IMPROVING THE IMAGE, IDENTITY, AND REPUTATION

OF URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

A Record of Study

by

ROBERT RAYMOND STOCKWELL, JR.

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2010

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,   Jean A. Madsen
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ABSTRACT

Improving the Image, Identity, and Reputation of Urban School Systems. (May 2010)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Jean A. Madsen

This collective qualitative case study explores the ways American urban school districts engage in image management and reputation building activities to sustain their on-going organizational improvement efforts and maintain public support. The study catalogues the internal and external communication and media relations strategies utilized by three urban districts to manage their public image, identity, and reputation. District officers were found to be generally aware of their district's image in the community, their own role in projecting and improving that image, and the positive or negative identity of the employees in relation to the district's image. The concepts of organizational adaptive instability and mutability were found to be most important to urban district leaders as they all described their response to organizational challenges by sharing information with internal and external stakeholders and focusing on long-term improvement efforts. Accountability for effectiveness and efficiency was found to be the most dominant theme related to reputation. This study suggests that urban districts need to manage their public image through a well developed communications plan that focuses on projecting a district image of continuous improvement, clearly defines roles in district communication, and utilizes professional communications expertise.

DEDICATION

To my wife, Anna Stockwell,

and my children, Allison, Robert, Victoria, and Raymond

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Madsen, and my committee members, Dr. Skrla, Dr. Torres, and Dr. Welch for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. I would like to give a special thank you to Dr. Madsen for introducing me to my topic and for her dedicated efforts to keep me on track to produce a quality result.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing concern over the public's abandonment of urban public school systems. Urban school districts are often characterized in community discussions as chaotic, ineffective, and unsafe. The fact is that the reputation of most urban school districts has been declining over a long period of time. Despite the valiant efforts of many urban district leaders to implement improvement initiatives in these urban districts, their efforts are frequently viewed with skepticism by the public.

It is important for urban district leaders to understand why the public is so skeptical of their improvement efforts and sometimes indifferent to any demonstrable improvement in the school system and understand the underlying factors that contribute to public disaffection and the poor public reputation of urban school systems. David Mathews (1996) catalogues the growing disaffection of the public with its public institutions in general and with public education specifically. Mathews cites "media hype" as one of the factors affecting the public's perception of disorder in urban school systems. He cites this as one of several reasons the public is "slipping away" from public schools. When the community "slips away" from an urban school district, it can mean that the community withdraws or limits its support for the system, including financial support.

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This record of study follows the style of *Educational Administration Quarterly.*

Urban school systems are often perceived as being both inefficient and ineffective. School systems, like businesses, are large, complex, and open political organizations that are highly sensitive to public perceptions of efficiency and effectiveness (Whetten, 1981). Public perception and public voting behavior is often disconnected from actual urban school district performance because the public is unaware of the facts about the system. The public does not have a balanced picture of what is actually occurring in the district because of slanted negative media coverage and the failure of district leaders to provide other sources of information.

Urban school districts are often situated in urban cities with multiple news media outlets. These urban school systems struggle to maintain public financial support because they are subjected to a constant barrage of negative media attention. Funding for building and maintenance programs and tax increases for growing operational expenses are often difficult to gain from a distrusting public that is fed a steady diet of bad news by the news media. Good news of organizational improvement is rarely reported, while almost any bad news is exaggerated and seized upon as justification for abandonment. Consequently, urban school systems find it difficult to positively engage their largely skeptical public, whose primary source of information is the news media. Urban school districts are frequently ill-equipped to deal with the news media or to effectively communicate with their public stakeholders through other means. Educators are primarily trained for the work of teaching and learning, not public relations. Educators lack the communications and marketing expertise necessary to effectively manage and counter negative media coverage.

One place urban educators can look for understanding of communications, media relations, and marketing is in public affairs research. A conversation exists in public affairs literature concerning organizational identity, image, and reputation in relation to the effectiveness of business organizations. Few studies have focused on these concepts in the field of education, especially as they relate to urban school systems. Most discussions of communications and media relations in the education literature focus on crisis management, not long-term communications strategy. There is little discussion in the literature of exactly how school districts can build internal communication systems to effectively market themselves to their public. This study seeks to bring the discussion of the importance of organizational image, identity, and reputation to the forefront of the urban school reform movement.

Urban school systems must take more effective action to educate and engage the voting, tax-paying public if they are to sustain reform efforts and maintain public support. Before district leaders can take effective action, they must understand exactly how the public's image of urban public school systems is created. They must understand the communications mechanisms by which public image is formed and maintained and also the role the news media plays in that process. District leaders must also understand how their own employees play a role in influencing the public's perceptions. School district leaders must understand how the public image and reputation of an urban school system can be improved if they are to effectively maintain public support and sustain change.

Background

In order to provide a theoretical foundation for this discussion of how to better sustain public support for urban education, this study draws from two important theoretical frameworks: new institutionalism and public affairs research. Together, these two theoretical perspectives help form a more complete theoretical framework in which to understand urban school districts. New institutionalism studies the behavior of organizations from a sociological perspective. New institutionalism helps us understand how school districts are like other institutions and how school districts interact with other organizations within their institutional environment. Public affairs research focuses on the communication and marketing activities of organizations such as school districts that are necessary for the management of their public image. Like other organizations, effective image management is necessary to urban school districts' economic success and long-term survival.

These two theoretical perspectives intersect on two important concepts: organizational permeability and adaptive instability. New institutionalism proposes that organizational boundaries of organizations like urban school districts are permeable, and organizational subunits, and the people within them, interact with other institutions across organizational boundaries. This idea of permeability connects with public affairs research, which emphasizes the importance of internal stakeholders' in supporting or undermining management's efforts to project a positive image and enhance organizational reputation. Both theoretical perspectives contribute to a more complete understanding of the context in which urban school districts operate and why they must engage in image management.

The second important connection between the two theoretical perspectives occurs between the new institutionalism concept of *mutability*, which is the organization's ability to adapt and change in response to internal inconsistencies (Clemens & Cook, 1999), and the public affairs research concept of *adaptive instability*, which is the dynamic tension that exists between organizational image, identity, and reputation that provides the organizational rationale and motivation for change and survival (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Both mutability and adaptive instability suggest that organizations such as urban school districts must adapt and change in order to survive. Urban school districts, with their negative public images and poor reputations, must communicate a clear commitment to organizational change and improvement, if they are to receive sustained public support. A review of the development of these new institutionalism and public affairs concepts provides a helpful background in which to understand the importance of urban school districts' communications and media relations activities.

An overview of new institutionalism begins with Meyer and Rowan (1983), who point out that all organizations are not just internally interdependent systems, but are actually dependent subunits within the wider institutional environment. Urban school systems exist in an institutional environment consisting of a variety of organizations including businesses, governmental entities, and other educational organizations. Meyer (1984) proposed that the structural elaboration of organizations occurs along lines where the environment demands accountability and on which the environment provides rationalized definitions. Urban school systems, like other institutions, are accountable to their institutional environment and must adapt their organizational structures in response to environmental demands.

Other important new institutional researchers, such as Clemens and Cook (1999), review the new institutional concept of *mutability*, which is the way organizations reproduce their core functions and activities within legitimate boundaries, while *mutating and adapting* in order to survive. They suggest that internal contradictions within organizations create a degree of instability in beliefs and practice. This internal instability, coupled with multiple tensions that arise between institutions creates organizational instability that promotes change and, at times, threatens organization survival. Urban school systems experience a great deal of internal instability and conflict as they change and attempt to meet public demands for accountability.

Rowan and Miskel (1999) point out that public education is experiencing an extended period of conflict and instability arising from greater public pressure to exercise control over teaching and learning, while at the same time experiencing greater pressure to maintain legitimacy in the institutional environment. This conflict is most apparent in urban school settings. So the question then becomes what should school district leaders do in order to help their districts adapt and survive in this period of greater institutional instability?

Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002) note that institutions such as urban school districts do change over time. They suggest that institutional theorists and researchers ought to develop new understandings of the manner in which institutions are created, transformed, and extinguished and the way in which institutional processes interact to affect institutional change (Dacin et al., 2002, p. 45.) These authors are interested in the primary sources or

drivers of institutional change, the factors that influence how organizations respond to organizational change, and how new institutional forms emerge (Dacin, et al., 2002, p.45).

In charting the future direction for the development of institutional theory, Charles Bidwell (2006, p. 46) calls for a study of how communication and persuasion are employed to create commitment to institutions. Urban school districts do not always communicate effectively with their public and are experiencing declining commitment in their urban communities. How should public education entities, especially urban school districts, respond to this changed educational institutional environment demanding both legitimacy and accountability from them? Where can urban school district leaders find meaningful research on communication, media relations, and persuasion? For a partial answer, we turn now to public affairs research on image management.

A review of public affairs research begins with Fombrun and Shanley (1990), who discuss the interaction of organizational information with media reporting and their mutual influence on public perception of a particular organization. They discuss the process by which stakeholders gauge the relative merits of an organization by interpreting ambiguous informational signals from the organization itself, from the media, and from organizational monitors such as auditors, regulators, accreditation agencies, etc. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) also discuss the variation in stakeholder judgment criteria for a given organization. Multiple stakeholders apply multiple and varied judgment criteria to the organization. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) also comment on the negative effects of both intense positive and intense negative media attention on organizational reputation. The findings of

organizational monitors of urban school districts are very often reported in the news media. At times, the news media may editorialize on its own interpretation of the organizational monitors' findings. In the opinion of Fombrun and Shanley (1990), both community constituents and media influence information on which reputation is based. The authors conclude that organizations must see *reputation building* as a longitudinal process in order to attain a stable positive reputation. Few urban school districts seem cognizant of the necessity to actively engage in long-term reputation building activities, nor do they seem fully cognizant of the interaction between their own information-giving activities and news media reporting.

Another important public affairs study was done by Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000), who review the public affairs literature concerned with organizational identity and image. They review the concepts of individual and organizational identity and then provide an overview of the various forms of image discussed in the public affairs literature. They also identify and define important nuances of the concepts of image, identity, and reputation. The authors go on to formulate the concept of *adaptive instability*, which proposes a dynamic relationship between organizational identity, image, and reputation (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). In their view, adaptive instability has implications for change management in all large organizations. Large urban school districts would certainly be included in this set of large organizations. The authors acknowledge the role of the news media in the formation of organizational identity, image, and reputation. The authors also recognize the importance of employees as internal stakeholders (Gioia et al., 2000). A key assertion of the authors is that employee identity is mutable and impacted by organizational image. Each

employee's individual identity is affected and redefined by the corporate image over time. There is a relationship between the internal members' perceptions of organizational image and outsiders' perceptions. This dynamic sets up the condition of adaptive instability, which presents an opportunity for management to lead change and evolve the organization in new and positive directions. The authors conclude that the strategic concern of management is not the preservation of a fixed organizational identity, but rather the ability to manage and balance a flexible organizational identity in light of shifting external images. This would seem to be an accurate description of the challenge facing school boards and superintendents of urban public school districts.

The concept of identity was further elaborated in public affairs research by Corley, Cochran, and Comstock (2000), who examine the direct and indirect effects of organizational image on employees. They suggest that organizations must be very concerned about the ways images intended for external stakeholders are actually received by employees. They warn that in an era of limited corporate loyalty, public affairs issues impact employees. Employees compare management's projected image of the organization to their own personally held image and are extremely sensitive to perceived gaps between their personal image and the one projected by the organization. Thus, employees are highly susceptible to external perceptions, and they are also alert to perceived or deliberate misrepresentations. This mechanism can erode employee confidence, encouraging turnover or whistle-blowing behavior. Employees' perceptions of these images are moderated by direct contact with external stakeholders and through the *media projected image* of the organization. Urban school district employees watch the news, read the newspaper, and come in contact with

members of the public. The urban district employees compare what they see and hear from external information sources such as the media or members of the community with the messages they receive from internal information sources, and urban district employees are very sensitive to inconsistencies or deliberate misrepresentations.

