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School Public Relations: Relating with LEP Families

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SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS:
RELATING WITH LEP FAMILIES

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
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May 2010

Major Subject: Communications

SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS:
RELATING WITH LEP FAMILIES

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May 2010

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this paper was to examine newsletters disseminated by school public relations programs to their community in districts where Spanish is the primary home language. A content analysis examined district newsletters of school districts located in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The examination of district-issued newsletters determined the percentage of stories written in English or Spanish to compare with the demographic make-up, specifically the percentage of the non-English speaking parents of the district and the percentage of Limited English Proficient students. Stories were also analyzed to determine whether there were recurring themes in the English versus Spanish stories. This helped to determine if the publications, created and circulated by the school district, were reflective of the demographics of their respective school districts.

DEDICATION

The completion of my master's studies is due to a wonderful support system. Without the love and guidance from my family and friends who were always there to give me a push when doubt started to creep in.

I thank wholeheartedly my professors at The University of Texas-Pan American who provided guidance, expertise, and encouragement, that without, this work would not have been possible. They challenged my thinking and helped me to become a better student and professional.

I dedicate this work to my mother, Irma Serventi who always wanted me to publish a work and has always been on my side with her loving words and encouragement. She is my best friend. And to my dad who has never been shy to say that he is proud of me. I want to thank my husband, Ignacio Garcia, who has been there throughout this journey with his love, support, and understanding.

And, finally to my children, Victoria and Roman, who at a young age had to understand that sometimes Mom's homework meant she couldn't go fishing or have fun. I hope they understand that I did this for them---so that they could know that with hard work and determination anything is possible! I hope to serve as a role model for them that education is so very important. Learning is lifelong!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Chances are if you have seen a television news story or read a local newspaper article about your local public school, the news was not good. Recent examples in the Rio Grande Valley alone include such headlines such as “Two Brownsville School Administrators caught using illegal doctorates” (Monitor, April 20, 2010), “Indicted Mission high school administrator stays on the job” (Monitor, April 9, 2010), “Valley school improving on, but still have long way to go in college readiness” (February 22, 2010). Any one of these is an example of a public relations nightmare and school districts at large are suffering because of it. To counter this ‘bad rap,’ various statewide associations have made it their mission to exclaim the “good news” of public schools in hopes of gaining community support. The *Texas School Business* magazine publishes an annual Bragging Rights special issue urging educators across the state to become cheerleaders for public education by inviting them to nominate a program within their district that is “wildly successful” (www.texasschoolbusiness.com). Another organization, the Texas School Public Relations Association, encourages Texas Public Schools to celebrate their local schools with an annual “Texas Public Schools Week.” Established in 1950 by the Masonic Lodges of Texas to recognize contributions made by the state’s free system of education, Texas Public Schools Week is “a meaningful way to

showcase the many educational opportunities given to the millions of students attending Texas public schools” (www.mansfieldisd.org/texaspublicschools.html). It is an opportunity for schools to invite the community ‘in’ to see first-hand what is happening in their neighborhood schools. Locally, individual school districts led by their school public relations programs, publish newsletters, flyers, brochures, and other communication pieces for their education community, inclusive of parents, highlighting the “good news” news within their districts.

So, why is public relations important to a school district? Researchers concur: public relations, if carried out effectively, can forge not only a positive relationship between a school district and its community and impact more than just attendance at a local PTA meeting; it can, in fact, positively influence educational achievement. Public relations can have a positive influence on educational achievement (Chavkin, Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Pena, 2000; Hughes & Wong, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009, Lopez, 2001).

According to Decker & Decker (2004) the goal of a school public relations program is to help the public understand that everyone in the community benefits when schools are able to carry out their mission of academic success for all children. Carr, 2008, further posits that a school district’s communication with the community leads to greater student achievement. More specifically, Delgado-Gaitan (1990) find that parents’ knowledge about school activities, procedures, and policies is an important factor in a child’s education. Further, parents who are more knowledgeable about school activities are more likely to be involved in these types of activities. Additional studies report that a strong indicator of student success is the level of parental involvement in their children’s

education (Chavkin, Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Pena, 2000; Hughes & Wong, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009, Lopez, 2001).

But what if parents are not informed? What if that lack of information isn't because of a lack of interest or desire, but because parents do not understand the information that is shared via the traditional print or web channels? What if they don't understand the information that is written because they do not read the language that the information is written in? There is a paucity of research with reference to the school district disseminated newsletter and the written language of the newsletter and how it affects parental involvement and awareness.

What are ways that parents can find out news and information about their local school district? One way is a school-district disseminated newsletter produced by the district's public information office. For the purpose of this research, a newsletter is defined as a publication created by the school public relations office which consists of news, such as updates to newly implemented school zones that will affect which campus a parent's child might attend the following year, or facts and figures about an upcoming multi-million dollar bond election that would affect not only the addition of school district facilities, but ultimately the amount of school taxes an individual pays. A newsletter can also contain information such as registration dates, school supply needs, information about new bus routes, and state testing requirements, or announce the winners of a district art contest. Updates to new district policies regarding dress codes, school lunch policies, or changes in school district personnel are also items that can be found in a school district issued newsletter that keep the education community abreast of events within the school district.

The layout of the newsletter can vary. Some newsletters are a single page document with black and white images, while others are multiple page publications with full color photos. The target audience for the school district newsletter is the district's community made up of many different groups: students, teachers, and community members, but primarily parents (Jensen, 2006). The first tenet to achieving effective public relations is to know who your audience is and to tailor the message to the audience (Wilcox, 2009). If one of the tools of an effective public relations campaign is the school district newsletter, it is vital to follow that rule and identify the wants and needs of the audience. As school public relations programs continue to publish newsletters to inform their public of school district news, it is important for school public relations professionals to evaluate and analyze their operations to determine whether all segments of their community are informed of school events and information in order to participate. Goble (1993) writes that it is important to identify the audience; "research the make up of your community and its demographic structure so that you know your community" (p.47).

As school public relations professionals address their communities, the make-up of their community cannot be ignored. This is especially true for the United States where the student population is shifting. Turney & Kao (2009) report that "one in four school-aged children has at least one immigrant parent" and "nearly 60% of Hispanic youth and 90% of Asian youth are immigrant or children of immigrants" (Turney & Kao, 2009, p.257). This is especially relevant to Texas schools because of Texas' international border with Mexico. According to the Texas Education Agency report, "Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2008-09," projections by the National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES) predict a 10% increase in the public school population nationwide. The growth, according to the NCES, will be affected by “factors such as internal migration, legal and illegal immigration, the relatively high level of births in the 1990s, and resultant changes in the population, rather than changes in attendance rates” (Turney & Kao, 2009, p.4). Historically in Texas schools, the NCES reports “between 1987-88 and 2008-09, the public schools served an increasingly diverse population of students” and “the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, in particular, brought greater linguistic and cultural diversity to the state” (p.4). Over that ten-year span in Texas the state education agency reports that the number of students receiving bilingual education services or English as a second language services increased by 58.2 % and that there was a 50% increase in the number of students identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) in the same time span. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, an area along the Texas-Mexico border and the geographic focus of this study, the overwhelming majority of LEP families speak only Spanish. While the percentage of school-identified Limited English Proficient students fluctuates each year (Texas Education Agency AEIS Report, 1999-2009), over the past ten years it remains steady at more than one-third of the total Rio Grande Valley student population.

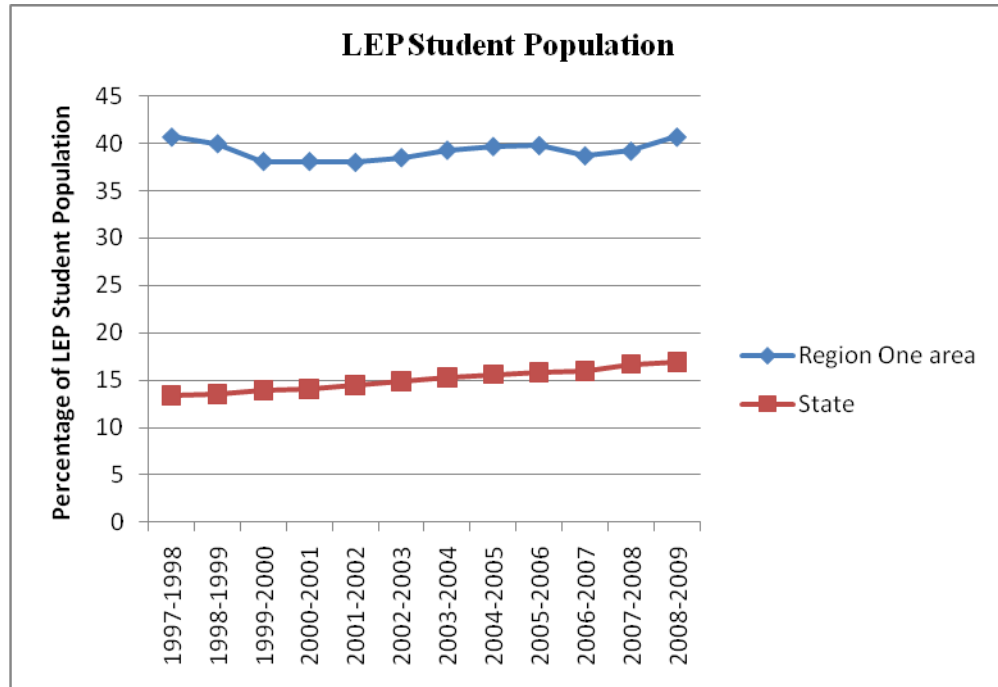


Table 1: LEP Student Population

Even though the Rio Grande Valley LEP student population fluctuates, this student population is consistently more than twice that of the state LEP student population (Texas Education Agency AEIS Report, 1999-2009). Clearly this is a segment of the school district population that warrants further study on many different levels, including the public relations approach by the school district public relations office.

