly involved with the school...are probably more concerned

with the controversial stuff.” Statements such as these indicated that parents involved in their local schools were fiercely protective of them.

Furthermore, researchers such as Cotton (2003) emphasized the intensified attention heaped upon school administrators as the result of increased press attention. When negative attention is focused upon schools, Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) concluded that there is a natural dissatisfaction associated with the leader’s performance, making him or her more vulnerable. Said West County Parent 1, “A newspaper, if it’s done correctly, is a great situation. If it’s done incorrectly, it can make or break a school system...If you get enough people on the bandwagon...against you, they’re just going to feed off of it.”

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from the findings of this study include the following:

1. The primary responsibility of rural newspapers is to keep parents and the public informed in a straightforward manner. Parents desire information on student performance, forthcoming events, and routine matters such as menus, schedules and supply lists.
2. Principals do not specifically use the media to showcase student learning or to illustrate the curriculum in action. Parents long to see more examples of their children at work in the classroom.
3. Of all the functions of local newspapers, parents value student recognition foremost. Journalists, parents, and principals acknowledge that local weekly newspapers can afford space to student recognition while larger daily newspapers cannot. Moreover, recognition of students and staff may be used

as a motivational tool for schools and as a means of increasing sales for newspapers.

4. Due to understaffing at rural newspapers, the majority of the education-related items published in rural local newspapers are submitted by schools. Aside from coverage of the local school board meetings, almost all of the remaining items reviewed in the content analysis were offered by schools. The average number of pages in editions of weekly newspapers swells during the school year, in part because of an increase in advertisements.
5. Parents desire more depth in local newspapers, including investigative reporting, rather than mere reports of meetings.
6. A unique, familial relationship exists between rural newspapers, schools, and their communities. Schools are the hub of these communities. Local journalists appear to view themselves as an extension of the school system, while principals utilize the local newspapers as community-wide newsletters.
7. Rural journalists are fiercely protective of their local school systems. They advocate in print for their local schools, explaining abstract concepts such as millage rates and Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) referenda to the public, and soliciting parent involvement. Moreover, journalists and principals recognize the lack of anonymity that exists in small towns and make efforts to protect students and staff from embarrassment.
8. Local newspapers view themselves as the community conscience. Journalists feel a responsibility to spur the public to action. However, this can lead to charges of sensationalism and make the relationship with principals tenuous.

To mitigate this, principals advocate candid conversations with journalists. Principals perceive journalists to report more negative stories than they, in fact, do.

9. Rural principals who employ effective print media relations practices are proactive. These school leaders invite the media into their buildings on a regular basis. They supply local newspapers with a list of upcoming events, take photographs and write articles.
10. Effective principals empower others to communicate with the press. Knowing that they must build teacher-leaders and acknowledging their own limited time, school leaders select others who communicate with local newspapers. Moreover, they notify the press of the school's points of contact. Finally, these principals encourage new teachers to contact the newspapers also.
11. Effective print media relations practices include trust-building, accessibility to information, and availability of staff. Journalists expect principals to be prompt, thorough, and transparent in their responses.
12. In the absence of formal training, experience proved the best teacher for forging a relationship between schools and the press. Rural reporters may not have formal training in journalism, and principals lack training in media relations. However, finding common ground, either professionally or personally, appears to facilitate the construction of an effective working relationship.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study and the work of previous researchers noted above, several implications for use of this study are noted. These implications are for rural Georgia principals and university preparation programs.

Principals and Local School Districts

First and foremost, the results of this study should be reviewed by current rural principals. It is the responsibility of each local principal to ensure the successful promotion of his or her students, staff, and school. To that end, rural principals may utilize these findings to employ the practices of accessibility to information, transparency, honesty, and availability of staff to build a relationship of trust and mutual respect with the local media. Furthermore, new principals should have the support of seasoned administrators within their school districts. Assigning a veteran principal to introduce a new principal to members of the local media would be beneficial in creating an initial connection with members of the press.

University Preparation Programs

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission requires the pre-service administrators to demonstrate the ability to utilize the press to communicate with stakeholders. However, as the principals in this study indicated, often this requirement is not mastered until the new principal is left in charge of his or her own school. Instead, having potential principals create media plans which demonstrate communication of extracurricular activities, instruction, and assessment data to the public via the media during pre-service course work would prove beneficial for aspiring school leaders.

Dissemination

As the local newspaper remains one of the primary sources of communication with stakeholders (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008), this study be reviewed by current principals serving in rural areas. Researchers (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Moses, 2007) have contended that newspapers, while relatively inexpensive, can be used to reach large numbers of readers whose views on education may be shaped largely by what they read. Therefore, it is essential for principals to forge effective working relationships with their local press utilizing the practices identified in these findings.