Another important finding of Corley and his colleagues (Corley et al., 2000) is very important for urban district leaders to consider. They found that if external stakeholders have a negative view of the organization, the employees of the organization will absorb some of this negative view. The authors refer to this as *reflected images*. Reflected images operate as a looking-glass effect that tends to be very powerful because instead of confronting feelings of self-definition and self-esteem only internally (personally and privately), employees are confronted with others' perceptions of both the organization as a whole and the individual, as a member of that organization. This study confirms that employees of an urban school district hold a personal image of the organization and are extremely sensitive to the images held by external stakeholders. These reflected images may affect employees own personal identity as a member of urban school districts. Corley and his colleague's (2000) study suggests that internal communication with employees in urban school districts is just as important as external communication with external stakeholders and the general public.   Further, their study illustrates that the accuracy, integrity, and congruence of both internal and external communication is very important to an urban school district's ability to sustain employee loyalty and commitment.

Theoretically then, drawing from new institutionalism and public affairs research, urban school districts must realize that they operate in an institutional environment that exerts an influence on them and demands accountability from them. Responding effectively to these institutional pressures requires that urban districts mutate and adapt in order to survive. Public perceptions about the urban school district's progress in improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency depends heavily on the interaction of organization information, news media reporting, and information from regulatory agencies. The image, identity, and reputation of an urban school district will improve only if the district focuses on honest, open internal communication with employees, while also communicating effectively with external stakeholders, including the news media. Urban school districts that communicate in a consistent and congruent effort with internal and external stakeholders should be more able to build a positive reputation and sustain public support.

Problem Statement

Little empirical research exists in the literature of urban school district reform to explain how urban school systems can improve their public image and reputation in an environment characterized by declining public trust of public institutions and intense negative news media reporting. The question posed then is: How can urban school systems improve their public image and reputation? Adequate information is not available to explain how urban school districts can maintain public commitment and survive as institutions in modern society (Dacin et al., 2002; Bidwell, 2006). Urban public schools are situated in intense media environments where the news media continuously feed the growing public dissatisfaction with the institution of public schools (Mathews, 1996; Rowan & Miskel,

1999).   Urban school districts are experiencing declining enrollment and are having great difficulty in increasing or sometimes even maintaining public financial support. The urban environment is characterized by increasing competition for students and increasing numbers of alternative providers, such as private schools, charter schools, and home-schooling (Rowan & Miskel, 1999).   There are two important theoretical perspectives that provide insight into this problem: new institutionalism and public affairs research.

New institutionalism offers concepts such as environmental dependence (Meyer & Rowan, 1983), isomorphism (Meyer & Rowan, 1991), structural elaboration (Meyer, 1984), mutability (Clemens & Cook, 1999), legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1991), and accountability (Rowan & Miskel, 1999) that give some insight into how to deconstruct the reputation of urban public schools as institutions. New institutional writers have pointed out that urban school districts have been experiencing an extended period of conflict and instability arising from increased public demand for accountability with no decrease in the expectation for maintaining legitimacy in the institutional environment (Rowan & Miskel, 1999).   New institutional theorists are very interested in how institutions, such as urban public school districts, thrive or decline as they respond to performance, political, and social pressures (Dacin et al., 2002) and engage in organizational activities designed to sustain or increase commitment to the institution (Bidwell, 2006).

Public Affairs research provides concepts such as image, identity, adaptive instability, and reputation, component concepts of the image management activities that institutions use to maintain commitment from employees and the public (Gioia et al., 2000).   Public affairs

research places a great deal of emphasis on the internal environment of institutions. Employees play an important role in the image management process, especially the commitment to on-going change and organizational improvement (Corley et al., 2000). So we look to the public affairs research to provide some possible answers to new institutional writers' questions about how institutions in general and urban school districts in particular can survive and sustain public support and commitment (Dacin et al., 2002; Bidwell, 2006).

Little empirical research exists that measures the effectiveness of urban school districts' efforts to build and improve their public image and reputation through internal and external communication. Without meaningful research on how to communicate effectively about their improvement efforts and improve their public image and reputation, urban school districts will continue to see their public support slip away. The goal of this study is to determine if successful urban school systems have more effective internal and external communication systems than less successful urban districts. A successful urban school system is one that is characterized by increasing student enrollment, recent public financial support, improved overall performance, and a generally positive public reputation. This study will explore how leaders of urban school districts engage in internal and external communication in an effort to maintain organizational direction and improvement, improve the public image and reputation, and sustain public support of their respective districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore how urban school districts can improve their public image and reputation. The study examined how urban school district leaders

communicate both internally and externally in order to improve their district's public image, manage district change and improvement, and sustain public commitment to the district (Gioia et al., 2000; Corley et al., 2000; Dacin et al., 2002; Bidwell, 2006). The study explored how district leaders' internal communication with employees impacts the critical interaction of employee identity and organizational image (Gioia et al., 2000; Corley et al., 2000). The study also explored two major components of external communication: communication with the news media (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990) and direct communication with external stakeholders (Dacin et al., 2002; Bidwell, 2006).

Significance of the Study

This study promises to add to literature of urban school district reform by linking concepts from new institutionalism and public affairs research and demonstrating their relevance and applicability to urban public school systems. The study explores how urban school systems currently engage in image management activities and manage organizational change (Gioia et al., 2000; Corley et al., 2000) in response to the conflict and instability arising from public demands for better performance and the related political and social pressures that arise (Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Dacin et al., 2002). The study analyzes the thought process, level of understanding, and choice of communication strategies of urban district leaders in their management of the public image of their respective institutions and their response to the performance, political, and social pressures they face in their institutional context (Dacin et al., 2002). The study explores how selected urban district leaders' sustain on-going organizational improvement and maintain public commitment to their districts in the context of the intense media environments of their respective urban communities (Bidwell, 2006).

In addition, the study illuminates possible factors such as internal and external communications that affect the adaptation and survival of the institution of urban public schools (Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Dacin et al., 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). The study promises to provide a better understanding of how urban district leaders can effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders in order to improve their districts' public image and reputation, sustain district change and improvement, maintain public support, and help their district and the institution of urban public education adapt and survive.

Overview of Methodology

Data Collection

For this study, a qualitative case study approach was employed (Merriam, 1998). This study utilizes a collective case study approach involving three separate urban school districts (Stake, 1995). Data included interviews, observations, field notes, website reviews, and document reviews. The superintendent, the communications officer, and the school board president were interviewed, using a set of pre-established questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) that centered on associated internal and external communication systems, processes, and procedures.

Data Sources

The data sources for this study included websites, documents, observations, and interviews. Three large urban school districts, from different geographic regions of the United States,

with 50,000 or more students were identified for study. Districts were selected that had recently sought public support to increase operating revenue, despite high levels of negative media attention. Each district was situated in a major media market with multiple local newspapers, radio outlets, and television stations. The success of the selected districts was determined by the achievement trend of the students. District performance was determined by a set of factors including: student achievement data, negative and positive news media reports within a predetermined timeframe, ability to maintain public support for district funding, and stability of district leadership. The districts websites and documents were reviewed for evidence of internal and external communications strategies related to district image, identity, and reputation. Observations of district communications activities were also made while conducting interviews of each district's superintendent, board president, and communications officer.

Data Analysis

Multiple sources of information were analyzed holistically (Yin, 2003) utilizing a prior-research-driven thematic code (Boyatzis, 1998). Participant interviews served as the primary unit of analysis. Prior to interviews being conducted, the district's web sites and publications were thoroughly examined. A coding process was developed, based on factors associated with effective internal and external communication practices. Document analysis was conducted of district's use of internal and external communication materials. The documents were analyzed and coded for recurring themes. Document analysis included district web sites, public relations materials, newspaper articles, district's accountability and financial reports, and inside communication at the district level. A qualitative thematic

strategy was used to categorize the data and interpret the findings, identifying commonalities in the way effective school systems communicate with internal and external publics in order to ascertain how the business related concepts of image, identity, and reputation may or may not apply to educational settings. The themes (see Appendix A) were developed based on prior research constructs from new institutionalism and public affairs research. These themes were used to compare the research concepts from new institutionalism and public affairs literature with district leaders' perceptions of their internal and external communications strategies and practices.

In order to establish reliability for this study, the data was analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. The interview data and the existing theory were matched. In order to avoid data contamination, an explicit code was developed to establish consistency of judgment and reliability. Multiple diverse perspectives were used to examine communication officer comments, and interpretation was sensitive to the inherent themes of the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Research Questions

The broader set of research questions the study is intended to answer are:

- How is the public's image of an urban school system formed and maintained?

- How does the public image and reputation of an urban school district affect its enrollment?

- How does the student achievement trend affect the public image and reputation of an urban school district?

- How does the public news media impact the formation and maintenance of an urban school system's public image and reputation?

- How does the positive or negative identity of school district employees' affect public perception of a given urban educational system?

- What role do sophisticated communication strategies, systems, and processes play in school systems' ability to sustain or increase public support?

- How can the reputation of an urban school system be changed or improved?

Limitations

This study is limited to data collected from three large, urban public school systems in 2008 and 2009. Small, private, rural, and suburban districts were consciously excluded from the study. This small sample of large, urban public school districts limits the ability to generalize the findings to all school districts. The limitations of this study involve participant sampling and lack of theoretical saturation; limited involvement of participants in theory development and revision; and the idiosyncratic aspects of investigator bias. The study also includes a limited focus on issues of race and other socio-economic factors commonly associated with the public image and reputation of urban school districts.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the superintendent, board president, and communications officer of the large urban school districts studied were important informants of their district's internal and external communication efforts and resources. It is further assumed

that the persons in these roles are finely attuned to the organizational identity, public image, and reputation of their respective school districts.

Definition of Key Terms

The following specific terms are central to this study and used throughout this record of study. They also form the basis of the thematic analysis of the data collected for the study. They are drawn from new institutionalism and business public affairs research:

- *Adaptive instability* - the dynamic tension between organizational identity, image, and reputation that creates the opportunity for organizational change and improvement

- *Construed external image* – employee's perceptions of how outsiders view the organization

- *Corporate identity* - the consistent, targeted representations of the organization emphasized through corporate symbols, logos, and various communication strategies and media

- *Desired future image* – the visionary perception the organization would like external others and internal members to have of the organization, for the future

- *Employee identity* – how employees feel about membership in the organization and their sense of loyalty to the organization

- *Image* – the character of an organization projected to the public by the organization itself and/or from mass media, creating a mental picture or representation of the organization in the public's mind

- *Image congruence* – the relative fit between projected, construed external, and reflected images of a given organization as perceived by its own employees

- *Isomorphism* – similarity in form; one to one correspondence between the elements of two sets; a mapping of one group onto another group

- *Legitimacy* – being in accordance with established or accepted standards or patterns

- *Media projected image* – the image of an organization based on the frequency and focus of the news media's reporting of a given organization

- *Mutability* - the way organizations reproduce their core functions and activities within legitimate boundaries while mutating and adapting in order to survive

- *Permeability* – the idea that organizational boundaries are porous or permeable and organizational subunits interact with other institutions across those boundaries. In other words, organizational boundaries do not prevent informal communication exchanges. Information flows relatively freely among employees and between employees and members of other organizations and the general public

- *Projected image* – the image created by the management of the organization to be communicated to constituents

- *Reflected image* – outsider views of the organization absorbed by employees

- *Reputation* - the relatively stable, long-term, collective judgments by outsiders of an organization's actions and achievements

- *Transient impression* – the short-term impressions of an organization constructed by a receiver through direct observation or through communication media

Organization of the Record of Study

This record of study is divided into five chapters. This first chapter introduced the background and statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the importance of the study, the methodology, key research questions, study limitations, and definition of key terms. Chapter II reviews literature and research related to the behavior of organizations and their image, identity and reputation. Chapter III presents the methodology for this study, including the research design, the selection of the sample, the data collection procedures, and the analysis of the data. Chapter IV will present the results obtained from this methodology. The final chapter, Chapter V, will present a discussion of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Literature Review

The previous chapter introduced the purpose and importance of this study and provided an overview of the research methodology, key research questions, study limitations, and definitions of key terms. This chapter will provide a more detailed review of research literature on the behavior of organizations that applies to urban school districts. This research literature will provide valuable insights into how urban school districts can communicate their image of how they serve their students in order to create a positive identity and improve their reputation within their respective communities.

This chapter presents an overview of two separate bodies of research literature that provide different perspectives of the behavior of organizations: new institutionalism and public affairs image management research. The purpose of this dual overview is to identify important concepts that may assist urban public school systems with improving their image and reputation. By improving their image and reputation, urban school districts can be more successful in retaining their students and recruiting quality teachers.

