

Student Perception is Our Reality: A comparative study of using public relations to improve student achievement

Abstract

This action research study will examine the correlation between student perception about their school and their achievement on standardized tests. The outcome of this study will make a case for legislative bodies to require training for teachers and administrators in school based public relations and protected funding for school leaders to invest in public relations to support student achievement efforts.

Context

School reform is challenging the quality and effectiveness of the traditional public school. Despite the past effectiveness of public schools, many have turned to public charter schools as a result of school choice initiatives. Traditional public schools have lost their appeal to the public and continue to face challenges such as low enrollment, poor reputation, and decreased funding. The Bush Administration implemented No Child Left Behind in effort to catalyze reform efforts for equity in education. Accountability and school choice were the most controversial topics. Although accountability is an issue for many teachers and communities, school choice has become a capitalist dream as a new market of opportunity. Former Chancellor Michelle Rhee recognized this opportunity and led the charter school movement in DC Public Schools. These efforts were publicized in her national documentary *Waiting for Superman*. Many educators were so disenfranchised by the outcome of Rhee's policy; they were unable to spot the opportunity. Rhee revealed the power of public perception and the importance of public relations.

Literature Review

A closer look at public relations and perception was needed to understand this phenomenon. Public relations is the practice of managing the spread of information between an individual or an organization and the public. In the context of a school, public relations is the spread of information for specific stakeholders to support the school's narrative. Some public relations tactics include a mix of the following: personal communication, word of mouth, community relations, media relations, special events, publications and other means of publicity. There are unexpected stakeholders that are unaware of what's happening in schools. Some unexpected stakeholders include taxpayers in the neighborhood who do not have children that attend the local school.

Public relations is a sustainable practice due to the research around attribution theory. Attribution theory is the process by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events. Public relations is a way to offer some control around the external, environmental or situations that cause behavior. This is an opportunity for students living in poverty stricken neighborhoods. Although there are many competing factors from the conditions of poverty, changing the perception of the environment is a way to work around the conditions of poverty and to rid learned helplessness.

School districts are usually responsible for school based public relations, but it's usually at the district level. However, local schools have different narratives within the

same district. Unfortunately educators do not know or understand public relations tactics, and/or schools do not have the budgets at the local school level to afford public relations campaigns.

Research Question

In response to 21st century expectations of education and indicators of attribution theory, should local schools invest in additional public relations for individual brand identity to improve student achievement?

Hypothesis

If student perception about their school's brand is favorable, then individual student achievement in their local school will meet or exceed grade level expectations for reading and math performance.

Methodology

The action research was actually NOT conducted due to the change in standardized assessments locally. There is a transition from DCCAS to the PARCC exam this year. The PARCC exam will be used to maintain consistency and integrity of the results.

This will be opinion-based research that will be conducted over the course of two years in specific D.C. Public High Schools and D.C. Public Charter High Schools performing at varying levels in student achievement. Independent variables in this experiment are student perception and budget allocation. The dependent variable the research will measure is student achievement on local standardized tests. Quantitative data will be collected on the following: publications, media spots, community engagement events, promotional items, website quality, student surveys and social media presence.

Outcomes

Intended outcomes will validate my hypothesis and result in policy change that allows educators to *"look for narrative threads that include the stories and successes of individuals and groups. Sharing those stories, coupled with vibrant images of learning, reminds everyone that test results are a product of a complex system of interwoven opportunities, relationships, and experiences,"* (Dillion).

Policy Recommendations

1. State Departments of Education will require School Administration and Teaching Licensure certification to include a course in school based public relations.
2. Federal and state governments, and local school districts will allocate funds to local schools budgets for teacher led public relations in public schools.

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References

Dillion, R. (2012). Promoting an Authentic Picture of Your School, *Principal Leadership*, 21-24.