In the area served by the Region One Education Service Center, a seven county area along the Texas-Mexico border, the influx of students from neighboring Mexico has had an impact on bilingual education and the Limited English Proficient student population. Included in the 2000 U.S. Census count, there is a question that aims to count the number of individuals who speak a language, other than English, at home. The Census defines “Language Other than English Spoken at Home” as those persons, over the age of 5 years, who speak a language other than English at home. For this category of

the census, participants were asked to report “whether they sometimes or always spoke a language other than English at home. People who knew languages other than English but did not use them at home, who only used them elsewhere, or whose language was limited to a few expressions or slang were excluded (2000 U.S. Census Quick Facts). According to the U.S. Census, in some areas of the Rio Grande Valley the “Language Other than English Spoken at Home” count is over ninety percent (2000 U.S. Census Quick Facts, Table 1).

The U.S. Census released its prediction of population figures in 2009 noting an increase in the majority-minority population. (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2009). Majority-minority is defined as “more than half the population being of a group other than single-race, non-Hispanic white” (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2009). This press release also noted that Starr County, Texas, located within the Region One area, was identified as an area with the highest percentage minority population (98%), along with two other Texas counties in the nation. Of those counties, the minority population was identified as Hispanic. Nationwide, the Census predictions noted 48 majority Hispanic counties, Texas was home to the top 10 counties identified in this category.

As school districts continue to experience shifts in the cultural and linguistic makeup of their student population, it is probable that of the nearly 800,000 Texas public school students (16.9% of total student population) identified with Limited English Limited Proficiency (Texas Education Agency, AEIS Report 2008-2009) their parents/guardians are also non-English dominant speakers. As mandated by the Texas Administrative Code, Chapter 89 §89.1215, “school districts are required to conduct a home language survey for each student. The Home Language Survey is administered to

each student new to the district, and to students previously enrolled who were not surveyed in the past.” The Home Language Survey establishes the student’s language classification. The Home Language Survey, written in English and Spanish, consists of two questions: “What language is spoken in your home most of the time? What language does your child (do you) speak most of the time?” If a language other than English is spoken at home, additional student testing is conducted to determine whether the student qualifies for Bilingual Education or a LEP program. The student is identified as LEP based on the home language survey and additional testing which measures the student’s proficiency in English (Texas Administrative Code, Chapter 89 §89.1215). With these potential language barriers in mind, it is imperative to examine the way information is disseminated to parent communities and to determine whether all segments of those communities are receiving and able to understand linguistically the information if school public relations offices are to be able to facilitate relationships between communities and schools.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways in which school public relations programs in Region One area school districts, where Spanish is the primary home language, communicate with parents. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the language used by school public relations practitioners when disseminating general school and district information to their parent community via the district-issued informational newsletter. A content analysis conducted using the district-published newsletter of school districts located in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas; an area with a large population of Hispanic families whose primary language (language spoken at home) is Spanish.

First, 22 district-issued newsletters representing 11 school districts of the Lower Rio Grande Valley were used to determine the frequency of stories written in English or Spanish. This data is then compared to the demographic make-up of the district. The study then examined the percentage of Spanish written stories in a newsletter and compared that percentage with the LEP student population and the Other than English percentage of the community. A further examination considered the type of stories written in English and Spanish and categorized them according to a typology created by the researcher. Stories were categorized as follows: *feel good stories* — those stories meant to elicit positive response from the reader regarding school, district, or student accomplishments, (i.e. student group wins chess championship, U.I.L. team wins at meet); *regulatory stories* — those stories containing information about mandated initiatives by the Texas Education Agency or school district policy (i.e. testing dates, immunization requirements); and *information stories* — those stories regarding news about the district (i.e. upcoming open-house schedule, football updates). Finally, an examination of the way the school district public information office disseminates the school district newsletter was examined. While an in-depth discussion of the delivery method of the school district newsletter is outside the scope of this paper, this information will be helpful to further study the relationship between the school district public relations office and the LEP community.

As the gatekeeper of information, the school district's public relations department has a responsibility to communicate with and disseminate information to the Spanish-only speaking segment of the district's community. This responsibility has the potential to reach beyond simply filling the parking lots on Open House nights. Noting research by

Delgado-Gaitan (1990) that parents who are more knowledgeable about school activities are more likely to be involved in these types of activities and that parents' knowledge about school activities is more likely to increase their involvement in those activities, school public relations offices have the opportunity to impact the overall academic success of the student.

This study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the language (English or Spanish) of district disseminated newsletters reflect the community's language?

RQ2: Does the percentage of newsletters written in Spanish reflect the LEP percentage in the community?

RQ3: Do district newsletter stories fall into discernable story themes?

RQ3.a: What are the themes of district newsletter stories?

RQ3.b: Is there a difference in story themes between stories written in English and stories written in Spanish?

Statement of the Problem

With the introduction of more organized school public relations programs in school districts across the state, it is important to evaluate their communication as the liaison between the district and parents. Of significant importance is the examination of the language used when addressing communication with parents. A survey of the current literature suggests a paucity of research directly addressing school public relations programs. Further research dealing with communication to the non-English speaking

parent is limited and, specifically in the area of school public relations programs and communicating with minority parents, research is virtually non-existent. With the significant LEP student population this is an area of research that offers fertile ground for study. With this knowledge, school public relations programs have the opportunity to make a positive impact in their districts. The ensuing literature review demonstrates that there is a research area which supports that parents who are active in their child's education leads to academic success for the child. The precursor to being active in the child's education is that a parent must first be aware of what is happening in the school. This research will demonstrate that the school district disseminated newsletter, which is meant as an information and communication vehicle for the school district, may in fact be ignoring a segment of their parent population simply by the language in which the information is written. While the parental involvement level of LEP parents is not the focus of this study, identifying the language used to communicate with the parent is a first step in creating an awareness by identifying and communicating with all segments of the parent community can increased parental participation in their child's school.

Significance of Study

Directing communication to the Spanish-only speaking population could have indirect implications leading to improved academic achievement by LEP students. It follows that if parents are more aware of news within their child's school district, they become more involved. Research indicates that the more engaged and involved a parent is in their child's education, the more likely the child is to succeed academically (Chavkin, Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Pena, 2000; Hughes & Wong, 2006; Turney & Kao,

2009, Lopez, 2001). If school district newsletters are written in a language that is understood by the parent community, could it encourage parents to become involved in the school activities of their children? While this research is outside the scope of this project, the questions lay the foundation for further research in this area.

In the following Literature Review, several streams of research including school public relations, school public relations effectiveness, identifying publics, Limited English Proficient (LEP) designation, language barriers and parent involvement, the connection between school public relations and parent involvement, and addressing non-English speakers will be discussed. Next, an explanation of how the research study was conducted will be explained in the Methodology section, then a discussion of the data uncovered through the content analysis of school district newsletters will follow. Finally, a limitations section will discuss possible hindrances to this research study followed by suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature focuses on streams of research regarding school public relations, school public relations effectiveness, identifying publics, Limited English Proficient (LEP) designation, language barriers and parent involvement, the connection between school public relations and parent involvement, and addressing non-English speakers will be discussed.

Emergence of School Public Relations as a Field

The school public relations field is relatively new, with the first record of an actual organization of school public relations professionals emerging in 1935 when an informal group of individuals met to discuss the need for a formal organization for those dealing with school-community relations. As documented by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), “the group was one-third educators, one-third writers, and one-third crusaders who had exchanged ideas for 10 years on better techniques, methods and materials for reporting and promoting the progress of public schools” (Muir, p. 2). Twelve years later, the January 1947 edition of *Trends in School Public Relations*, one of the earliest association’s publications boasted that the school public relations field

was gaining credibility as a true public relations specialty with the addition of school public relations departments with directors in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and in other major U.S. cities (Muir, p.2).

According to Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1984) the public wields power when it comes to the control of public schools because they have the right to vote for or against legislation that affects public schools, they have a voice in local decisions through participation in local school board meetings, and they can sway public opinion and attitudes about their local schools. Because of this influence, Kindred, et al (1984) wrote that the school district has a responsibility to the community to provide accurate and complete information about the school district, including policies, finances, and activities. It was because of the recognition of this responsibility that the field of school public relations evolved.

Long before the informal group of school public relations practitioners met in 1935, in response to the need to inform the school community of such topics, an approach was initiated in the early twenties to study the use of “publicity” for public schools. As Kindred, et al (1984) explains, within a few years there was a move away from the word “publicity” because of the negative connotation associated with advertising. The change from the terminology “publicity” is consistent with the work of researcher Yungwook (2001) who maintained that “public relations academicians do not use the word ‘image’ because of its manipulative connotation,” (Yungwook,2001 p.4). Instead, Yungwook chose to use the word ‘reputation’ to describe the same concept.