A review of new institutionalism, which arises from the social sciences, provides a very broad perspective for understanding the behavior of institutions or organizations of all types. New institutionalism also provides insights into the current state of public education, which has experienced an extended period of conflict and public dissatisfaction. Certain concepts drawn from new institutionalism also provide validation of the concepts of image, identity,

reputation and change management found in public affairs literature on organizational image management.

Public affairs literature on image management arises from business communications and marketing research and contains several concepts that may be applicable to educational organizations in general. The concepts of image, identity, reputation may also specifically enrich the national discussion on how to improve urban school districts. Key concepts drawn from the two theoretical perspectives of public affairs research and new institutionalism will be compared. This comparison will form a synthesis on which to base a thematic analysis of data collected from urban school districts.

Both theoretical perspectives suggest that school districts must maintain a positive public image. A new institutional perspective suggests that all institutions such as urban school districts are accountable to the public and must give accounts of themselves to the public. However, a fact of life in the modern context is that the public's perception of a given urban school district depends not only on what it learns directly from the district itself, but also on what it hears about the district from the news media. Public affairs research acknowledges that the news media heavily influence the public image of any organization. The public image and reputation of a school district is heavily impacted by news media reports, leading to the necessity for school districts to aggressively manage their relationship with the news media. To a large extent, urban school districts must seek to project a positive image to the public through the news media. In today's society, media reports have become the proxy for public accountability. Ultimately then, we would like to know more about how effective

urban school districts manage media relations and also how they use other communication strategies to project a positive image to the public and to their own employees. It is the hope of this researcher that this theoretical synthesis may enrich the current discussion of how to reform and improve urban school systems.

Body of the Literature Review

This study draws from two important theoretical frameworks: new institutionalism and public affairs research on image management. One aim of this study is to link these two important theoretical perspectives. A combination of these two theoretical perspectives will form a better foundation for understanding the behavior of urban school systems. Another aim of this study is to directly relate the public affairs research concepts of image, identity, and reputation to the study of urban school systems. This will also improve our understanding of how to more effectively support the continuous improvement of urban school districts. An understanding of the major factors affecting organization's reputation and how that reputation may be improved over time will help urban district leaders identify the strategies and processes necessary to effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders and improve the urban district's public image, organizational and individual identity, and reputation.

New institutionalism and public affairs research have some related concepts, most notably, the concepts of organizational permeability and adaptive instability. New institutionalism proposes that organizations are permeable and that their subunits interact with other institutions across organizational boundaries. This idea of permeability connects with the

public affairs research emphasis on the importance of internal stakeholders' in supporting or undermining management's efforts to project a positive image and enhance organizational reputation. A second connection occurs between the new institutionalism concept of *mutability*, which is the ability to adapt and change (Clemens & Cook, 1999), and the business public affairs research concept of *adaptive instability*, which is the dynamic tension that exists between image, identity, and reputation that provides the organization the opportunity to change (Gioia, et al., 2000). Each of the studies cited below provide an important perspective on urban school system reform, public engagement, and the role of internal and external communication in the formation of urban school district identity, image, and reputation. The next section will provide a review of new institutionalism.

New Institutionalism

A new institutional perspective provides insights into the way urban school systems change and why they take on the organizational forms that they do. New institutionalism also provides insight into how urban school systems establish their reputation by projecting both their legitimacy and their accountability for efficiency and effectiveness. New institutionalism is a social theory that provides a sociological view of institutions and looks at the way they interact and the way they affect society. All organizations operate in an institutional environment consisting of other institutions, and every institution is influenced by the broader environment through a kind of "institutional peer pressure." But, rather than conceive of educational organizations as rational institutions that interact with other institutions, such as the media, only at their borders, new institutionalism also proposes that organizations are actually permeable and that their subunits interact with other institutions

across organizational boundaries. The goal of all organizations is to survive in their institutional environment, and in order to do so they must establish legitimacy and continue to succeed economically. A review of new institutionalism concepts as they apply to urban school systems begins with a discussion of how school systems depend on their environments for survival.

The discussion of urban school systems' *environmental dependence* begins with Meyer and Rowan (1983, p. 71), who point out that "in an apparent act of ritual faith, society allocates large sums of money and large numbers of children to schools, and the schools in turn allocate these funds and children to a relatively uncontrolled and un-inspected classrooms." They go on to discuss the interplay between the activities organizations carry out, and the "organizational accounts" they need to give to other institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1983, p. 85). In the authors' view, organizations are not just internally interdependent systems, but are actually dependent subunits within the wider institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1983, p. 86.) The organizational accounts of the institution are given to other institutions in the environment including regulatory agencies, stakeholder groups, and so on. The medium of communication for these organizational accounts can take many forms, such as oral reports, written reports, letters, and publications. But, for many institutions, especially urban school districts, the communication medium the institution depends on the most to communicate with its environment is the public news media.

The concept of *environmental dependence* is expanded further by Meyer (1984), who proposes that the very forms organizations take are dependent on the environment, both in

what it demands and on what it provides. Meyer (1984, p.193) suggests that *structural elaboration* of organizations occurs along lines where the environment demands accountability and on which the environment provides rationalized definitions. On the one hand, organizations may be pressured to adopt institutional structures from other institutions. For example, urban school districts may be expected to adopt charter schools. On the other hand, organizations may be sanctioned for adopting structures that are not rationalized from the institutional environment. For example, an urban school district may be sanctioned for creating an extensive and expensive communications department. This new institutional concept of structural elaboration has its roots in another new institutional concept known as *isomorphism*.

The new institutional concept of isomorphism proposes that there is often a similarity in form between institutions within a given class of institutions. This concept of isomorphism explains why urban school systems are highly similar in both their structure and in their operating procedures. Meyer and Rowan (1991, p. 47) suggest that organizations are structured by phenomena in their environments and tend to be isomorphic with the institutional environment because of technical and exchange dependencies and as a result of socially constructed reality. The technical core of the organization depends on suppliers and regulators of that technical core expertise. At points of contact where goods and services are exchanged or certain regulatory activities are carried out, certain organizational structures may be required. Also, over time organizations may be required to mimic societal expectations about their structure and behavior that have developed over time for institutions of their type. According to this rationale then, urban school districts must adhere to

expectations about their structure and behavior from the urban communities and news media environments in which they are embedded.

Meyer and Rowan (1991) go on to discuss how organizations must deal with their institutional environments at their boundaries and as a result are pressured to imitate environmental elements in their structures. In their view, institutional isomorphism represents a powerful force that drives the organization to achieve a state of external *legitimacy*, in which its structure and actions are considered acceptable to a collection of powerful external actors. If urban school districts, like other institutions, are undergoing powerful pressures to conform to environmental expectations of maintaining a particular form in order to maintain legitimacy, how do they adapt to changing conditions and improve over time?

Clemens and Cook (1999) provide a discussion of organizational durability and change from a new institutional perspective. They review the new institutional concept of *mutability*, which is the way organizations reproduce their core functions and activities within legitimate boundaries, while mutating and adapting in order to survive. Clemens and Cook (1999) point out the fact that internal contradictions within organizations create a degree of instability in beliefs and practice. This internal instability, coupled with multiple tensions that arise among institutions creates organizational instability that promotes change and may threaten organization survival. Urban school systems are clearly experiencing both internal instability and external environmental tensions within their urban institutional context that are threatening their survival.

This explanation of organizational mutability, instability, and drive to change and improve is applied directly to educational institutions by Rowan and Miskel (1999). In their discussion of institutional theory and educational organizations, Rowan and Miskel (1999) point out that public education has experienced greater pressure to exercise control over its core technical activity, teaching and learning. At the same time, the pressure to maintain legitimacy in the institutional environment creates a high level of conflict. Public demands for greater *accountability* and productivity in education without a corresponding decrease in demands for institutional conformity have produced a long period of education reform in the United States (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 365). School districts are increasingly expected to increase academic achievement while also being expected to maintain legitimacy by respecting teachers' autonomy and independence. So the institutional environment for public education has changed over time, shifting from an exclusive emphasis on legitimacy to a greater emphasis on accountability, without reducing the emphasis on legitimacy concerns. The question then becomes, how does all of this external conflict and corresponding internal instability affect the ability of urban school districts to survive? What do urban school district leaders do in order to help their organizations adapt and survive within the context of their institutional environment?

Institutions such as urban school districts do change over time. It has been suggested that institutional theorists and researchers ought to develop new understandings of the manner in which institutions are created, transformed, and extinguished and the way in which institutional processes interact to affect institutional change (Dacin et al., 2002, p. 45.) These authors are interested in the primary sources or drivers of institutional change, the

factors that influence how organizations respond to organizational change, become deinstitutionalized or disappear, or emerge as new institutional forms (Dacin, et al., 2002, p.45).

Meyer and Rowan (2006, p. 2) identify three important conditions in the current educational institutional environment. The first changed condition is greater pluralism. Education is now provided by public, private, and market-oriented organizations, especially in urban environments. This educational pluralism places greater pressure on urban public education to compete for students and resources with alternative providers. The second changed condition identified by Meyer and Rowan (2006) is the urgent call for greater accountability in public education that have led to more narrowly controlled instructional practices. The importance of achieving results and making these results visible to the wider institutional environment have never been more important. The third changed condition identified by Meyer and Rowan (2006) is the fact that the institution of education now plays a more central role in our increasingly knowledge-dependent economy. The public is now paying very close attention to the quality of educational providers and the quality of the education their children are receiving. The news media are thriving on the conflict generated by this closer public scrutiny of education. This public scrutiny and heightened media attention is most intense in urban school district environments.

In charting the future direction for the development of institutional theory, Charles Bidwell (2006, p. 46) calls for a study of how communication and persuasion are employed to create commitment to institutions. Urban school districts do not always communicate effectively

with their public and are experiencing declining commitment in their urban communities. How should public education entities, especially urban school districts, respond to this changed educational institutional environment demanding both legitimacy and accountability from them? Where can urban school district leaders find meaningful research on communication, media relations, and persuasion? For a partial answer, we turn now to public affairs research on image management.

To summarize our theoretical framework from a new institutional perspective, first and foremost, urban school districts are absolutely dependent on their environment for survival, and, in order to survive, they must build and maintain a positive public reputation. Urban school systems' reputation is based to a large extent on the public's perception of their legitimacy. They must also demonstrate to the public that they are engaged in legitimate uses of the funds they receive. The economic success of school districts arises from the flow of public funds they receive from federal, state, and local sources. The public's judgment of the district's appropriate use of these funds is heavily affected by what it views as appropriate expenditures for school districts, and by what other school districts are doing. In short, school districts are dependent on the good will of the public and public's perceptions of their legitimacy for their economic survival.

Second, from a new institutional perspective urban school districts are also accountable to the public for the quality of their performance of their core function, teaching and learning. Another component of an urban district's reputation is based on the public's perception of how well it is performing its core teaching function. Urban school districts must give

accounts of themselves to their public. These public accounts take many forms such as reports, conversations, speeches, and so on. However, a fact of life in the modern context is that the public's perception of a given district's performance depends not only on what it learns directly from the organization itself, but also on what it hears about the district from the news media.

Third, new institutionalism research recognizes that organizations do not have firm, impenetrable boundaries. Instead, their boundaries are porous and permeable. This permeable condition allows a relatively free flow of information across organizational boundaries between an organization's employees and outsiders. Employees of urban school districts are an important factor in understanding how the organization is perceived by outsiders.

Fourth, new institutionalism focuses on how organizations can turn internal contradictions and environmental instability into a force for positive change, focused direction, and organizational improvement. The new institutional concept of mutability describes how contradictions within an organization and conflicts between organizations contribute to the process of organizational renewal. We would like to know if successful urban districts are indeed consciously channeling the negative energy created by internal contradictions, environmental tensions, and conflicting organizational images into constructive organizational change and improvement.

Fifth, from the new institutionalism perspective organizations respond to environmental pressures for accountability with a process called structural elaboration. This means that where the public demands accountability, organizations must develop new organizational components or subcomponents to respond to this demand for accountability. Some new institutional writers focus on the technical core of education as instruction in the classroom. Over time, school districts have devoted more energy and resources to monitoring classroom instruction. By the same reasoning, environmental pressure from media and other community stakeholders for more organizational responsiveness should lead to the growth of more robust communications departments with more professional expertise in urban school districts. The next section will review public affairs research.