Moreover, this study should be examined by Georgia administrator preparation providers. Prior to issuing an initial license, perhaps as part of the internship program, administrative candidates should be required to develop a plan for promoting their schools using both media relations and public relations practices.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made for both practice and further research. These recommendations are detailed below.

Recommendations for Practice

1. University program providers should implement media relations training within the internship component of pre-service training programs for administrators.
2. Local school systems should develop and disseminate to the local press a school-based media relations plan, including procedures for notifying the press and a school-based contact list.

3. Local rural schools should establish public relations advisory boards and include local media representatives in the monthly meetings.
4. Local rural principals and their designees should send weekly press releases, including student recognition and curriculum items, to local newspapers.
5. Local school systems should assist local media in interpreting student achievement data.
6. Rural principals should establish an open-door policy for press and invite the press and parents into school buildings on a regular basis.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Because this study was limited to rural Georgia high-performing principals, further qualitative research should be conducted among rural principals who do not meet the high-performing principal criteria.
2. Because all of the principal participants in this study were female, future studies should examine the relationship between rural male principals and their local newspapers.
3. Because of the divergent responses from parents, principals and journalists in regard to the impact of rural newspapers on public opinion, further quantitative data should be gathered via survey research and explored further with qualitative measures.

Concluding Thoughts

A leader's relationship with the press may temper the public's view of an institution's efficacy; similarly, a principal's, or superintendent's, influence also may be colored by the portrait painted by the press. Most importantly, however, could be the

media's ability to acquire public, particularly parental, support for the school's mission. Each of these critical elements is built upon uniquely dynamic, albeit human, relations between journalists and administrators.

This study has explored the practices employed by three rural Georgia high-performing principals to build effective relationships with their local weekly newspapers. Chief among these practices is the recognition that the connection between rural schools and their community newspapers is a personal one built by individuals rather than between abstract government and corporate entities. By finding common ground through shared experiences and a similar vision, the schools in this study and their corresponding newspapers acknowledged their mutually beneficial relationship based upon trust, accessibility to information, and availability of staff.

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APPENDIX A:
IRB APPROVAL CORRESPONDENCE

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs Institutional Review Board (IRB)		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	P.O. Box 8005 Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Patricia L. Cato
P.O. Box 1974
Thomson, GA 30824

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Associate Vice President for Research

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: February 18, 2010

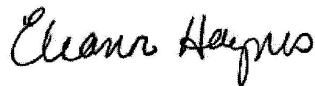
Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered H10170 and titled “**Effective Print Media Relations Practices of Georgia’s High-Performing Rural Principals: Three Case Studies**”, it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to 35 subjects.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer

APPENDIX B:
SCHOOL DATA COLLECTION FORM

SCHOOL DATA COLLECTION FORM

School: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Service Area: _____

Total Number of Pupils: _____

According to 2008 Office of Student Achievement Data

% of African-American Students: _____

% of Hispanic Students: _____

% of White Students: _____

% of English Language Learners: _____

% of Students with Disabilities: _____

% of Gifted Students: _____

% of Economically Disadvantaged Students: _____

Other Schools in District

School Name	Grade Levels	Total Number of Pupils	Feeder Schools

Principal's Length of Tenure at School: _____

Principal's Total Tenure in District: _____

Principal's Total Experience: _____

Total Certified Employees: _____

APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

As part of this interview, I must include a brief consent statement before we continue. The contents of this project will be analyzed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Georgia Southern University.

All information on your identity will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by law. If information about this interview is published, it will use pseudonyms or fake names. This project is for research and educational purposes only.

The research is not expected to cause any discomfort or stress. However, if you feel uncomfortable during the interviews, you may decline to answer and stop participating at any time without penalty. No risks are expected. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Do you have any questions?

During this interview, I will be taking written notes and this communication will be recorded for future transcription. At the conclusion and approval of this dissertation, all records will be destroyed. Do I have your permission to continue?

Core Questions Asked of All Participants

1. What is the responsibility of the local newspaper in regard to reporting on education?
2. How does the local newspaper help the school communicate with parents, community members, and other stakeholders?
3. In regard to educational matters, what do you believe parents value in the local print media?

Questions Asked of Principals Only

1. How long have you been employed in your current capacity as a principal?
2. In your opinion, who is primarily responsible for communicating with the local newspaper in this building?
3. Why were these individuals selected?
4. Tell me about the relationship between this school and the local weekly newspaper.
 - What are its strengths?
 - What are its weaknesses?

- In your opinion, what makes this relationship work or not work?
5. How did you learn to develop the skills of working with the local newspaper?
 6. What particular experiences shaped your working relationship with the media?
 7. How do you think the relationship between the local newspaper and school differs from that of other school-community partnerships?

Questions Asked of Journalists Only

1. How long have you been employed in your current capacity as a journalist in this community?
2. Tell me about the relationship between XYZ school and this newspaper.
 - What are its strengths?
 - What are its weaknesses?
 - What particular experiences shaped your working relationship with the school?
3. What practices foster an effective working relationship between principals and the local newspaper?