What is School Public Relations?

Today, the National School Public Relations Association has a membership of 3,076 in chapters across the United States. In Texas, the state chapter of NSPRA called the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA), has a membership of 1,073. Within these organizations, there are many different titles for the individual charged with the public relations of a school district. Some of those names include community information officer, community relations, and public relations officer. Kowalski, in defining school public relations as “the application of public relations in education” warns against the reference to “public relations” in a school setting because public relations can sometimes be associated with shaping opinion, “a well founded fear since many people still see public relations as synonymous with words like cover-up, obfuscate, misinterpret, and lie” (Kowalski, 2000) other researchers concur (Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher, 1984 and Yungwook, 2001).

NSPRA defines educational public relations as a “planned and systemic two-way process of communication between an educational organization and its internal and external publics designed to build morale, goodwill, understanding, and support for that organization” (Kowalski, 2000) and as a program which “serves to stimulate a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments of the organization” (NSPRA, 1972, p.31). Walling (1982) supports the NSPRA definition of school public relations as a school district’s approach to conducting the business of building relationships with their publics as “a philosophy of communication by which public schools strive to build goodwill and understanding between themselves and their various publics” (Walling,

1982, p.17). Understanding that public relations is a process and a cooperative effort (Kindred, 1957) school public relations is a two-way communication approach whose purpose is to develop an understanding of education needs and practices between the school district and the community it serves. But how do you measure the success of a public relations program if, as researchers (Kowalski, 2000; Walling, 1982) contend, the role of school public relations is relationship building? How is the effectiveness of a school public relations program measured?

Effective School Public Relations Programs

Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (2002) recognize the importance of public relations programs in any organization, citing not the instantaneous effects public relations programs may produce, but what public relations can do for an organization in the long run: “Public relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategies constituencies” (p.97). Dollars spent on a school public relations program do not determine the program’s success or predict its failure, Walling (1982) maintains. Instead the value of the program is measured by whether the program meets its intended objectives; “the value of school public relations programs is not measured in dollars but in reaching discernible goals. The prime factor is not budgeting big bucks but in targeting for effective goal setting” (Walling, 1982, p.25). It is not the “bottom line” that determines the effectiveness of a school public relations program; rather it is the end result that determines success. As Walling (1982) upholds, to be deemed successful, a school public relations program “must create dialogue between the schools and their publics” (p.28). Kowalski

(2000) adds that an effective school public relations program is responsible for more than creating newsletters or generating publicity and has the potential for a greater impact in the success of the school, “a comprehensive school community relations program that emphasizes positive relationships greatly enhances, if not directly influences, the achievement of students and the productivity of the staff” (Kowalski, 2000, Foreword).

Identifying Publics

Both Martinson (1999) and Newsom (1984) agree that valuable school public relations programs cannot simply exist as systems designed to “sell” the public an idealized version of public education or “cover up” problems that a school district may encounter. Martinson (1995) believes that effective school public relations programs must be directed toward bringing about mutual understanding between the education district and its community. However, before mutual dialogue and understanding can occur, Newsom challenges school districts to identify their publics and modify their public relations approach toward the audience (Newsom, 1984; Miller, 2002; Perreault & Murray, 2004).

Boyd (2004) maintains a strategic practice of public relations, including identifying all segments of the district’s publics, is necessary to help public education manage issues and their publics effectively. In managing publics effectively, it is vital that school public relations practitioners inform their communities of events in the district and “forge creative links to open themselves to the community” (Goble, 1993, p. 47). “The general public, and

even parents to a great extent, are uninformed about what really goes on in the educational setting and about how and why school decisions are made” (Goble, 1993, p.47). Goble further maintains that “keeping the public informed will reap rich dividends in support for education” (p.47). Ultimately, public relations programs are in place to support and promote the district events and to foster relationships between the district and the community it serves. According to Ediger (2001), “a quality public relations program’s emphasis is vital to any school. There needs to be a good communication between the public schools and the lay public” (Ediger, 2001, p.743) which includes, most importantly, the parents. Decker & Decker (2003) indicate a number of strategies designed to have a positive impact on a school’s public relations program. In this delineation of principles is listed “inclusiveness” which is defined as “...opportunities designed to involve the broadest possible cross-sections of community member and eliminate the segregation or isolation of people by age, income, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or other factors that impede participation” (p.6).

In Decker & Decker (2003) inclusiveness is defined as providing opportunities based on an individual’s characteristics. One of the characteristics that was not included in their definition was a person’s language. The following research areas: Limited English Proficient Designation and Language Barriers and Parental Involvement concentrate on language and how limited knowledge of a language can serve as an obstacle.

Limited English Proficient Designation

A major consideration in this research is the Limited English Proficient (LEP) student and their families — a term used by the Texas Education Agency to identify this student group. LEP students make up a segment of the student population who are not proficient in the English language. Parents of school-aged children who enroll in a school district in Texas are required to complete a Home Language Survey. The Home Language Survey (Appendix A) asks these two questions: 1) What language is spoken at home most of the time? and, 2) What language does your child (do you) speak most of the time? (Subchapter bb of Chapter 89, TEC). If either response is any language other than English, then the student is assessed with an oral language proficiency test in English. The oral language proficiency test determines if the student is limited in their English proficiency. Virginia R. Champion, Senior Education Specialist in the Bilingual/ESL program at Region One ESC, explains that “In many cases, if a language other than English is spoken in the home, it is typically the native language of the parent or guardian who may also be limited in their ability to communicate in and comprehend the English language.”

In the South Texas Region One area, 37.6% of students have been identified LEP (2008-2009 Texas Education Agency, AEIS Report). “LEP parents” refers to parents of school-aged children who have been identified as Limited English Proficient by the school district based on the results of the Home Language Survey. It follows that the parent of a Limited English Proficient student would also have limited English proficiency, as explained by Champion.

With this identified population of students it follows that there would exist a language barrier that might prevent a Hispanic parent from becoming aware of information about their child's school district. Without awareness of happenings within the district, this could then lead to a parent not becoming involved.

Language Barriers and Parental Involvement

Researchers (Boyd, 2004; Martinson, 1995; Decker & Decker, 2003) agree that identifying the target public is the first step towards a successful school public relations program. Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher (1984) write that understanding the audience is necessary when the intent of the school public relations program is to communicate with the community, "For communication to take place with any assurance those sending the message must study the intended audience. Otherwise, the content, form, and timing of the message may not be suitable for the receiver of the communications" (p.15).

In understanding the audience, school public relations practitioners must also understand what characteristics make up the audience. In the case of parents, what is the language that parents use to communicate and what would be most beneficial for the parent? Jensen (2006) and Wong and Hughes (2006) write that a language barrier can hinder a parent's participation in their child's education; "the lack of English proficiency [is] one of the major obstacles to some Hispanic parents' participation in their children's education" (p.3). But if the parent is unable to understand the information being sent home — information that might help them become a more involved parent — then both the parent and child are at a disadvantage. Effectiveness

goes beyond simply making a newsletter available to parents, it involves going a step further to ensure that the information disseminated from the school public relations office is understood. “To actively participate in the schools, parents must become informed about the school system and how it functions” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p.25). To be fully informed, the school public relations practitioner must identify those publics who may need to receive that information in a language other than English. In keeping with the definition of school public relations as being “two-way” (Kindred, 1957; Walling, 1982), school public relations practitioners must recognize that by not identifying their public and providing information to them in a language that they can read and understand, is not honoring the ideals of two-way communication by understanding what the public wants and needs.

In defining parent involvement, Hughes & Wong (2006) write “parent involvement in schools refers to the efforts made by parents or primary caretakers that directly support the academic success of their children or administrative needs of their children’s schools as well as perceptions of the quality of home-school interactions” (p.4). Studies report that a strong indicator of student success is the level of parental involvement regarding their children’s education (Chavkin, Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Pena, 2000; Hughes & Wong, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009, Lopez, 2001). In Delgado-Gaitan (1991), the researcher writes to the deficit theory perspective that Hispanic parents do not participate in their child’s education for several reasons —(1) parents are incompetent, unable to help because they do not understand the language; or (2) that they are not interested. Delgado-Gaitan continues that deficit-theory research suggests that Hispanic parents’ low level of involvement means they do not value their child’s education.

However, in earlier research by Delgado-Gaitan (1990), and others Lareau,1987; Lott, 2003; and Lopez, 2001 challenges the deficit theory, contesting that it is the school district's language used in communicating with Hispanic parents that keeps Hispanic parents out of the parental involvement arena. By not providing information to the parents in a language that parents can understand the school district is not being inclusive.

Similarly, researcher Lareau (1987) contends, and Delgado-Gaitan (1991) agrees, that the school's use of a particular linguistic structure, curriculum, and organization structures can affect parental involvement:

“Schools facilitate the exclusion of students and parents by (consciously or unconsciously) establishing activities that require specific majority culturally based knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution. The absence of appropriate sociocultural knowledge precludes acceptable participation in formal school activities, resulting in isolation for many parents, especially those who have not been schooled in the United States and who are limited in English proficiency” (p.21).