Public Affairs Research

The previous section reviewed the development of new institutionalism, which studies organizations from a sociological perspective. From a new institutional perspective, organizations must effectively connect to the institutional environment in which they operate. In this section, we will turn to a review of public affairs research, which focuses directly on how organizations may relate to their operating environments. From this review, we would like to draw insights into the ways urban school districts can relate more effectively to the urban environments in which they are situated. In addition to knowing what the salient factors are that affect public commitment to urban school districts, we would also like to know the kinds of strategies and processes that urban districts can use to maintain public commitment into the future.

We begin our look at public affairs research on image management with Fombrun and Shanley (1990), who provide a foundation for understanding the interaction of organizational information with media reporting and the mutual influence of both organizational information and news media reporting on public perception of a particular organization. From a practical perspective, organizations in the modern world, such as urban school districts, must communicate with their stakeholders or customers. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) assert that organizations must see reputation building as a longitudinal process in order to attain a stable positive reputation. This suggests that urban school district leaders must also be concerned about the public image and reputation of their urban school districts and must engage in continuous reputation-building activities over time.

There are a variety of ways that urban districts communicate with the public, but one very important aspect of communication in an urban environment is communication through the public news media. Fombrun and Shanely (1990) comment that intense media exposure, either positive or negative, can have a negative effect on organizational reputation. Urban school districts must be concerned about what community constituents and the news media are saying about them and should be wary of intense media exposure. Urban school districts must engage in long-term reputation building activities and not rely solely on the news media to get their information out. The next study takes a deeper look at the construct of organizational reputation.

Fombrun and Shanley (1990) discuss the process by which stakeholders gauge the relative merits of an organization by interpreting ambiguous informational signals from the

organization itself, the news media, and from organizational monitors such as regulators, auditors, lawyers, and so on. The authors discuss the variation in stakeholder judgment criteria for a given organization such as an urban district. In these authors' view, stakeholders will tend to judge an organization by their personally held beliefs and their role related judgment criteria as customer, competitor, or regulator. In Fombrun and Shanley's (1990) view, multiple community stakeholders will apply multiple and varied criteria to their assessment of the organization's overall quality and worth. The stakeholders of urban school districts are constantly interpreting the signals they get from the organization itself and from monitors of the organization. When organizational monitors release a report about an urban school district, these signals frequently come through the news media. If the urban district is not effectively getting information directly to its stakeholders through other channels, then those stakeholders' judgment of the organization comes *exclusively* from the news media.

Fombrun and Shanley (1990) point out that each organization is embedded in a unique community in which both community constituents and the news media influence information on which an organization's reputation is based. They cite *boundary spanning activities*, which include both giving information and soliciting feedback across organizational boundaries, as very important components of building a good reputation. Gioia and his colleages (2000), review the management literature concerned with organizational reputation. Their study expands the understanding of reputation by exploring the concept of image and also by highlighting the importance of employee identity in the reputation building process. Their study recognizes the importance of employees as internal

stakeholders and also acknowledges the role of the news media in the formation of organizational identity, image, and reputation. This would suggest that the employees of urban school districts and the news media in urban environments play a major role in establishing the reputation of urban school districts.

Gioia et al. (2000) provide a review the concepts of individual and organizational identity and then give an overview of the various forms of image and reputation discussed in the public affairs literature. From their perspective, *identity* is understood as that which is central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization. Individual employee identity and organizational identity are linked. Organizations attempt to build a strong *corporate identity* through the consistent, targeted representations of the organization emphasized through corporate symbols, logos, and various communication strategies and media. Urban school district leaders must be aware of how employees' identity is tied to their membership in the organization and how it is affected by the district's reputation.

From Gioia et al.'s (2000) view, the managers of a given organization, like an urban school district, must formulate an image of how they would like the organization to be perceived and project or communicate it to constituents. The authors caution that both external and internal stakeholders actually receive and evaluate this *projected image*. At the same time, in an effort to evolve the organization in a new direction, organizational management, such as urban district leaders, may also project a *desired future image*, which is the visionary perception the organization would like external others and internal members to have of the organization in the future. Urban leaders frequently develop and communicate strategic

plans in order to give urban districts a focus and direction for improvement. Over time both external and internal stakeholders will form *transient impressions* of the organization through direct observation or through communication media. Employee's perceptions of how outsiders view the organization is known as *construed external image*. Employee's perceptions of how outsiders view the organization can affect their own judgment of the merits of the organization. The *reputation* of the organization is the relatively stable, long-term, collective outside judgments of an organization's actions and achievements. Urban district leaders may not always be aware of how employees are affected by a poor organizational reputation.

Gioia et al. (2000) also formulate a new concept of *adaptive instability* that proposes a dynamic relationship between organizational identity, image, and reputation. A key finding of the authors is that identity is mutable and impacted by organizational image. Each employee's individual identity is affected and redefined by the organizational image over time. There is also a relationship between the internal members' perceptions of the organizational image and outsiders' perceptions of the organizational image. This dynamic sets up the condition of *adaptive instability*, which presents an opportunity to evolve the organization in new and positive directions. The authors conclude that the strategic concern of management is not the preservation of a fixed identity, but rather the ability to manage and balance a flexible identity in light of shifting external images.

Adaptive instability and its relationship to employee identity has important implications for change management in large organizations such as urban school districts. By this reasoning,

urban school district leaders should pay careful attention to the images of the organization they project and the effect of those images on stakeholders and employees. Urban district leaders should be able to use the negative perceptions about the organization to strategically influence stakeholders and employees in a particular direction and fuel their desire to change and improve the organization. The next study delves more deeply into the issue of employee identity and employee commitment to the organization and its goals.

In their study, Corley et al. (2000) examine the direct and indirect effects of corporate image on employees. They suggest that organizations must be very concerned about the ways projected images intended for external stakeholders are actually received by employees. They warn that in an era of limited corporate loyalty, public affairs issues can dramatically impact employees. This would suggest that urban superintendents should be very aware that their own employees are watching television, listening to the radio, and reading the newspapers, and in the process urban district employees are absorbing the accounts of the urban district given by the media.

Corley et al. (2000) emphasize that employees are extremely sensitive to external perceptions. Employees compare management's projected corporate image to their own personally held image and to their perceptions of how outsiders view of the organization. Urban superintendents should be very aware that their employees are extremely sensitive to perceived gaps between their personal image of the district and the one projected by the district.

Employees are also alert to perceived and deliberate misrepresentations. This mechanism can erode employee confidence, encouraging employee turnover or in extreme cases, whistle-blowing behavior. This mechanism provides insight into some of the problems urban school districts have, such as high employee turnover, difficulty in attracting and retaining quality staff, and occasional whistle-blowing to the news media by disgruntled employees.

Employees' perceptions of the external images of their organization are moderated by direct contact with external stakeholders and also through *media projected images* of the organization. If external stake holders or the news media have a negative view of the organization, the employees will absorb some of this negative view. The authors refer to this as *reflected images*.

Reflected images operate as a 'looking-glass effect' that tends to be more powerful because instead of confronting feelings of self-definition and self-esteem only internally (personally and privately), employees are confronted with others' perceptions of the organization and their own individual feelings as a member of that organization. Corley and his colleagues (2000) confirm that employees of an organization hold a personal image of the organization and are extremely sensitive to the images held by external stakeholders. By this reasoning then, urban school district employees are often confronted by a constant barrage of negative images about their organization which they compare to their leaders' projected image of the organization and to the media's projected image of the district.

From a public affairs research perspective, urban school districts, like for-profit businesses, must build and maintain a positive reputation for service and performance in order to survive.   From this perspective, urban school districts have to be more than just appropriately constituted; they must also be effective. Effective performance of the core mission of the organization and capable service to clients are the ultimate bases for the organization's reputation and long-term survival. Therefore, from a public affairs research perspective, urban school districts must engage in a long-term process of reputation building in order to continue to attract customers and remain economically viable.

Public affairs research acknowledges that the news media heavily influence the public image large organizations like urban school districts. Further, public affairs research elaborates on the concept of reputation by breaking it into subcomponent variations of the concept of image. The public image of an urban school district is heavily impacted by news media reports, leading to the necessity for school districts to manage their relationship with the news media.

Managing media relations has two main components, promoting positive news reports and responding to negative news reports. To a large extent then, school districts must take steps to project a positive image to the public through the news media. News media reports become the proxy for public accountability. Ultimately then, we would like to know more about how effective urban school districts manage media relations and use other communication strategies to project a positive image to the public.

Public affairs research also describes the condition of adaptive instability which arises from dynamic tension between public image, identity, and reputation and gives management the opportunity to create and project a conceptualization of what the organization needs to become in order to survive. This desired future image presents responses to the challenges the organization currently faces. Urban district leaders should consciously create a desired future image in response to this adaptive instability within their own organizations. We would like to know if successful urban districts are indeed consciously channeling the negative energy created by internal contradictions, environmental tensions, and conflicting organizational images into constructive organizational change and improvement.

Public affairs research also recognizes the condition of organizational permeability and focuses on employee identity. Employees are frequently comparing the image of the organization projected by management to their own personally held image of the organization or the image of the organization held by community members they come in contact with. In this conceptualization, employees are very sensitive to discrepancies between projected and reflected images.

From this perspective, employees and the organizational subcomponent departments in which they work are sensitive to their own or others' perceived strengths and weaknesses of the organization and to deliberate misrepresentations by management about the organization. Further, employees pay close attention to what the media and members of the public say about the organization. We would like to know if successful urban districts are sensitive to

employee identity and give special attention to honest and congruent internal and external communication.

Finally, public affairs research does not explicitly call out what the makeup of a state of the art communication department would be. Leaders of business organizations have the benefit of an entire field of marketing and image management from which to draw. We would like to know what kind of communication departments successful urban school districts are building in order to respond to the demand for increasingly complex internal and external communication activities.

In conclusion, from a public affairs research perspective, urban school districts must focus on reputation building as a long term process. Urban district leaders must be very aware of how the news media affects the information that stakeholders receive and the judgment criteria various stakeholders use in assessing the reputation of the organization. Urban district leaders must also be concerned about the affect of their projected image on employees since those employees compare what the urban district leaders say to what external stakeholders think. In the next section, these ideas are combined with concepts from new institutionalism to form a synthesis on which to base this study of urban school districts.

Synthesis of the Research

Although most researchers engaged in the discussion of new institutionalism are focused on the behavior of all organizations, some make specific references to how the key concepts

apply to the field of education. However, public affairs image management research focuses almost exclusively on the issues of business organizations and does not address education or school districts directly. In order to advance the study of urban school districts, a synthesis of the two would be helpful. A synthesis of the two theoretical perspectives would include five major components highlighting the need for urban school districts to: 1) engage in long-term reputation building communication activities, 2) maintain a positive public image in order to retain environmental support, 3) focus on constant organizational change and improvement, 4) remain sensitive to the importance of employee identity and internal communication, and 5) engage in structural elaboration and professionalisation of communication functions.

In summary, the conceptual framework advanced here is based on a synthesis of new institutionalism and public affairs research concepts. Because urban school districts are dependent on their environment for support, they should engage in a long-term process of reputation building. Urban school districts should also recognize that the public receives a projected image from the organization itself and also from the news media, which profoundly impacts the process of long-term reputation building. Urban school districts should also capitalize on any organizational instability to proactively adapt and improve themselves by creating and pursuing a desired future image.

Urban school districts must also recognize the importance of projecting congruent images both internally and externally in order to maintain positive employee identity in order to support long-term improvement in organizational reputation. Finally, urban school districts

must engage in structural elaboration in both control of the teaching and learning process and in their communications functions in order to respond effectively to public pressures for accountability.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed two strands of literature about the behavior of organizations: new institutionalism and public affairs image management research. New institutionalism discusses the behavior of all organizations from a sociological perspective. Public affairs research discusses the conceptual framework and mechanisms involved in building the reputation of businesses as a particular subset of organizations. A synthesis of the two literature strands produced five concepts on which this particular research study is based: reputation building, media relations, organizational change and improvement, employee identity, and structural elaboration. The next chapter will discuss the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed two theoretical perspectives, new institutionalism and public affairs research in order to draw parallels between the two and create a broader understanding of urban school districts. This dual theoretical perspective provides insights into the nature and purpose of communication practices that urban school districts utilize. This dual theoretical perspective also extends our understanding of the nature of the news media environments in which urban school districts operate. This research framework formed the basis for a prior-research-driven thematic code which was applied to the data gathered in this study (Boyatzis, 1998). This chapter highlights the research methodology and procedures used in the study. The sections include: research perspective, research questions, data collection, data sources, data analysis, bias and error, trustworthiness, and summary.