Questions Asked of Parents Only

1. In your opinion, what do parents like about the local media's coverage of schools?
2. In your opinion, what do parents dislike about the local media's coverage of schools?
3. In your opinion, how does the local newspaper's coverage of school events and issues impact the public's opinion of the school's effectiveness?
4. How could the school-media relationship be better improved to facilitate communication with parents and the local community?

APPENDIX D:
NEWSPAPER CONTENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

NEWSPAPER CONTENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Newspaper: _____ Owned by: _____

Average Circulation: _____ Primary Coverage Area: _____

Published Weekly on _____

Other Readership Demographics:

Item (Article/ Announcement/ Editorial/Photograph/Letter to the Editor Title)	Location (Section; Page Number; Amount of Space Allocated)	Date of Publication	Primary School Contact Quoted	Photos, Statistics or Other Information Included	Theme (Budget/Assessment/ Announcement/Policy & Rules/Other)

APPENDIX E:
PARENT DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOL

PARENT COLLECTION FORM

School: _____

Gender Male FemaleAge 18-34 35-45 46-62 62-older

Highest level of education attained

 High school diploma/GED Bachelor's degree Master's degree Education Specialist/Professional degree Doctorate

How often do you read the local newspaper in hard copy?

 Every week 1-3 times per month NeverDo you own a computer? Yes No

How often do you use a computer to access the following?

School website Daily Weekly Monthly NeverLocal newspaper's website Daily Weekly Monthly NeverNational news websites Daily Weekly Monthly Never

How often do you watch the following on television?

Local news programming Daily Weekly Monthly NeverNational news programming Daily Weekly Monthly Never

APPENDIX F:
INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARENTS

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY
PARENTS**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Patricia Cato, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to identify the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are the parent of a student

1. The purpose of this research is to identify the practices of high-performing principals as they interact with members of locally published, rural newspapers. It is also the aim of this research to determine how these practices impact the school-family-community partnership in rural Georgia.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief audio-taped focus group interviews with five to eight parents on-site at each school. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher will review publicly available documents, including school system policies, newspaper articles, and press releases for additional information which may clarify participant responses.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate your involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in this study, the benefits to society include improving the school-family-community relationship as well as advancing educational leader preparation programs in regard to media relations.
5. Focus group interviews are expected to last from 45 to 60 minutes each.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, school district, and newspaper. Notes, interview transcriptions, tape recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, tape recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2013. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing the assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to obtain a copy

of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.
8. This research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in the study, and you may decide at any time that you don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: Effective Print Media Relations Practices of Georgia's Rural High-Performing Principals: Three Case Studies

Principal Investigator: Patricia L. (Lynn) Cato
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Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX G:
INFORMED CONSENT FOR PRINCIPALS

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY
PRINCIPALS/EDUCATORS**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Patricia Cato, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to identify the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have been identified by the Georgia Department of Education as a “High-Performance Principal” between June 2006 and June 2008.

1. The purpose of this research is to identify the practices of high-performing principals as they interact with members of locally published, rural newspapers. It is also the aim of this research to determine how these practices impact the school-family-community partnership in rural Georgia.
2. Participation in this research will include brief audio-taped individual interviews with educators. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher will review publicly available documents, including school system policies, newspaper articles, and press releases for additional information which may clarify participant responses.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate your involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in this study, the benefits to society include improving the school-family-community relationship as well as advancing educational leader preparation programs in regard to media relations.
5. Interviews for individuals are expected to last from 45 to 60 minutes each.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, school district, and newspaper. Notes, interview transcriptions, tape recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, tape recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2013. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing the assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to obtain a copy

of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.
8. This research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in the study, and you may decide at any time that you don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

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Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX H:
INFORMED CONSENT FOR JOURNALISTS

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY
JOURNALISTS**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Patricia Cato, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to identify the effective print media relations practices of rural Georgia high-performing principals. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a weekly newspaper journalist assigned to cover one of a selected principal's assigned school.

1. The purpose of this research is to identify the practices of high-performing principals as they interact with members of locally published, rural newspapers. It is also the aim of this research to determine how these practices impact the school-family-community partnership in rural Georgia.
2. Participation in this research will include brief audio-taped individual interviews with journalists. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher will review publicly available documents, including school system policies, newspaper articles, and press releases for additional information which may clarify participant responses.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate your involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in this study, the benefits to society include improving the school-family-community relationship as well as advancing educational leader preparation programs in regard to media relations.
5. Interviews for individuals are expected to last from 45 to 60 minutes each.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, school district, and newspaper. Notes, interview transcriptions, tape recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, tape recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2013. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing the assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to obtain a copy

of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.
8. This research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in the study, and you may decide at any time that you don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

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Investigator Signature

Date