Delgado-Gaitan (1990) finds that parents' knowledge about school activities, procedures, and policies is an important factor in a child's education and parents who are more knowledgeable about school activities are more likely to be involved in these types of activities. Recognizing a divide, Inger (1993) writes that many Hispanic organizations have attempted to improve the relationship between public schools and Hispanic families. One such case is the Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP) which conducted a nationwide grant program to promote and test strategies to involve Hispanic parents in the schools. What they found was that parents need to feel comfortable with the surroundings of the schools to become involved. The HPDP found the most difficult part in cultivating the home-school relationship was getting past the parents' initial

intimidation and getting them to the first PTA meeting. Inger (1993) writes that the HPDP program determined that by making it easy for parents to participate, program participation and retention rates in the programs will increase. While Inger is not specific in how to make it “easy for parents to participate” it can be suggested that providing information to parents in a language they can understand could certainly help to facilitate the parents’ participation levels. Turney & Kao (2009), Peña (2000), Hughes & Wong (2006), Lott (2003), and Lopez (2001) found that factors such as language barriers can make Hispanic parents feel uncomfortable when communicating with the school. With the reasons noted above as to why Hispanic parents would not participate, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) studied the reasons why Hispanic parents become involved in their children’s education through parental involvement efforts. They write that parents become involved because they believe they *should* be involved, because they feel they *can* make a difference, and “because they *perceive* general opportunities and invitations for involvement from their children and their children’s schools” (p.31). Whether Hispanic parents choose to become involved, according to Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, depends on their experiences of specific invitations to involvement. Based on Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997), parent involvement is not dependent on whether the school district’s public relations office does an adequate job of communicating with all audiences; a Hispanic parent’s involvement is affected if Hispanic parents believe they are being left out.

Likewise, a move by the National PTA to raise the number of Hispanic members to join local parent-teacher associations found a reason for the lack of parental involvement was not that parents just did not want to become involved. Like the Hoover-

Dempsey & Sandler study, Jacobson (2003) found that a major obstacle to parent involvement by Hispanic parents in the organization was that traditional PTA programs in their districts were not sensitive to the changing demographics of the school and to the cultural differences of the Hispanic parents and families.

A major barrier to parents' involvement in school events involves the communication that the school has with parents. Inger (1993) finds that many schools exclude Hispanic parents by limiting written communication to parents in English only. In a 2000 study by Delores C. Pena, the researcher followed a group of Mexican American parents for one year to determine what factors influence parent involvement. While many factors were noted which contributed to a parent becoming involved in their child's education (i.e. work schedules, socioeconomic barriers, and their own level of educational attainment), language was "particularly influential" (Peña, 200, p.46) in their level of involvement. "For many disadvantaged parents, a serious handicap in supporting their children's education is their limited education and their lack of fluency in English" (p.46). While efforts are made to include Spanish speaking parents in schools as noted in the HPDP study, the efforts do not go far enough (Hughes & Wong, 2006; Pena 2000. Lott, 2003).

Improved student academic achievement can result from a parent's involvement in their child's education (Chavkin, Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Pena, 2000; Hughes & Wong, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009, Lopez, 2001). For that reason, it is important that all parents are aware of what is happening in their child's school district in order to take an active role. How is a parent informed?

The Link between School Public Relations and Parent Involvement

How do school public relations and parental involvement fit together? In “The New Communication Tools...Listening, Helping,” Marken (2007) advocates the use of social networking tools by public relations practitioners as a new way to reach an audience, away from the traditional newsletter. However, Wilcox (2009) offers reasons why the newsletter will never completely be overtaken by the Web 2.0. Wilcox notes that newsletters are efficient, tangible, portable, and convey an image of professionalism by the organization (p.353). Continued use of the newsletter as a communication tool by the school public relations practitioner must take into account the demographics of the community. Educational researchers (Delgado-Gaitan,1991; Lareau, 1987; Hughes & Wong, 2007; Peña, 2000; Ramirez, 2003) maintain that the selection of English-dominant communication creates barriers to a parental involvement by LEP parents. Consequently, it is key for school public relations practitioners to re-evaluate their method of communication if they want to include the Spanish-only speaking audience.

Newsom (1984) believes that improving the effectiveness of school public relations can be achieved by expanding the view of the community’s connection to the school. According to Newsom (1984) school administrators continue to view the publics as parents, school employees, and students. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) and Lareau (1987) assert the needs of the LEP parent are not being considered. Thus, the LEP parent is developing his own perception of the school and the district by not being given the opportunity to participate in school events (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lareau, 1987; Ramirez, 2003).

As Carroll & Carroll (1994) note, school districts and the public relations practitioner must determine who the “public” is by examining the demographic makeup of the community it serves. They define demographics as the study of human population in three particular areas: 1) growth or decline in population size; 2) composition of the population; and 3) distribution of the population (p. 40). This corresponds with the NSPRA philosophy which developed the R-A-C-E method in the execution of any public relations activity: *Research, Analyze, Communication, and Evaluate*. NSPRA recommends that before any public relations activity is carried out, the public relations practitioner should first research what needs to be communicated, and simultaneously determine who will be receiving the message. As Carroll & Carroll (1984) uphold, researching the “target audience” is the key to determining what the message will be and what the best method is to deliver that message. Researching the target audience entails determining what language would best meet the needs of the targeted population. Kowalski (2004) contends that public relations activities should contribute to the greater good, and that public relations activities should contribute to educational success. Evaluating the school public relations’ impact on the parental involvement program must be considered when implementing a school public relations program or when auditing its effectiveness.

A key step in communicating with the parent audience is to determine that besides just being a parent, what characteristics make up the “parent”? That question needs to be addressed by the school public relations practitioner with consideration to language comprehension.

Addressing Non-English Speakers

Reaching multicultural and multi-linguistic audiences is an issue faced by different industries. Recognizing that there exists a possible language barrier between the school district public relations office and the community it serves is just the first step in reconciling the divide. As it is in the education field, the healthcare industry is finding it necessary to begin addressing the needs of Spanish-only speakers if they are to be effective in the explanation of a diagnosis or treatment plans (Diaz-Duque, 1989; Wilson, Chen, Grumbach, Wang, & Fernandez, 2005). In a healthcare setting, the patient's or family's unfamiliarity with the English language can compromise the quality of care for limited-English proficient patients (Wilson, et.al). By not being able to communicate with the patient, the health of the patient can be compromised. In an educational setting, the same holds to be true. If parents are unaware of school requirements, policies, or procedures there could be repercussions to the educational advancement of the student. A language barrier exists and in order to get the message to the patient/parent, then steps need to be taken to address the obstacle.

To address the language barrier in a healthcare setting, translators are hired to assist the non-English speaking family, but verbal and nonverbal nuances and dialect can also pose problems with the use of translators (Diaz-Duque, 1989). Likewise, in attempting to address the language barrier between the school district and Spanish-only speaking parents, the school district can find itself in a similar situation. Without trained translators aware of the nuances of the language, the dialect of an area, or the correct translation for education-related terminology, translations can end up causing confusion

(Diaz-Duque, 1989; Sobel and Kugler, 2007). The issue of translation is outside the scope of this study but is notable for future research.

In another example of industries tackling the issue of non-English speaking customers, marketers are becoming aware that an individual's language preference can shape how the marketer crafts a marketing strategy. In a 1986 study by Dolinsky & Feinberg, the researchers hold that when a consumer is provided information "which exceeds their processing capacity, information overload is said to exist and results in less effective decision making" (p.261). For the purposes of their research, they studied linguistic differences and the presence of information overload and found that even if the consumer (or for purposes of this research, parents) understands just a little of the English language, the overwhelming feeling coming from the English-dominant communication can impair the consumer (parent) from making good decisions. "Marketers need to be sensitive to the fact that, even if proficient, Hispanics and other linguistic minorities may have difficulty processing consumer information and making effective consumer decisions when that information is presented in their non-dominant language" (p.270). When parents make the choice to become active in a parental involvement program it could also be compared to a consumer making a purchasing decision. If the parent is overwhelmed, the end result can be non-participation in parental involvement activities. Advertisers have discovered that reaching the targeted audience in their dominant language is more effective and prevents information overload thereby providing a more positive experience for the consumer (Hernandez & Newman, 1992). Perhaps in an effort to increase the level of parental involvement in schools, school public relations

practitioners can follow their counterparts and provide information in a language that would not overload or detract parents.

As school public relations practitioners continue to provide information to their parent community utilizing a district disseminated newsletter, it is these factors of linguistic differences that must be addressed if the intent is to truly have “buy-in” from their audience.

In the following methodology section the researcher examined the school district newsletter to observe the occurrences of English versus Spanish stories and the correlation to the LEP student population of the district. The methodology section explains how the content analysis was conducted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

To examine the language use of the school district disseminated newsletter, a content analysis of 22 school district created newsletters, representing eleven school districts was conducted. The results of those findings were compared with the demographic make-up, specifically the percentage of identified Limited English Proficient (LEP) students within that school district, to establish whether the publications created and disseminated by the school district are reflective of the demographics of the respective student body. In reviewing the newsletters, the researcher focused on four areas: (1) whether the language of the newsletter reflects the district's community, (2) whether the percentage of Spanish articles reflects the LEP percentage of the community, (3) of the stories that are written in Spanish, how are the stories categorized: feel good stories, regulatory stories, or school district information stories, (4) the method used to deliver the newsletter to the parent community.

For the purposes of this research, only newsletters from the public school system were evaluated. There are 37 school districts (N=37) spanning a 7 county area in the South Texas Region One service area — Cameron County, Hidalgo County, Jim Hogg County, Starr County, Webb County, Willacy County and Zapata County.