Research Perspective

This study utilizes a qualitative collective case study approach (Stake, 1995) in which multiple sources of information are analyzed holistically (Yin, 2003) utilizing a prior-research-driven thematic code (Boyatzis, 1998). This study utilized a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1988), which aimed to examine contemporary, real-life situations in three different urban school district settings in order to discover if there is a basis for the application of public relations theory to urban school systems. The cases were chosen and

studied in order to further understanding of urban school districts and to provide for theoretical elaboration of a combination of new institutionalism and public affairs research in relation to urban school systems (Stake, 1995). The goal of this study was to understand issues of communication and reputation building, specifically in relation to urban school districts. The study seeks to broaden the understanding of the communication issues intrinsic to urban school systems.

The study utilized a collective case study approach involving multiple cases, with each individual case representing a bounded system (Stake, 1995). A case study approach is desired here in order to understand how and why urban school district leaders communicate with both internal and external stakeholders in order to improve the public image and reputation of their urban school districts. A case study approach is also necessary because the thoughts and actions of urban school district leaders represent a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the events being studied (Yin, 1989).

In this study, it was also desirable to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1989). The three separate cases of urban school districts were each studied from multiple perspectives through website review, document analysis, and interviews of key district leaders (Yin, 2003). This provided opportunities for in-depth within-case thematic analysis of each individual urban school district case and also for cross-case analysis between urban school districts (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

The general template for coding this collective case study was taken from Creswell (2007, p. 172). It provides for the case context and description for each of the three districts, a within-case thematic analysis for each district, a cross-case theme analysis of similarities and differences between cases, and assertions based on the overall thematic analysis. In summary, the study utilizes a holistic analysis approach related to the multi-site case study (Yin, 2003). The results of the thematic analysis and assertions based on the thematic analysis are presented in the next chapter.

Research Questions

The broader set of research questions this study is intended to answer are:

- How can the reputation of an urban school system be changed or improved?

- How does the public news media impact the formation and maintenance of an urban school system's public image and reputation?

- How is the public's image of an urban school system formed and maintained?

- What role do internal and external communication strategies, systems, and processes play in establishing school districts' image, identity, and reputation?

- How does the positive or negative identity of school district employees' affect public perception of a given urban educational system?

- What role do image, identity, and reputation play in urban school systems' ability to sustain public support?

Data Collection

Data were collected from each of the three urban districts selected for study from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, field notes, web site reviews, and document reviews (Yin, 2003). This overview of the data collection procedures used in this study includes sites and individuals studied, gaining access and rapport, purposeful sampling strategy, types of information collected, interviewing and observing issues, recording procedures, and field and storage issues (Creswell, 2007).

Sites and Individuals Studied

Five urban school districts were pursued as potential participants in this study. All five urban school districts are situated in a major media market located in a different geographic region of the United States. Each of the five districts represented a critical case that is indicative of the situation for most large urban school districts in the United States. Three sites were finally selected from the group of five urban districts, based on willingness of the three key district leaders from each selected site to participate in an interview. The following urban school district leaders with oversight of public relations in each school district were interviewed in the three urban districts: the superintendent, the school board president, and the communications officer.

Access and Rapport

A letter was sent to the superintendent of each of the five districts, explaining the purpose of the study. The first three urban school districts that responded were selected. After the superintendent responded favorably, letters were sent to the board president and the

communication officer of each district requesting their participation in the study and an hour-long interview. When each district leader had responded, they were contacted by telephone and an interview date, time, and location were set for each participant.

The interviews were conducted in the office of the respective district official or a conference room adjacent to their office. Each officer was offered the opportunity to meet off-site or away from their work area, but all requested that the interview occur in their office. The superintendents and the communications officers were all interviewed in their offices. The board presidents were all interviewed at their place of work in their private offices.

Purposeful Sampling Strategy

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed that included criterion sampling and critical case sampling (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). First, a set of criteria for urban school districts were developed which included the size of the district, the proximity to a major news media market, the district's overall performance, and the district's effort to get approval for increased financial support from its local community within the last three years. Each of the districts selected for participation had greater that 50,000 students. Each of the districts pursued for study is situated in a different major media market with multiple local newspapers, radio outlets, and television stations. District performance for each district was determined by a set of factors including: student achievement data, negative and positive news media reports within a predetermined timeframe, ability to maintain public support for district funding, and stability of district leadership. The urban districts that were pursued for participation in the study had all recently sought public support to increase operating

revenue. Ultimately, the success of the selected districts was determined by the achievement trend of its students and its success in securing public financial support.

The individuals selected for interview from each district were purposely selected because of their leadership roles and frequent direct involvement in district communication. Three key district leaders within each urban school district were interviewed, using the same set of open-ended interview questions.

<center>*Types of Information Collected*</center>

The types of information collected from each district included the district website, district communication documents, and interviews of key district leaders. Prior to interviews being conducted, the district's web sites and publications were thoroughly examined. Each district's website was observed over a period of time for evidence of internal and external communication efforts related to organizational image, identity, and reputation. Some websites underwent revisions and improvements during that time period. Media reports about the district and district press releases concerning media reports were also examined. District communication documents and publications were collected during visits to the districts' headquarters. Interviews were conducted with three district leaders from each district. Some interview participants also offered additional documents during the interviews. Each interview was tape recorded on a Sony cassette recorder, and the interviewer also took notes during the interview.

Interviewing and Observing Issues

A set of seventeen open-ended interview questions based on themes drawn from new institutionalism and public affairs research were developed. Structured interviews of district leaders were conducted using a set of pre-established questions (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) that centered on associated internal and external communication systems, processes, and procedures. The participants were sent the interview questions in advance of the interview session. Interviews of approximately one hour in length were conducted with the district officials at a time and place of their choosing. First, the interviews explored the training and preparation of key district leaders in communication, marketing, and media relations. Second, the interviews were used to gain insights into how urban districts deal with both positive and negative public news media reports and the impact of news media reports on the district's public image and reputation. Third, the interview questions focused on the relationship between the communication directors, the superintendents, and the board presidents in dealing with communications and district improvement issues. Finally, the interview questions explored the communication strategies employed by the district targeted at both internal and external audiences.

Field and Storage Issues

The interview tapes were transcribed verbatim. All specific references to persons, school districts, or businesses were systematically changed to a letter reference such as, District A, District B, Superintendent District A, and so on. The transcripts were analyzed, and coded utilizing the pre-developed thematic code. All data was stored on note-cards in file boxes by themes. The transcriptions were copied to preserve the original. Coding, recoding, cutting,

and pasting were done on copies of the transcripts. The field notes, interview transcriptions, documents, and cassette tapes are stored in a file box at the researcher's home. The interview tapes were stored and labeled by date and participant code name. The transcriptions are stored electronically in duplicate files on the researcher's computer and on a micro-disk storage device kept in the researcher's possession.

Data Sources

The data for this qualitative collective case study (Stake, 1995) are drawn from three urban school districts in the United States. A profile of the districts selected for study appears in Table 1. District A is situated in the gulf coast region of the United States. District A is located in a major news media market which includes one major newspaper, multiple radio stations, and seven television stations. District A has over 60,000 students and over seventy schools. District A has been growing each year for the past several years and is noted for its very positive trend in student achievement over the past several years. District A was able to secure voter approval by a wide margin for over $300 million dollars in facilities improvement funds in 2007.

District B is situated in the central plains region of the United States. District B is located in the fourth largest media market in the United States, with 1 major newspaper, multiple radio stations, and five television stations. District B has over 75,000 students and more than 140 schools. District B has a positive trend in student achievement. District B was able to pass a $500 million bond election by a substantial margin for facilities and technology improvement in 2007, despite several preceding years of bad publicity.

District C is situated on the east coast of the United States. District C is located in a very large media market consisting of two major newspapers, multiple radio stations, and nine television stations. District C has over 160,000 students and over 280 schools. District C has recently established a positive upward trend in student achievement. District C received approval for over $1.1 billion dollars in facilities improvement funds in 2006.

Table 1

Profile of Urban School Districts Selected for Study

	District A	District B	District C
Geographic region	Gulf coast region	Central plains region	East coast region
Media market	1 Major newspaper	1 Major newspaper	2 Major newspapers
	Multiple radio stations,	Multiple radio stations	Multiple radio stations
	7 Television stations	5 Television stations	9 Television stations
Student enrollment	Over 60,000	Over 75,000	Over 160,000
Number of schools	Greater than 70	Greater than 140	Greater than 280
Five year student achievement trend	Very positive	Positive	Positive
Amount and year of last major public financial support	Over $300 million in 2007	Over $500 million in 2007	Over $1,100 million in 2006

The primary source of information for this study came from the interviews of the district leaders. The superintendent, the board president, and the communication officer from urban school districts A, B, and C were interviewed. All three superintendents interviewed were female. Two were White and one was Black. Of the three board presidents interviewed, one was male and two were female. One board president was Hispanic, one was White, and one was Black. Of the communication officers interviewed, one was female and two were male. One communication officer was Hispanic, one was White, and one was Black. The district officials ranged in age from 42 to 64. The race, gender, and age of the district officials interviewed appear in Table 2.

Table 2

Race, Gender, and Age of School District Officials Interviewed

	Superintendent	Board President	Communication Officer
District A	White female, 58	Hispanic female, 64	Black male, 52
District B	White female, 57	White male, 62	White female, 53
District C	Black female, 61	Black female, 45	Hispanic male, 42

Data Analysis

The focus of this study is the image, identity, and reputation of urban school districts situated in major media markets. This study explores the communication strategies these

districts utilize to improve their identity, image, and reputation. Therefore, the primary unit of analysis of this study is the participant interviews that focused on the communication practices of each school district. A secondary unit of analysis is each individual district for purposes of cross-case comparison. The analysis of the data for this study includes the creation and organization of data files, the formation of initial codes, the description of each case and its context, the categorical aggregation to establish themes and patterns, direct interpretation of the data, naturalistic generalizations, and both in-depth case and cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Creation and Organization of Data Files

The documents and interview data for each district were kept together. Items from the district websites and some documents from each district were collected first. The interviews for District A occurred before the interviews for District B. District C district leaders were interviewed last. The interviews for District A were also transcribed first, District B interviews were transcribed second, and District C interviews were transcribed last. The interviews for each district were initially coded as the transcription progressed, and then later re-coded as the thematic code evolved.

Formation of Initial Codes

A coding process was developed initially, based on factors associated with combined new institutional and public affairs research concepts. The development of this initial thematic code utilized a prior-research-driven method for the development of a thematic code which was applied to the data gathered in this study (Boyatzis, 1998). The initial theory-based

thematic code included the concepts of environmental dependence, structural elaboration, legitimacy, and accountability from new institutionalism theory and reputation building, projected image, corporate identity, media projected image, identity, adaptive instability, desired future image, and reputation from public affairs research theory.

Categorical Aggregation to Establish Themes and Patterns

The data produced by this study was analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. The data and the existing theory were matched. In order to avoid data contamination, an explicit code was developed to establish consistency of judgment and reliability. Multiple diverse perspectives were used to examine district documents and officer comments. Interpretation was sensitive to the inherent themes of the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Document analysis was also conducted of each district's use of printed internal and external communication materials. Document analysis included district publications, public relations materials, district newspaper articles, press releases, the districts' accountability and financial reports, and inside communication at the district level, including letters, memoranda, and e-mail communication. Both the website and district documents were analyzed and coded for recurring themes. A qualitative thematic strategy was used to categorize the data and interpret the findings, identifying commonalities in the way effective school systems communicate with internal and external publics in order to ascertain how the business related concepts of image, identity, and reputation relate to urban school districts.

Analysis of the interview data began during the transcription process. In general, the data were analyzed utilizing a data analysis spiral and the specific procedures for case study data analysis were employed (Creswell, 2007). The researcher made analytic notes as the transcription process moved forward. Each transcript was read and coded as soon as it was finished. As the data was coded, patterns and relationships were identified and fit into categories. Some adjustments were made to the initial code during analysis, and some additional themes were added as trends emerged.

District A was coded with the initial research-based thematic code. As new district interviews were completed and coded, the thematic code was modified as needed. After all data was collected, transcribed, and analyzed, the transcriptions were re-read, comparing all of the interview responses of all the participants. Similarities and differences in key words, phrases, relationships, feelings, and perceptions across interviews were noted. The resulting thematic analysis was then used to compare the research concepts from new institutionalism and public affairs literature with district leaders' perceptions of their internal and external communications strategies and practices. All interview transcripts were recoded and re-categorized utilizing the final thematic code. The final thematic code appears in the Appendix.

Direct Interpretation

Each individual interview transcript was analyzed first using the thematic code. The officer comments were placed on note-cards and grouped by theme and sub-theme. Then the comments of all of officers from a given district were grouped by theme and sub-theme to

form an interpretation of the communication practices of each individual district that were related to image, identity, and reputation. This allowed for a within-case analysis of each districts data. Then the officer comments of all three districts were grouped by theme and sub-themes to create the final version of the thematic analysis and form the basis of a cross-case analysis.

Naturalistic Generalizations

As the thematic analysis proceeded, concepts from new institutionalism and public affairs research were combined and recombined to form a single thematic framework. As new themes and sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis of district data that did not fit well with the final theoretical framework, themes and sub-themes were added to the thematic framework. Examples of themes that were added to the theoretical framework themes are media relations, external communication strategies, community engagement strategies, internal communication strategies, board communications, and employee engagement strategies.

In-depth Case and Cross-case Analysis

The next chapter will present the in-depth case analysis and cross-case analysis of district data based on the final themes and sub-themes of the research based thematic code (Yin, 2003). The results of the analysis for each individual district for each final theme and sub-theme is organized, presented, and interpreted by theme. A cross-case analysis and interpretation of the results for each theme and sub-theme follows in Chapter IV.

Bias and Error

This study is limited to data collected from only three large, urban public school systems in 2008 and 2009. Small, private, rural, and suburban districts were consciously excluded from the study. This small sample of large, urban public school districts limits the ability to generalize the findings to all school districts. The limitations of this study involve participant sampling and lack of theoretical saturation; limited involvement of participants in theory development and revision; and the idiosyncratic aspects of investigator bias. The researcher is a former district official from a large urban school system. Personal experiences may unduly bias the researcher's interpretation of participant comments. The study also includes a limited focus on issues of race and other socio-economic factors commonly associated with the public image and reputation of urban school districts.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Validity and trustworthiness for this study are achieved through triangulation, negative case analysis, and rich thick description (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved in three ways. First, by interviewing three different key district officials from each school district the researcher is able to check for consistency of words, phrases, and themes between separate participants. Second, by reviewing district websites and analyzing district documents additional multiple perspectives can be added to the participant interviews. Third, by interviewing officials from three different urban school districts in different geographic locations the researcher is able to compare interview data across multiple cases. Negative case analysis was employed by eliminating concepts from the initial code that were not supported by the multiple data sources, grouping and regrouping the codes into themes

as the data gathering process proceeded, and adding codes as themes emerged that were not included in the initial code. Rich, thick description of participant comments enables the reader to determine if the findings are transferable because of shared characteristics (Erlandson et al., 1993). In addition, the researcher has declared his bias at the outset (Merriam, 1998).

Summary

This qualitative collective case study seeks to understand how the reputation of urban school systems can be changed or improved. Three urban school districts with 50,000 or more students were identified. Data were collected from each district utilizing interviews, observations, field notes, web site reviews, and document reviews. Three key district leaders within each school district were interviewed, using the same set of open-ended questions. Hour long interviews were conducted with the district officials at a time and place of their choosing. The primary unit of analysis of the study is the participant interviews. To establish reliability for the study, the data were analyzed using a constant comparative method. Validity and trustworthiness for the study is achieved primarily through triangulation. The next chapter presents the results of the research study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, a review of the methodology and participants for this study was presented. This chapter will review the results from this study in two sections. The first section provides an analysis of the results for District A, B, and C. This section is organized by the seven general themes that were identified for study: projected image, media relations, external communication, identity, internal communication, adaptive instability/mutability, and reputation. The themes and their respective sub-themes are substantiated by the comments from the study's participants which consist of the superintendent, board president, and communications officer from each district. The final section presents a cross-case analysis of the results for all three districts. The cross-case analysis section will discuss the similarities and differences between the district cases and summarize the results from each district for each theme and its related sub-theme(s).

Summary of Methodology

For this study, a qualitative case study approach was employed (Merriam, 1998). The study also utilized a collective case study approach involving multiple cases, with each individual case representing a bounded system (Stake, 1995). The three separate cases of urban school districts were each studied from multiple perspectives (Yin, 2003). This provided opportunities for in-depth within-case thematic analysis of each individual case and also for cross-case analysis between districts (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Data were collected from three urban school districts with more than 50,000 or students. A total of five districts in different geographical sections of the country were approached to participate. The first three to respond were included. Each district is situated in a major media market with multiple local newspapers, radio outlets, and television stations. Data included interviews, observations, field notes, and document reviews. District performance was determined by a set of factors including: student achievement data, negative and positive news media reports within a predetermined timeframe, ability to maintain public support for district funding, and stability of district leadership. The superintendent, the communications officer, and the school board president from each district were interviewed, using a set of pre-established questions (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) that centered on associated internal and external communication systems, processes, and procedures.

Participant interviews served as the primary unit of analysis. Prior to interviews being conducted, the district's web sites and publications were thoroughly examined. Document analysis was conducted of each district's use of external and external communication materials including district web sites, public relations materials, newspaper articles, accountability and financial reports, and internal communication. A coding process was developed, based on factors associated with effective internal and external communication practices. A qualitative thematic strategy was used to categorize the data and interpret the findings, identifying commonalities in the way these school systems communicate with internal and external publics in order to ascertain how the business related concepts of image, identity, and reputation may or may not apply to educational settings. The themes shown in the Appendix were developed based on prior research constructs from new

institutionalism and public affairs research. These themes were used to compare the research concepts from new institutionalism and public affairs literature with district leaders' perceptions of their internal and external communications strategies and practices.

Reliability for this study was established by analyzing the data using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. The interview data and the existing theory were matched. In order to avoid data contamination, an explicit code was developed to establish consistency of judgment and reliability. Multiple diverse perspectives were used to examine communication officer comments, and interpretation was sensitive to the inherent themes of the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998).

<div align="center">Participants</div>

The participants in this study were the superintendent, board president, and communication officer from three different urban school districts. A total of nine subjects were interviewed. Each urban school district is situated in a major media market in a different geographic area of the country. Each participating district had recently successfully obtained public financial support, and each is engaged in major improvement efforts. The next section will report the results for each district and a comparison of the results from all three districts.

<div align="center">Results</div>

This section presents the results of the prior-research-based thematic analysis of interviews of the superintendent, the board president, and the communications officer of Districts A, B, and C, along with the analysis of the district communication documents and district

websites. Seven major themes emerged in the analysis of data from the three districts: projected image, media relations, external communication, identity, internal communication, adaptive instability and mutability, and reputation. Each theme has one or more sub-themes. The first major theme that emerged in the study was projected image (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Projected image is the image or representation of the urban district communicated by the superintendent, school board leaders, and communications staff to organizational insiders and to outsiders. Projecting a positive image of the urban school district is the primary set of activities that are used by leaders to build a positive reputation for the urban school district within its community. One of these image projection activities involves projecting a strong organizational or corporate identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) through consistent and targeted representations of the urban district through standard images and symbols and through standardized communication formats.

The second major theme that emerged in the study was media relations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Media relations are the complete set of tactics and activities employed by urban school district leaders to promote a favorable relationship with the local news media. Through its news reporting on the urban school district, the news media play an important role in establishing the district's public image and reputation. The news media reporting is so powerful that it can establish a media projected image (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000) of the organization that will supercede the image that urban leaders seek to project.

The third major theme that emerged in the study was external communication strategies. External communication strategies consist of the full set of tactics and activities designed by

urban district leaders to provide information to community stakeholders and project a positive image. External communication strategies include providing information through the news media and through other independent channels. Most of these channels simply broadcast information to stakeholders, and consequently, represent a one-way communication channel. An important sub-set of external communication activities includes community engagement strategies which provide the opportunity for stakeholder feedback to urban district leaders. Community engagement strategies provide an opportunity for two-way communication between urban district leaders and community stakeholders.

The fourth major theme that emerged in the study was identity (Gioia et al., 2000). Employee identity is the expression of how employees feel about being a member of the urban school district. Employee identity also includes the degree of loyalty employees feel toward the urban school district as an entity. The employees' identity has a direct relationship to their confidence in the district leadership and the integrity of leadership's honest internal and external communication of the status of the urban school district.

The fifth major theme that emerged in the study was internal communication strategies. Internal communication strategies consist of the tactics and activities designed by urban district leaders to provide information to employees and other internal stakeholders. A sub-set of internal communication strategies is employee engagement strategies. Similar to external communication, urban district leaders also look beyond one-way communication

channels to tactics and activities that are designed to create two-way communication channels that allow them to elicit feedback from internal stakeholders.

The sixth major theme that emerged in this study was adaptive instability (Gioia et al., 2000) and mutability (Clemens & Cook, 1999). Adaptive instability is the dynamic tension between identity, image, and reputation that creates the opportunity and motivation for change within the members of an urban school district. Mutability is the way urban school districts reproduce their core functions within legitimate boundaries while mutating and adapting to survive. Adaptive instability and mutability are the organizational forces that drive improvement in urban school systems. Urban district leaders channel this force for change into meaningful improvement by creating a desired future image of the organization that guides specific change efforts. Urban district leaders also take steps to build or improve organizational capacity through structural elaboration of the urban district in order to meet the challenges to improving the district's public image, identity, and reputation.

The seventh and final theme to emerge in this study was reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia et al., 2000). Reputation is the relatively stable, long-term, collective judgments of an urban school district by outsiders. Reputation has two important sub-components, legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1991) and accountability (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The first component of organizational reputation originates from a legitimacy perspective. The legitimacy concern is that the urban district should be operating in accordance with established and generally accepted patterns and standards for a school system of its type. The second component of reputation in an urban school district is the public's perception of

the degree of effectiveness of the performance of its core function of teaching and learning. An urban school district is dependent on its environment for support and the urban district must be aware of its environmental dependency (Meyer & Rowan, 1983). If the public believes that the district is legitimate and accountable for its efficiency and effectiveness, then the public will generally provide financial support to the urban district.

In the sections that follow, the results for each urban district A, B, and C will be discussed. The data gathered from the three urban districts are presented to support each theme and its related sub-themes. The discussion of the seven major themes begins with projected image.

Projected Image

The first major theme that emerged from this study was projected image (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000). One important aim of this study was to test the possibility that the public affairs research concepts of image and reputation can be appropriately applied to urban school systems. The study also sought to ascertain if urban school systems currently engage in long-term reputation building efforts in order to positively influence the public's image of the school system and thereby increase support for the district. Reputation building (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) is the combined efforts of organizational leaders to create a positive upward trend in the public's perception of the organization. Image projection occurs when the management of the organization formulates and actively communicates an image or representation of the organization to constituents and stakeholders. Management actively projects a positive public image by communicating the positive aspects of the system and its results to a variety of audiences in order to build its reputation.

A secondary component of reputation building is creating and projecting a clear, strong, positive school district or corporate identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). The organizational identity consists of the targeted representations of the organization, such as corporate symbols, corporate logos, communication strategies, and organizational media designed to market the school district or organization to the public. Organizational identity is also expressed when an organization seeks to control the format and quality of its own organizational communication.