Newsletters were solicited from only those school districts with a full-time designated Public Information Department (N=17). Of those 17 school districts with a

full-time Public Information department, newsletters were obtained from 11 school districts (n=11). Requests for newsletters were made through email and follow-up telephone calls. When soliciting newsletters, it was explained that an analysis of school district newsletters was being conducted for a master's thesis. A request for a beginning of the school year or "Back to School" newsletter and a Spring newsletter was made so there could be a like comparison of newsletters. When those specific dates were not available, a newsletter close to the requested publication dates was collected. When newsletters were not provided upon the first request, another request was made via a telephone call. If newsletters were not provided after the second request, the researcher located archived newsletters on the school district website and printed them for review. If newsletters were unable to be located on the school district website, a final follow-up telephone call was made to solicit copies of the newsletter. A total of 22 newsletters, representing 11 school districts and four counties of the seven county area of Region One were obtained. These counties and their corresponding percentage of LEP students are reported as Cameron County (79.0%), Hidalgo County (83.1%), Webb County (66.0%), and Willacy County (10.3%) (2000, U.S. Census).

The school districts from the unrepresented three counties (Jim Hogg County, Starr County, and Zapata County) either did not have a public relations office or the public relations office did not publish a newsletter.

School District Newsletters

For the purposes of this research, "newsletters" are defined as publications developed and disseminated by the district public relations program to the education

community consisting of the district's internal public (school district employees), parents, and those residing in the district boundaries that do not have children in school. The newsletter publication collected was considered valid if it met these criteria. For the remainder of this paper, the school district disseminated newsletter will be referred to simply as "newsletter." These publications are distributed through a variety of methods including being mailed home to parents, posted on the school district web site, are sent home with students, or included as inserts in the local newspaper.

Parental Involvement

"Parental Involvement" is defined here as a parent's interaction with the school/school district and/or participation at school sponsored events or activities.

Typology

To examine the story themes that emerged in the data, a Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed. Stories were read and re-read to discover themes. First, using an open coding system, articles were read and grouped based on specific topics such as health related stories. Any story that referred, for example, to immunizations or warning signs for H1N1 virus was considered a health related story. Stories that announced winners of academic prizes or awards were grouped as winner stories. These articles included information such as UIL results. Another group that emerged was the rules grouping. These articles referred to campus policy, such as uniforms, school hours, and student conduct. Stories that explained state education mandates, such as state assessments, , new academic programs and child

nutrition guidelines were grouped as state stories. Articles about No Child Left Behind guidelines and NCLB assessments of school districts were grouped as federal stories. Pieces that announced events on campus such as band concerts, carnivals, fun days or crazy sock week were labeled as fun stories. Articles about district-events such as school dedications, student celebrations, and graduation events were labeled community stories. Articles containing information about items which needed votes, were labeled voting stories. These included topics such as bond issues and school board elections. Stories that announced new teachers, principals, superintendents or other staff positions within a district or about students who were involved in community projects were labeled people stories. Nine general categories were identified. Once these general categories were found, the axial coding process was employed to collapse the general categories into specific themes. Three main themes emerged:

1. **Feel good stories** — those stories meant to elicit positive response from the reader regarding school, district, or student accomplishments, (i.e. student group wins chess championship, U.I.L. team wins at meet);
2. **Regulatory stories** — those stories containing information about mandated initiatives by the Texas Education Agency or school district policy (i.e. testing dates, immunization requirements, drug use policy);
3. **Information stories** — those stories regarding news about the district (i.e. upcoming open-house schedule, football updates, availability of lunch services).

These themes were then compared to the researcher's fifteen plus years of personnel experience as a school public relations practitioner. The data collected and the

three major themes that emerged followed what the researcher has observed professionally.

After the typology was created, the researcher enlisted a second coder, who was not in the school public relations field, to categorize the news stories according to the typology of stories developed for this project. The researcher provided an overview of the research study. The second coder was then given a listing of each category, along with a definition of the category, and general examples of what each type of newsletter story would look like. Together the researcher and second coder reviewed the categories and the types of stories that would be included in each.

The coders coded ten newsletter stories in an area away from each other. Upon completion of the coding process, the researcher and second coder reviewed their results. In areas where there was a coding inconsistency, the newsletter story was discussed and agreement was reached. Inter-coder reliability resulted in 94.6%.

Data Discussion

To carry out the content analysis of the school district newsletters, first a simple frequency count was done to determine the total number of stories in each newsletter. Two newsletters from each school district, representing 4 of the seven counties of the Region One service area, were collected. A total of 647 stories were reviewed; 82 were written in Spanish. Approximately 14.5% of all stories are delivered in Spanish (see Table 2 below).

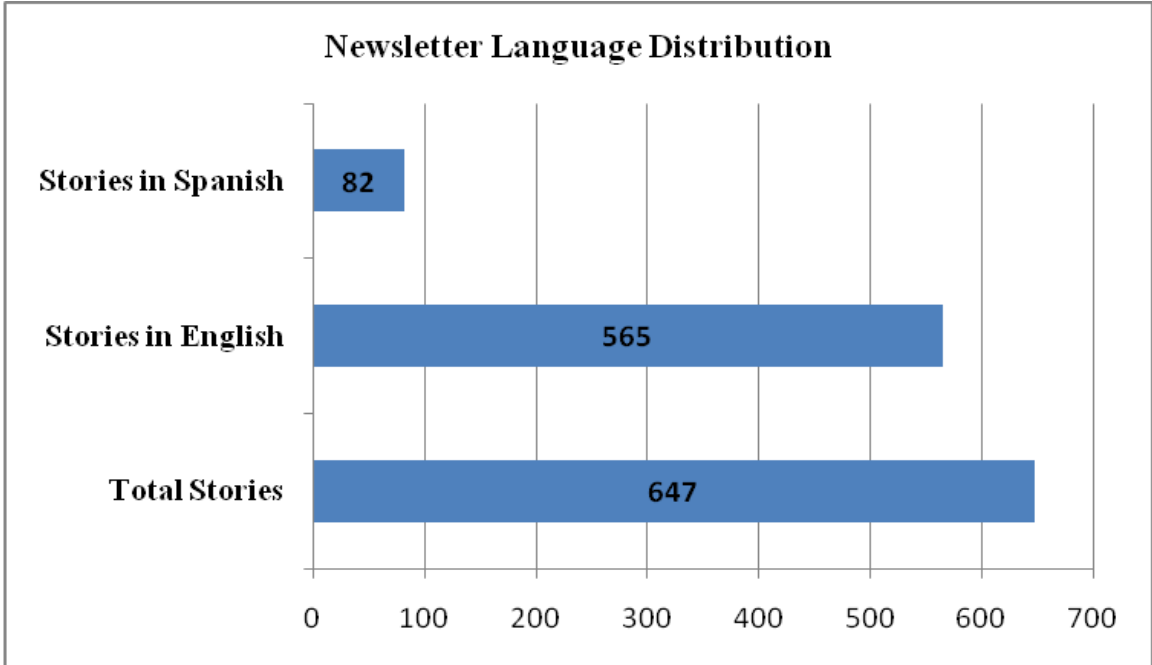


Table 2 Newsletter Language Distribution

In addition, an average LEP student family percentage over all districts was found to be 34.24% and an average of 83% of residents in those same counties reported speaking a language other than English (see Table 3 below).

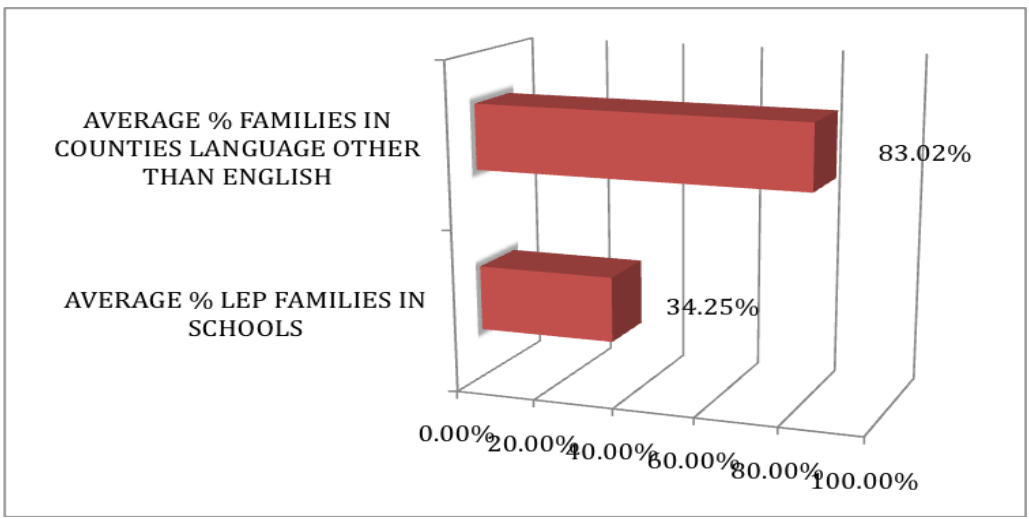


Table 3 Comparison of *Language Other than English* Families and LEP Families in Schools

Further breakdown of each district newsletter set revealed the following (see Table 4 and Table 5 below).

District A in Webb County with a 66% student LEP population and a 91.9% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 31 news stories; 0, or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District B in Willacy County with a 10.3% student LEP population and a 78.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 44 news stories; 21, or 47% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District C in Hidalgo County with a 41.5% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 36 news stories; 5 or .13% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District D in Hidalgo County with a 55.7% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 29 news stories; 3 or .14% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District E in Hidalgo County with a 31.9% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 52 news stories; 0 or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District F in Hidalgo County with a 35.2% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 51 news stories; 41 or 80% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District G in Hidalgo County with a 47% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 63 stories; 9 or .13% of the stories were written in Spanish.

Newsletter	Newsletter Date	Total # of Stories - English	Total # of stories in Spanish	% of Stories in Spanish	% of LEP in district	County Language Other than English	County
DISTRICT A	Aug.-09	22	0	0%	66%	91.9%	Webb
	Feb.-10	9	0	0%	66%	91.9%	Webb
TOTAL STORIES		31	0	0%			
DISTRICT B	Mar-09	21	10	47.6%	10.30%	78.1%	Willacy
	Oct-09	23	11	47.8%	10.30%	78.1%	
TOTAL STORIES		44	21	47.7%			
DISTRICT C	Aug-09	10	5	50%	41.50%	83.1%	Hidalgo
	Oct. 09-Jan. 10	26	0	0	41.50%	83.1%	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		36	5	13.9%			
DISTRICT D	Fall 2009	14	2	14.3%	55.70%	83.1%	Hidalgo
	Spring 2009	15	1	6.6%	55.70%	83.1%	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		29	3	10.3%			
DISTRICT E	Aug-09	8	0	0%	31.90%	83.1%	Hidalgo
	Nov-09	44	0	0%	31.90%	83.1%	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		52	0	0%			
DISTRICT F	Aug-09	31	31	100%	35.20%	83.1%	Hidalgo
	Jan-09	20	10	50%	35.2	83.1	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		51	41	80%			
DISTRICT G	Aug-09	27	11	39%	47%	83.1	Hidalgo
	Nov-09	41	1	2%	47%	83.1	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		68	12	18%			
DISTRICT H	Nov-09	93	0	0%	28%	83.1	Hidalgo
	Mar-10	112	0	0%	28%	83.1	Hidalgo
TOTAL STORIES		205	0	0%			
DISTRICT I	Oct-09	13	0	0%	24.30%	79	Cameron
	Spring 2010	3	0	0%	24.30%	79	Cameron
TOTAL STORIES		16	0	0%	0%		

DISTRICT J	Aug-09	10	0	0%	35.70%	79	Cameron
	Nov-08	7	0	0%	35.70%	79	Cameron
TOTAL STORIES		17	0	0%	0%		
DISTRICT K	Fall 2009	8	0	0%	1.20%	79	Cameron
	Spring 2010	8	0	0%	1.20%	79	Cameron
TOTAL STORIES		16	0	0%	0%		

2000 U.S. Census Report

Texas Education Agency, 2008-2009 AEIS Report

Table 4 District Demographics, Newsletter Composition

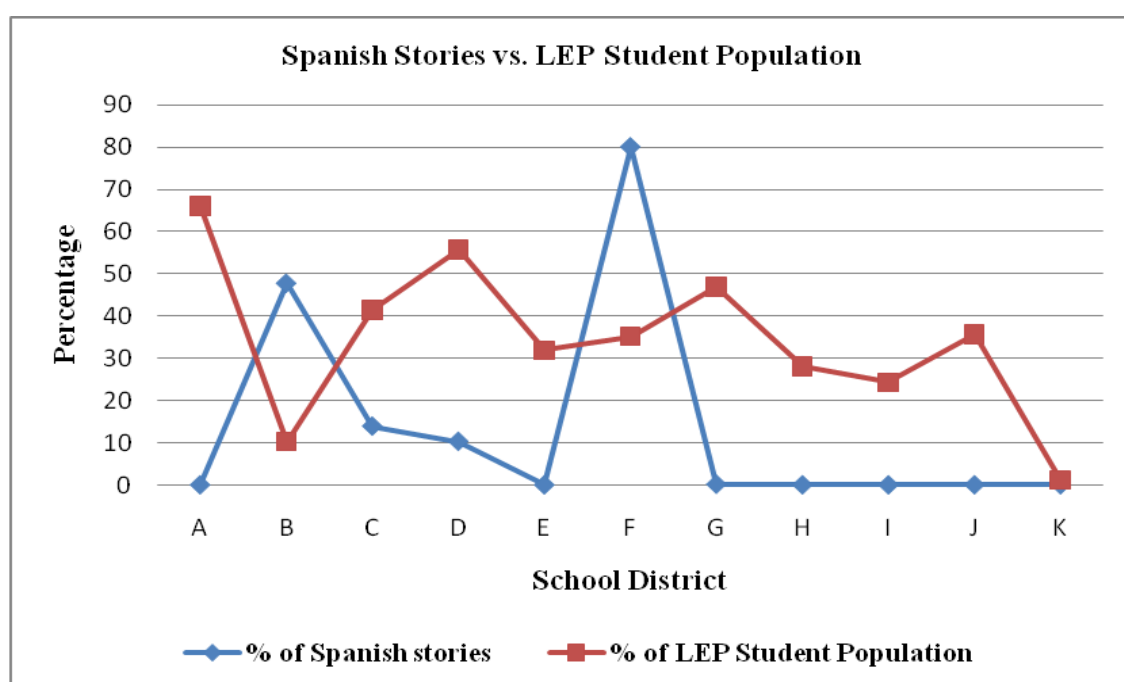


Table 5 Spanish Stories vs. LEP Student Population

District H in Hidalgo County with a 28% student LEP population and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 205 stories; 0 or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish. The occurrence of such a high volume of stories is due to the layout of the district newsletter. Each campus (total of 11 campuses in

elementary and secondary level) is given a page in the newsletter to submit to the district. As such, many of the “stories” are brief updates.

District I in Cameron County with a 24.3% student LEP population and a 79% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 16 news stories; 0 or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District J in Cameron County with a 35.7 % student LEP population and a 79% Language Other than English community population, had a total of 17 news stories; 0 or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish.

District K in Cameron County with a 1.2% LEP student population and a 79% Language Other than English community population had a total of 16 news stories; 0 or 0% of the stories were written in Spanish. It should be noted that District K is a special category of school district. While it is considered a public school district, the schools that comprise the district are considered specialized schools of study and the students that attend the schools in this district live in cities and towns throughout the Region One area.

In reviewing the results of the content analysis, the results seem polarized—either school districts are providing a fair amount of the information in Spanish or the availability of Spanish stories is non-existent. Additionally, there seems to be an opposite correlation between the percentage of LEP families in a district and the percentage of stories written in Spanish (see Table 5). Only 5 out of the 10 school district newsletters indicated a more than one percent representation of Spanish language stories. The highest representation of Spanish language stories was District F, which had an 80% representation of Spanish language stories in both issues of their submitted newsletter, (January 2009 and August 2009). These results far exceed the percentage of Spanish

stories in other school districts. The August 2009 “Back to School” edition showed a 100% representation of Spanish written stories. This newsletter was written entirely in Spanish; there is an English-only version of the same newsletter. Both newsletters contain identical stories. This Spanish-only newsletter is made available only for the Back to School edition. The Public Information Officer for District F explains in a survey response that a translator is used to translate the stories. In newsletter issues other than the Back to School edition, a determination as to which stories are translated is made according to the impact on students and parents, for example immunizations, health concerns, bond elections, and attendance.

Another significant showing in the percentage of newsletters with Spanish language stories is by District B, a community with a reported 10.3% of a student LEP population and a community Language Other than English population of 78%. The March 2009 edition of the newsletter had a 47.6% showing of Spanish language stories and the October 2009 newsletter indicated a 47% representation of Spanish language stories.

Of the remaining nine school districts studied, District C is a community of 41.5% LEP student representation and a 83.1% Language Other than English community population. In the August 2009 Back to School edition, 50% of the stories were written in Spanish. However, later that year, the October 2009-January 2010 quarterly edition demonstrated a 0% representation of Spanish stories. District D, with a 55.7% LEP student population and an 83.1% Language Other than English community population, had only a 10.3% overall representation of Spanish stories in the newsletters. In a similar fashion, District G, with a 47% student LEP population and the same 83.1% Language

Other than English community population demonstrated an almost equal representation of Spanish stories with only 14.3 % of their district's newsletter stories written in Spanish.

Of the remaining six districts, there were no stories written in Spanish in either of the two newsletters evaluated. Interestingly, the title of District A's newsletter is in Spanish but none of the 31 stories in either newsletter reviewed were written in Spanish. This school district has a 66% LEP student population and a 91.9% Language Other than English community population. Of those districts with no Spanish news stories in their newsletters, the LEP student population varies from 1.2% to 66%.

Typology of Stories

Once the number of English and Spanish written stories was determined, a further analysis of stories was evaluated—English or Spanish, then category of story..

Of the total 82 Spanish stories, “Feel good” stories comprised 15.47%, or 13, of the total Spanish stories. “Regulatory” stories made up 16.6%, or 14 Spanish stories, and “Informational” stories made up the majority of Spanish stories with 67.78% or 55 stories (see Table 6 below).