District officers of the three urban districts were asked, "What is your role in district communication?" The intent of this question was to hear what purposeful strategies the district officers consciously used to communicate to the public and what the content of their message was. The officers of each district were also asked, "How do you get the good news out?" The purpose of this question was to elicit the strategies district leaders use in telling the organization's story and to document their efforts to create a favorable perception of the district in the public's mind. The following sections describe each of the urban district's efforts to project a positive image and corporate identity.

District A Projected Image

The officers of District A are clearly engaged in the long-term process of reputation building through the projection of a positive district image and to a lesser extent, the creation of a strong district identity. The officers of District A all had a slightly different view of their role in promoting the district. The superintendent spoke of her role as projecting the

district's image; the board president described herself as an advocate for the district; and the communication officer described his role as marketing the district.

The superintendent of District A expressed her perception of the need to project a positive image and promote the school district long term, when she said, "One of the big things we do, which we just did this past Friday, was our annual "State of the District Address," when we give really our report [to the community]… that's important because we really do give the data and where we are and what our challenges are…. we have to brag!" The board president of District A described herself as an advocate for the district and described her primary role as promoting the district and its initiatives. She described herself as an advocate for kids and the things the kids need. The communication officer, who has extensive experience in marketing, referred to the activity of projecting a positive image when he said:

> In a *marketing communication strategy* (emphasis added) you have to consider internal audiences and all of the various stakeholders… parents, students, all taxpayers and their perspective, businesses, business partners, government representatives who are passing laws and all employees and whatever area they are in… No matter how complex things are… they will always boil down to the simple elements… who are you writing and what are you trying to say… what impact you hope it will have … and what is the perspective of the Superintendent and the leadership and… what it is we are trying to say…. We have a lot of good stuff to write about… *if we see it and if it is walking and breathing and looks like it is*

> *positive, it is going to be in the newspaper, it is going to be on the website* (emphasis added)…. (Communication Officer, District A)

District A did not have a noticeably advanced set of strategies and activities to project a strong organizational identity as did some other districts, but the district does incorporate references to the numerous awards it has received into its communication documents and the district logo. Each of the leaders of District A expressed a slightly different perspective on how he or she projects a positive image of the district. It is not clear that the officers have a single unified strategy that they all understand. However, despite the absence of a clear, common understanding of image projection, they have been effective in projecting a positive image of District A. The district is actively engaged in long-term reputation building efforts. The leaders of District A understand the need for long-term reputation building and are constantly seeking opportunities, each in a slightly different way, to project a positive image of the school district.

District B Projected Image

The officers of District B also emphasized the importance of projecting a positive image and a strong organizational identity for their district. The superintendent and the board president each saw similar roles for themselves in telling the district's story and describing the challenges the district faces. The communication officer described her role as marketing the district through a variety of communication channels.

The superintendent and the communication officer both described the superintendent's role in communicating with the public and the news media as being the face of the district and serving as the number one communicator for the district, who gives credibility to the district's actions. The superintendent made reference to taking prominent people with her to local newspaper editorial board meetings in order to validate her representation of the district and its current state of affairs. The superintendent described her primary role as telling the positive aspects of the district's story because the community and the news media were not going to come and find out the positive aspects on their own. The board president of District B also sees himself as using his position as a "bully pulpit" in order to deliver an accurate message to the public about the status of the school system.

The communications officer saw her role as one of actively marketing the district through a variety of communication channels. She described her role as one of "social marketing," which she described as advancing the ideals of social change by using the news media and every other communication conduit. She summarized her perception of her role in image projection when she said:

> I think our role is to communicate with all of our stakeholders and to protect and grow the brand of [District B] … and we protect and grow that brand as if this were a private entity … Because, if you have a credible brand and if you have the trust of your constituents then you will have the support you need to be successful in teaching kids in school. (Communication Officer, District B)

The communication officer also described the role of her extensive communications department as marketing, sharing information, and promoting the school district. She

described her department as an in-house ad agency designed to present the district in a positive light by growing its "brand." She also described how her staff had sought to create more community buy-in to the district through billboards designed to promote the district and recruit teachers from around the country. She also described how her staff had made teachers and students centerpieces of the district's new brochure.

Of the three districts studied, District B had the most advanced strategies designed to build and project a strong organizational identity. The superintendent of District B described the district's visual identity guide which has established district policies for both internal and external communication. She cited the importance of communication policies because "one person can taint the whole image of the district unwittingly just because of inexperience or the use of incorrect grammar or punctuation." The communications officer of District B also described her department's efforts to create and implement the district's visual identity guide with standard district symbols, logos, and communication standards. The visual identity guide requires district staff to use common writing standards, and requires the use of approved logos, colors, and communication formats, all intended to establish the district brand.

District B has obviously recently invested a great deal of time and energy in projecting a positive image to their public through contact with the news media and through other communications channels such as magazines and billboards. District B has also recently expended considerable energy in creating its visual identity guide in order to create a new district logo and other communication standards in order to establish a district "brand."

Both the superintendent and the communications officer also mentioned District B's efforts to establish district writing standards in order to project a district identity of competent professionalism.

District B is definitely engaged in long-term reputation building efforts. District leaders have obviously invested a lot of time and energy in creating a positive projected image. Of the three districts studied, District B had the most unified image projection communications strategy and the largest communications department. The officers all seemed to clearly understand their role in representing the district to the public in a positive light. Of the three districts studied, District B has the most advanced strategies designed to build a strong district identity.

District C Projected Image

All of the officers of District C alluded to the importance of projecting an image of the district to the public, but they did not express a common view of how the district image should be projected to the public. The superintendent clearly saw herself as the main spokesperson for the district whose primary responsibility is to project the image of the district and its future direction. The board president seemed to concur that the superintendent is the face of the district, but she expressed her view that it is the role of the board to project the long term vision of the district. The communication officer saw his role as supporting the superintendent and board president in crafting and disseminating the image of the district.

The superintendent of District C spoke of her role as the spokesperson for the district and communicating the district's vision to the public:

> I think in the role of superintendent I have the bully pulpit to articulate a vision for children… to advocate for young people and to help other people clearly understand what the district is about in terms of educating these children… so I have to help people understand here is the vision… the big vision… of where we want to go… here is how we are going to get there… and this why it is important… not only for the students but for the city as a whole, for the state, for the country… and I think … so my role is really important for advocating and being visible… this is the face that people see… (Superintendent, District C)

The board president of District C concurred that the superintendent should be the face of the district, but she distinguished the board's role in image projection from that of the superintendent as the difference between daily operations and long term vision. The board president described the role of the board as amplifying the district's mission externally and answering larger guiding questions, such as the role of charter schools. The board president felt it was the board's role to set the long term vision and define the goals of the district. She alluded to joint press availabilities where she and the superintendent held discussions in order to reach consensus on the district's official position on a given policy or topic.

The communication officer of District C was very clear about his department's role in projecting an image of the district to the public. He saw his role as crafting the message and the communications strategy for the district. He described his primary role as one of

assisting the executive team in communicating to the general public. In District C, the communication officer was the only one who mentioned the district's style manual and "branding" officer.

District C clearly engages in reputation building activities. All of the officers of District C seem to generally understand their role in representing the district to the public, although there seems to be some confusion expressed by the board president about the respective roles of the superintendent and the board in the communication process. The superintendent of District C is clearly focused on projecting an image of the organization to the public. The board president distinguishes between the superintendent's role and the role of the Board in communication as the difference between daily operations and long term goals.   The communication officer clearly sees his role as supporting the district leaders and the image projection process.

Summary of Projected Image for Districts A, B, and C

All three urban districts had indications of a focus on the theme of projected image, but only District B exhibited a strong emphasis on the sub-theme of district identity. District A exhibited a strong indication that it is actively engaged in long-term reputation building efforts. The image projection efforts of District A focused on the strengths of the district itself, in contrast to the image projection efforts in District B and C, which focused more on the superintendent as leader of a broken and ineffective district.

Leaders of District A are constantly seeking opportunities to project a positive image of the school District. Although District A does not have a heavy focus on organizational image, they do make an effort to incorporate reference to awards and grants into every form of communication at their disposal. District A has clearly been engaged in reputation building for the longest period of time because of the stability in its communications department. An additional strength in District A is the high level of marketing experience of its communications officer.

District B is also engaged in long-term reputation building efforts. District B leaders have obviously invested a lot of time and energy in creating a positive projected image. The officers all understand their role in representing the district to the public in a positive light. Of the three districts studied, District B currently has the most advanced strategies designed to build a strong corporate identity because of the media professionals brought in three years ago. Because of its strong focus on reputation building, projected image, and corporate image, District B is perceived as the strongest overall in this thematic area of reputation building and projected image. In District B, however, the communications department centers a great deal of its effort on projecting the superintendent herself and increasing her appeal to the public. The effect is that the public can think well of the superintendent, but not be convinced that the district itself has improved. If the superintendent were to leave, the improvement in public image might not be sustained.

District C also engages in reputation building activities, but seems more focused on defining the desired future image of the district rather than highlighting its current positive aspects.

The officers seem to understand their role in representing the district to the public, although there seems to be some confusion of roles in the communication process. The superintendent is clearly focused on projecting an image of the organization to the public, and the communication officer sees his role as supporting that process. However, the board president sees the superintendent's role as discussing the daily operations of the district and her role as projecting long term goals. District C was reported to have some focus on district identity by one of its three officers and there was some evidence in district artifacts that suggested that this was true. There was also evidence that the previous superintendent had been the focus of image projection rather than the district itself.

In the next section, the second major theme of this study, media relations, will be discussed. Media relations are the way an urban school district handles its relationship with the public news media. Because the news media can project its own image of an urban school district, urban district leaders must pay close attention to their relationship with the news media.

Media Relations

The second major theme that emerged in this study of urban school districts was media relations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Urban school districts must give a great deal of attention to their relationship with the news media because the majority of the public, especially those who do not have children in the school system, get most of their information about the school system from the news media. Even those who do have a relationship with the district, such as parents or employees, are likely to be heavily influenced by what they hear or see in the news media.

An important sub-theme of media relations is media projected image (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). The school district can not control what the free press chooses to report. Since public news media are businesses with a profit-driven motive to sell advertising, they are mainly interested in capturing readers or viewers by highlighting negative news stories. The media can over-report negative aspects and under-report positive aspects of an urban district, and by this process, the news media often play a major role in establishing the public's image of an organization.

An urban school district's media relations tactics and activities must be designed to promote a favorable relationship with the news media. To the greatest extent possible, urban districts must facilitate good news stories about the district in the news media, while limiting the frequency of bad news reports and keeping bad news stories as fair and balanced as possible. The complex and delicate relationship with the media has to be carefully managed through a professional communications officer or staff member with media expertise.

The officers of the three districts were asked, "How do you communicate with the news media, especially investigative reporters?" They were also asked, "How do you handle bad news or bad publicity?" The primary purpose of these questions was to understand the districts' strategies for managing their relationships with the news media. Selected comments from district officers regarding their district's relationship with the media and their efforts to manage the media's projected image of their district appear in the following sections.

District A Media Relations

District A has a clear philosophy for managing their relationship with the news media and limiting the negative impact of the media's ability to project an image of the district. District A's media relations philosophy involves limiting contact of staff with the media, channeling communication with the news media through the communications department, limiting on-camera interviews, developing a positive relationship with the media be being responsive to their needs and timelines, working with reporters to get them accurate information, acknowledging and correcting district faults, and promoting positive news stories.

The officers of District A highlighted their heavy reliance on the communications department in dealing with the news media and managing the media's projected image of their district. The superintendent's practice is to limit her contact with the news media and speak only through the communications department. When asked how she deals with the news media, the superintendent of District A said flatly that she does not communicate with the news media. She prefers to communicate with the news media through written quotes released through the communications department. The superintendent is only interviewed for positive news stories.