In the English stories grouping there were 565 stories. Of the English written stories, the “Feel Good” stories made up 31.15% of the grouping, or 176 stories. The “Regulatory” stories made up 3% of the stories with only 15 stories, and the “Informational” story category comprised 66.19% of the total English stories written with 374 stories (see Table 7 below).

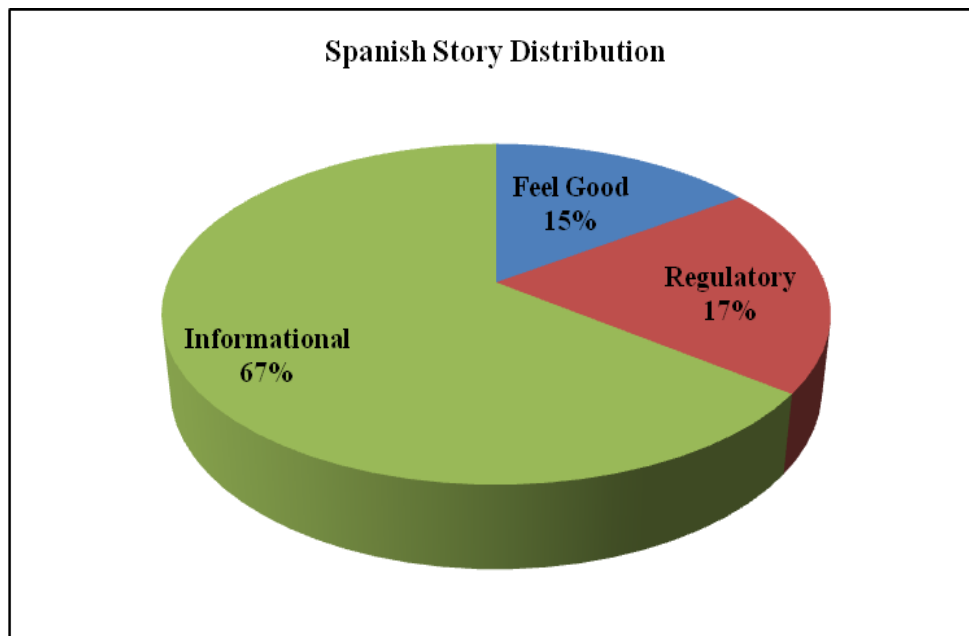


Table 6 Spanish Story Distribution by Category

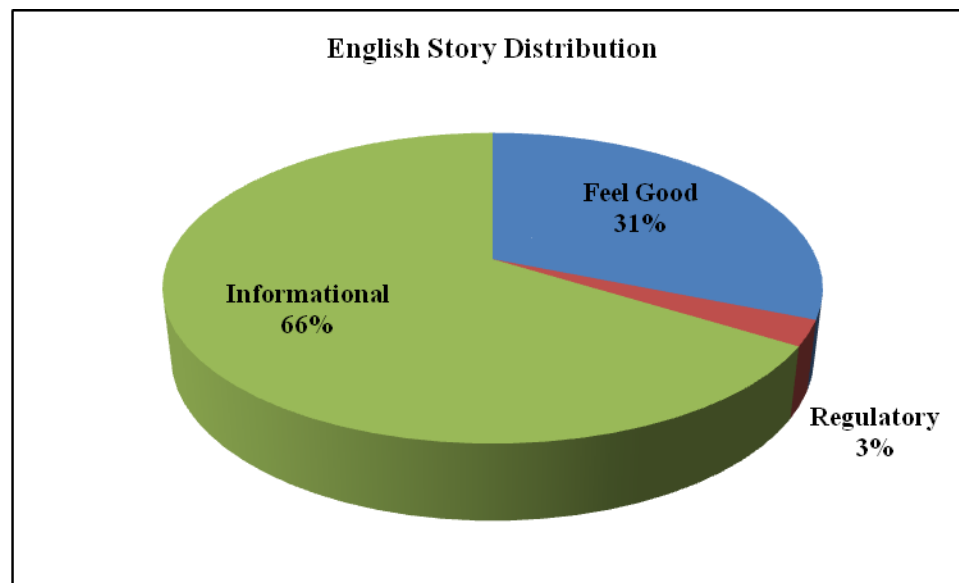


Table 7 English Story Distribution by Category

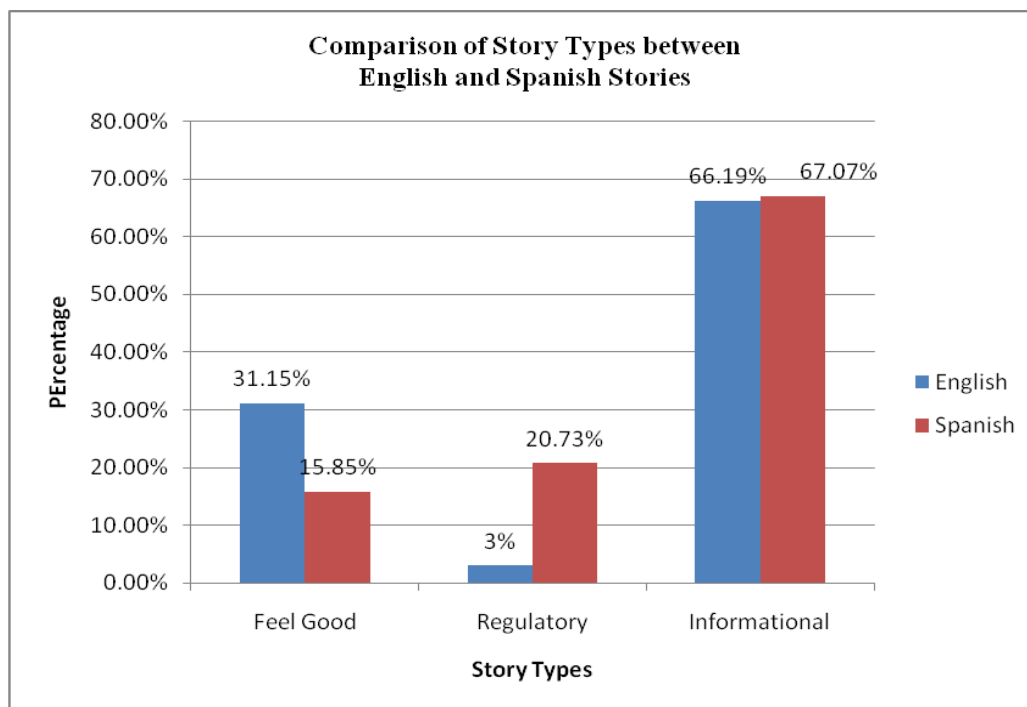


Table 8 Comparison of Story Types between English and Spanish written stories

Distribution Methods

Additional information regarding the school district newsletter was collected through a survey to investigate what planning goes into the school district newsletter to ensure it captures the target audience. A survey was e-mailed to the 17 school district public information offices. The response rate was 41% with 7 responses returned. The survey (Appendix C) sought to find out first if the district had a public information/community relations office and if that office develops a district newsletter, inclusive of the parent community. Questions regarding the newsletter asked about the distribution method of the district newsletter, whether a Spanish language newsletter for parents was published, if stories in the district newsletter included stories in Spanish, how

were stories translated, through a software program or human translator, and how is it determined which stories to translate into Spanish.

All seven responses indicated that a district newsletter was developed. Of the responses, only two districts (28%) indicated that they provide a Spanish language newsletter for parents. Six of the seven respondents indicated that they use a human translator to translate to Spanish, 0 indicated they used a software translator program, and one did not respond.

Regarding distribution methods, respondents indicated that they each utilize numerous methods to distribute the newsletter: three responded that they send newsletters home with the students, four indicated they insert the newsletter into the community newspaper, one indicated the newsletter was available online only, three indicated the newsletter is available at school, and other methods of disseminating the newsletter included U.S. mail and email. The distribution methods utilized to ensure that the newsletter reached as many of the educational community varied. There was not one consistent method for ensuring that the educational community receives the newsletter.

Although the distribution methods of school district disseminated newsletters is not paramount to this study, the researcher wanted to find out how it was determined if there was any one method of newsletter distribution used by school public relations practitioners.

How to determine which stories were translated varied among districts. Overall, districts evaluated whether a story directly impacted students and parents; the level of importance to the community, students, and parents; and those stories with a wider audience or outstanding achievement, when deciding which stories would be translated.

This approach is contrary to what researchers agree is key to school public relations; that public relations is a cooperative effort (Kindred, 1957), a two-way communication approach to develop an understanding of needs and practices between the school district and the community it serves, and creating a dialogue between the audience and the school (Walling, 1982). By making the determination of what stories are translated without asking the audience “What do you want to know about?” the needs of the audience are being disregarded.

With the information obtained through the content analysis of the school district newsletter, a summary, implications and conclusion follows.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The findings indicate that overall school public relations newsletters did not reflect the demographics of their community nor did the newsletters mirror the student LEP population. The stories that were written in Spanish were informational stories intended to help parents become more knowledgeable about the district. And, if the research by Delgado-Gaitan (1990) holds true that parents' knowledge about school activities, procedures, and policies increases the likelihood that they become involved, then the school public relations office could very likely make an impact on the academic success of the district.

But there is still a long way to go. Merely providing parents with information to make parents more informed does not mean they feel a part of the district (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Sharing all news with the parents is important — by sharing stories about awards being won by students at a local literary meet or about teachers who have reached a milestone in their career, all stories that would fall under the category of “Feel Good” stories, are as important as regulatory or informational stories. Knowing that there are opportunities for their child to excel outside of the classroom may help parents to find an

outlet for their child that will encourage the child to do better in the classroom, and then finally academic success can be achieved by the student. Not providing information to Spanish speaking parents with “Feel Good” or “Regulatory” stories is not giving parents the whole story.

In both the English and Spanish written groups, there was an overwhelming percentage of stories in the “Informational” story category with 63.87% and 67.78%, respectively. This may suggest that when deciding which stories are translated into Spanish, it is important that school districts inform parents about news about the district.

Differences arise in the grouping of “Feel Good” and “Regulatory” stories (see Table 8 below). The grouping of the English “Feel Good” stories was almost twice that of the Spanish “Feel Good” stories. Examination of the “Regulatory” stories shows an almost non-existent showing in the English story category whereas the Spanish story category is 16.66%. For English stories it suggests that informing and congratulating takes precedence over the need to convey information regarding rules and regulations.

In trying to provide Spanish dominant parents with information in their native language, public relations practitioners must be cautioned when translating. As in the case of the healthcare field, literal translations cannot be made without thought about the nuances of the language (Diaz-Duque, 1989; Sobel and Kugler, 2007). In the survey of Region One area school public relations practitioners, all indicated that they use a human translator instead of a software translator program. Because of the high percentage of Spanish speaking personnel within a school district, it is likely that the translator is familiar with the regional nuances of the Spanish language. However, this is not always the case. The best example of what “not” to do was found in a newsletter article by

District B in which the English article entitled, “Head of the Class,” a story about high academic achievers was translated to “*Cabeza de Clase*” a *literal* translation which does not translate to the idea of the story. That Spanish translation literally meant the “head” of the class, like the head that has two eyes, a nose and a mouth.

Limitations

A limitation to this research study was that the purposive sampling of only those school districts with a full-time public information office omitted school districts who still communicate with their community. There may be school districts that have identified a staff member to carry out the responsibility of producing a newsletter, in addition to their other duties, that would have eliminated the district from analysis in this study. Also, that not all school districts were represented and only two newsletters from each school district were included in the analysis, limited the scope of this study. By evaluating more newsletters, or perhaps other methods of communication with parents, it may indicate that the LEP parent community is being addressed in a different manner. An evaluation of possible other methods of communication with parents may have produced a different outcome.

Another weakness of this research study was a limitation in accurately identifying the Spanish-only parent community within a school district. A suggestion was offered that parents of LEP students would themselves likely be limited in their English proficiency. This assumption may not be entirely reflective of the Spanish-only speaking community. Furthermore, simply because the parent does not speak English does not

negate the possibility that another person in the household is translating the information for the non-English speaking parent. The identification of the LEP student population as reported by the Texas Education Agency also presents possible flaws. The Texas Education Agency derives this number based on the results of a Home Language Survey that itself is problematic because it is a self-report; depending on who completes the questionnaire, it may not be indicative of the language spoken at home. Additionally, the information made available by the Texas Education Agency is not current information because the information that is currently available represents the student population from the prior school year.

In a similar fashion, a possible fault of this research study is that the data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau is out-dated because the available information regarding “Language Other than English” is information that is 10 years old. As this research is being conducted, the U.S. Census Bureau is currently conducting its 2010 Census count and is not available for this study.

Future Research

The implications for future research in this area are vast. First, the focus of this study is in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, an area where the non-English speaking population is predominantly Spanish speaking. Future research could be directed in other areas where another language, other than Spanish, is spoken in homes or where the larger community included numerous different home languages.

The merger of these streams of thought — school public relations, language choice, and level of parental involvement — adds another dimension to the responsibilities of the public relations program. Research can be directed to gauge the parent's perceptions of English-dominant information by the district to determine if there is an impact on parent participation at the campus and district level. If so, it may prompt school public relations practitioners to re-evaluate the goals of the public relations program and to determine their role in the public education arena. Is it simply to add to the district's image or is the program used as a tool to truly enhance and improve communications and build relationships between the district and its public?

The relationship between parental involvement and student success was presented throughout this research acknowledging that parental participation is contingent upon how much the parent knows about the school, what is occurring outside of the classroom, and if parents feel welcome in the school. Further studies can evaluate the perceived level of communication by parents and the correlation to parental participation and academic success of the district of campus.

Recognizing that there is a need to communicate with a population that does not speak English, as in the healthcare industry noted earlier, the education field may investigate the use of translators for their communication needs. Further research could possibly be directed at the level of existing methods of translation in public school communications and how it is accepted by the non-English speaking community.

Finally, the basis of this research was to evaluate the inclusion of Spanish language stories in school district disseminated newsletters. It was determined that despite the student LEP population and Language Other than English community

population a small percentage of stories were written in Spanish. A possible research stream could be to investigate the barriers to the inclusion of non-English language news stories in school districts where there is a high percentage of an other than English speaking population.

In addition, as noted in the discussion section of this paper there is an inequality between the percentage of English and Spanish written news stories when looking at the grouping of “Feel Good” and “Regulatory” news stories. Future research could include a further examination into what information is conveyed to non-English speaking parents, and why that information was selected.

Summary

Previous researchers maintain that parental participation and awareness holds the key to academic success. While increased levels of parent participation and awareness may not solve all the education problems that ail school districts it is certainly a relatively inexpensive remedy worth pursuing. This research study indicated that there is not an equal representation of English and Spanish written news stories in newsletters that are intended as informational items for the community which a school district serves.

Recognizing that there exists a segment of the population that is not being addressed, at least through the district newsletter (a district-identified method of communication with the parent community), school district public information offices should begin to explore alternative methods to ensure that this population is not overlooked. For whatever reasons that a school district public information office may

have for not including Spanish written news stories in district-circulated information pieces, if the intent is to involve all parents in the school district then the district may consider how it communicates with all parents.

What should school public relations practitioners now do with this information?

First of all, it is evident that as small attempts are made to inform the non-English speaking parents of happenings within the district to gain their understanding and support, this segment of the parent population appears to be slipping through the cracks. In some instances the non-English speaking population may be small in comparison to the majority of families, but the fact remains that these families are still members of the school district community. Efforts must be made to communicate with this segment of the population by either increasing the number of Spanish stories included in the district newsletter or the creation of a newsletter written exclusively in Spanish.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Home Language Survey

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT/CHARTER SCHOOL
HOME LANGUAGE SURVEY-19TAC Chapter 89, Subchapter BB §89.1215

TO BE COMPLETED BY PARENT OR GUARDIAN (OR STUDENT IF GRADES 9-12). The state of Texas requires that the following information be completed for each student that enrolls for the first time in Texas public schools. This survey shall be kept in each student's permanent record folder.

NAME OF STUDENT _____ **STUDENT ID#** _____

ADDRESS _____ **TELEPHONE #** _____

CAMPUS _____

1. What language is spoken in your home most of the time? _____

2. What language does your child (do you) speak most of the time? _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Student if Grades 9-12

Date

Cuestionario del idioma que se habla en el hogar

DEBE DE COMPLETARSE POR EL PADRE/MADRE/ O REPRESENTANTE LEGAL: (O POR EL ESTUDIANTE SI ESTA EN LOS GRADOS 9-12): El estado de Texas requiere que la siguiente información se complete para cada estudiante que se matricula por primera vez en una escuela pública de Texas. Este cuestionario se archivará en el expediente del estudiante.

NOMBRE DEL ESTUDIANTE _____ **#ID** _____

DIRECCION _____ **TELEFONO** _____

ESCUELA _____

1. ¿Qué idioma se habla en su hogar la mayoría del tiempo? _____

2. ¿Qué idioma habla su hijo/a (usted) la mayoría del tiempo? _____

Firma del Padre/Madre/ o Representante Legal

Fecha

Firma del estudiante si está en los grados 9-12

Fecha

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

Newsletter Questionnaire

Please complete the following questionnaire as it pertains to the newsletter created by the school district's public information/community relations office.

1. Does your school district have a designated public information office/community relations office?
 _____ Yes _____ No

2. Does your public information office develop a district newsletter for the community, inclusive of parents?
 _____ Yes _____ No

3. How is the newsletter distributed to parents?
 _____ Sent home with student
 _____ As insert in community newspaper
 _____ Available online only
 _____ Available at schools
 _____ Other (please explain)

4. Does your district offer a Spanish language newsletter for parents?
 _____ Yes _____ No

5. Do you include Spanish written stories in your district newsletter?
 _____ Yes _____ No

6. Do you have a translator who translates stories or do you use a computer software program to translate?
 _____ Translator _____ Computer Software Program

7. How do you determine which stories are written/translated?

Name of School District: _____

Person completing questionnaire: _____

Job Role of Person Completing Questionnaire: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Annette Serventi Garcia received her Bachelor of Arts from Southwest Texas State University in 1988 with a major field of specialization in Broadcast Journalism.

She has worked in the field of school public relations for the past 15 years. Currently, she has served as the public information officer for the Region One Education Service Center, a position held for the past twelve years. Prior to that, she worked as the public information officer for the La Joya Independent School District, located in South Texas, and a member school district of the Region One Education Service Center area.

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