Investigative reports by the news media are handled by the communications department. The superintendent of District A also described the media's tendency to play up the negative aspects of a situation in order to create controversy and attract viewers or readers:

I do not communicate with the media. I will give a quote. I communicate with the media through the public information office… If they call me and they say "we are running a story on the new stimulus plan, and we'd like a quote" and then I would share that quote with [the communication officer] and then [the communication officer] would share that with them… If they are doing an investigative piece, the way we operate, is I am not interviewed… I would not go on camera because I have seen what they do to people… and we would release a statement… And our response is… we will do an investigation… When you start trying to sell your story to the media… and this has been my understanding and our experience they are going to edit it, so they are not going to say everything that you said, and if they've got an upset parent and it is a slow news day, they [the parents] are going to get the bulk of the coverage…. We don't openly try to sell the story… (Superintendent, District A)

District A officers also identified another challenge they face in dealing with the local news media when the news media down-plays positive stories or represents good news as a negative. The district has been nominated several times for a national award given to urban school districts. The news story focused on the fact that the district had been nominated but had never won. The superintendent and the board president of District A both lamented that the article in the newspaper seemed to suggest that there was something wrong with the district because it had been nominated but had never won. The officers of District A recognize that they have to develop other means to share positive news with their

community because good news will not often be communicated by the news media. The superintendent of District A said:

> They did call us about the [National Award]… don't get me wrong, we had a lot of interest… But then what they wrote was that, gosh, they've been nominated three times and they can't seem to win it… What's the matter with [District A]? They are looking for the negative… and so we put the … anything we have… anything to brag about, I make no apologies for that, because if we don't share it, it will not be shared. (Superintendent, District A)

District A has to find ways to get the good news about the district to the public by other channels than the news media. They also have to take steps to limit bad news reports about the district.

District A has a very well thought out approach to dealing with the news media and potential negative news reports. The district officers and communications staff tries to deal with negative news reports head-on. They are always truthful with the news media and work with media to get the story accurate. As much as they can, they limit the media's access to district staff and keep interviews to a minimum in order to cut down on the duration of news stories. District A has developed clear procedures for dealing with the news media and actively trains district staff in the district procedures. District A also trains the news media over time to adhere to the district's guidelines for access to schools and staff. District A tries to address systemic problems head-on and invites the news media to report on systemic problems that have been corrected. District A actually trains the news media to respect the

district's media procedures while also respecting the media's need for responsiveness and appropriate access to district premises and staff.

The communication officer of District A described the district's general philosophy and his department's practice in relating to the media and dealing with media inquiries and investigative reporters:

> We've always found that you deal with the media head on… you're truthful… you are honest with the reporter, with the desk people, and I think that helps… to improve that trust between us and the media… being honest and forthright… providing what they want to the extent you can… and trying not to panic as best as you can and you know even the worst of stories… if it is not something systemic… it is going to pass... if it is not systemic… and if you can come out with it and say we are wrong, admit it and say you know what we are going to correct it… yeah, we are going to do a better job with it…. (Communication Officer, District A)

District A has developed policies and procedures to guide principals and other administrators in dealing with the media. When bad things happen that will very likely attract media attention, District A follows a standard protocol which includes notification of the communication department of potential media interest, gathering information about the situation, discussion of options, and decision on approach to engaging with the news media, which is usually either the release of an official district statement or when absolutely necessary, an interview of the communications officer. District A's primary approach to

dealing with the media is to use written statements to inform the media and parents of school or district related incidents rather than to do on-camera interviews.

The communication officer of District A described several situations where investigative reporters had to be carefully managed and educated because they are usually looking for a negative story. The first situation involved media interest in crime statistics and crimes committed on or near schools. The television station's story morphed into an attack on the district for not correctly coding some incidents which occurred on the streets near a school. Another example of an investigative reporter looking for a negative story occurred when District A made changes to its transportation policies. The communications department had to educate the reporter on state transportation policy and the rules for state reimbursement to districts for transportation of students.   The district had been exceeding the state requirements and transporting all children at district expense. Because of budget constraints, the district could no longer transport all children. No laws or policies were being violated. The district was merely following the state policy more strictly.

The communication officer of District A gave one final example of how he has to get reporters to focus on the facts, and when the district needs to improve, get them to report on the improvement. In the final example, the district had hired staff members who were dismissed from other school districts. The communication officer identified that the district was not asking employees when they applied for a job with District A if they had previously been dismissed from employment. After suggesting changes to the district employment application, the communication officer got the news reporter to do another story on the

improvements made by the District A to its employment application. By taking action on a systemic problem, the communication officer managed to turn a negative story in to a positive one about District A's desire to improve.

District A's approach to handling negative situations where the district is clearly not meeting acceptable standards is to acknowledge the problem, take immediate steps to address the underlying issues, and then allow the media the opportunity to see the district improve. With this approach, District A sometimes gets a positive story after the fact and manages to create the impression that they are an improving district with both the news media and the public.

The communication officer of District A elaborated on the challenge of projecting the district's image through the local news media. He described the process by which they collect good news stories internally and pitch them to community newspapers or community sections of the major news paper in the area. By his reports, some news outlets print the district's press releases almost verbatim. This allows the district to create a steady barrage of good news reported to the local community. The communications officer of District A reported:

> Well we work with our community newspapers… through press releases… we pitch story ideas… what usually happens with the [Major Newspaper] This Week … you know they're zoned… they cover different zones in the area… come every Thursday… we will send them a release… we will send to the [Neighborhood] News… The [Small Paper]… they usually take the release and do their own story…

which is fine with us… it works… Basically, whatever I send the [Neighborhood] News, they are going to run verbatim… so that is how we try to get our message out…   (Communications Officer, District A)

By cultivating a relationship with the news media, the communication department of District A is positioned to capitalize on almost every opportunity to create a positive image of the district.   The communications officer described one situation where District A took advantage of the opportunity to tell their story of how good their employees are and how hard they worked for the community's children, after a major storm closed schools for more than a week.

In summary, District A has developed clear strategies for managing its relationship with the media. First, in District A, all media interactions are handled through the communications department. Second, the communications department cultivates a positive relationship with the various news reporters, news editors, and news directors. This relationship is important in that it provides the opportunity for getting positive news stories reported and also in minimizing extended media focus on negative news. Third, media inquiries are handled promptly and as directly as possible in order to respect the needs and timelines of the media. Fourth, the district has clear guidelines for staff to follow in dealing with the news media and for conducting investigations of situations receiving media interest. Fifth, the district acknowledges when it is at fault or when something can be improved, addresses the issue, and then invites the media to review the corrective actions. Finally, District A has clear protocols for providing information to the media through on-camera reports or through written statements. District A works hard to manage its relationship with the news media.

However, even though it has a generally positive relationship with the news media, District A still has to work very hard to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative and has a difficult time getting the news media to report on positive news about the district.

District B Media Relations

District B seems to be actively engaged in the process of establishing a clear philosophy for managing its relationship with the news media. The officers of District B were very focused on limiting the negative impact of the media's projected image of the district. District B's developing media relations philosophy currently involves building relationships with the news media and creating a sense of openness. District B has recently created a highly professional communications department under the leadership of its current superintendent. The members of this relatively new communications department are focused on using their professional experience to "help" the local media with their reporting of District B. The communications department is focused on developing a positive relationship with the news media be being responsive to their needs and timelines. The staff is working to lead news editors and reporters to positive stories about the district. District officers generally channel their communication with the news media through the communications department, but they do not necessarily limit their on-camera interviews.

The officers of District B were all very aware of the media's ability to project a completely negative image of their urban district. Each officer described situations where the news editors and headline writers had put a negative spin on an otherwise neutral or positive story.

The superintendent of District B gave her opinion of the current situation with the news media across the country and its ability to create a negative image of urban school systems:

Well the problem we are having and this has been for the last several years… the media has become almost desperate to compete with mass media, visual media and so what I have told them is *they have gone from reporting the news to creating the news… so they will create tensions and drama when there is none* (emphasis added)… and that is very irritating and I think we have an obligation to call them on it and hold them accountable… so I will pick up the phone and call about headlines because very often what you will see now is the story is fine, but the headline and the first paragraph give a wholly different picture than the reality… and so headlines right now are to grab people's attention to get readers…   (Superintendent, District B)

The board president also recognized the news media's role in creating a negative image of District B.   He attributed the growing negativism of the news media to the increasing competition among news outlets and the declining profit margins, resulting in heavier work loads for reporters and less air time or column space devoted to telling a complete and accurate story. He gave an example of the media's focus on negative aspects of student achievement data and failure to report on the overwhelming positive aspects of the same data. When talking about the news media's indifference to a special program recognizing students' achievement, the Board President of District B lamented:

It could have been that [the communication officer] sent this information to the newspaper in a press release and they just chose not to run it… but wow, we had 800

kids in our district who had maintained a 3.8 grade point average or better for two frickin' years… that's a lot better than having a running back get a scholarship to [state university]… to me we are not doing a good enough job of that… *and it could be that the media doesn't want good news... it doesn't sell papers ... you can't write a negative headline... although they would probably write it... "79,000 Kids Did Not Get a 3.8 Grade Point Average"* (emphasis added). (Board President, District B)

The Communication Officer of District B also expressed her concerns about the direction of news reporting in general. She described current news reporting as "chatter" and lamented the fact that news reporters seldom took steps to check the accuracy of their information.

So the officers of District B are challenged to manage their relationship with the local news media in order to limit negative reporting that seriously damages District B's public image and reputation.   The superintendent of District B described her efforts to lead an improvement in District B's relationship with the local news media in order to reduce the number and frequency of negative news reports. She described how she maintains an open door policy with the media and every news reporter. Unlike the superintendent in District A, the superintendent in District B allows the media almost continuous access to her office and district information. She said that her approach to dealing with negative stories or publicity was to respond immediately and as honestly as possible. She warned that in her experience, avoidance of the media or an attempt to spin the story would usually draw even more intense media pressure.

The board president of District B was inclined to be sympathetic to the time-strapped education reporter for the local newspaper. He attributed much of the increasingly poor and negative news coverage to cutbacks in news media staff. He described how the local education reporter was recently sent out of town to report on a natural disaster, but had to return to the city to begin immediately reporting on several different local education stories. Like the superintendent, the board president of District B thought that the best approach to limiting bad news about District B was to develop a relationship with the local newspaper editorial boards and electronic media news directors.

The communication officer reported that the department's general approach to dealing with bad news was to limit discussion, especially of personnel matters, and to limit interviews with the news media. In certain circumstances, if the district's relationship with a media outlet is positive, they reporter is invited to sit down with district staff to discuss the situation. The goal of such meetings is to move the tone of the story from negative to neutral.

The communication officer of District B also talked about how she and her staff work hard to cultivate their relationships with the editorial boards, editors, and reporters of various media outlets in order to promote good news about District B. She explained District B's process for getting news outlets to run positive stories about the district:

> There are outlets that are just dying for content so they will … if you publish the ingredients of a Cheerios box on a news release letter head they publish it … you know without ever reading it… there's no gate-keeping anymore… so it's just

verbatim… if there is somebody I'm trying to tease with a story, I will tease them, I will play with them for a while… I can't tell you this… you know and then they will get really interested about it… just drive up their expectations and then finally give it to them and then they will do something with it… (Communication Officer, District B)

District B is still in the process of establishing a clear philosophy for managing its relationship with the news media. First, District B's developing media relations philosophy currently involves building relationships with the news media and creating a sense of openness. District B cultivates its relationship with the media by being receptive to them and knowing the stresses they are under. District communication staff strives to project the district's image through the media, by accommodating the needs of news outlets and strategically exploiting the relationship. Second, District B has recently created a highly professional communications department that is focused on using its professional experience to "help" the local media with their reporting of District B. The staff is working to lead news editors and reporters to positive stories about the district. Third, the district has developed strategies to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative and to limit the duration of reporting on a particular issue. Finally, District B officers generally channel their communication with the news media through the communications department, but they do not necessarily limit their on-camera interviews. District B has had some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but it has also developed external communication strategies, as an alternative to the news media, in order to transmit the district's story to the public.

District C Media Relations

District C has some long-standing policies and procedures in place regarding interaction with the news media. Protocols were reported to be in place to guide district staff. However, there were many indications that district staff interacts with the news media on a regular basis, a phenomenon related to district and employee identity, which will be discussed in a later section. There was not a keen sense of urgency regarding the impact of the news media on District C's image. The communications officer was able to describe standard operating procedures for dealing with bad news. There was also some indication that historically, the communications department had established a strong working relationship with the news media and had a process in place for promoting good news stories about the district to the news media.

District C is set in a very active media market. The superintendent and the other district officers seem very used to dealing with the news media. The communication officer of District C mentioned the role of the media in the public's perception of the district:

> The majority of the folks… the only way they know what's going on in the district is based on what they read and what they listen to on the radio… and the majority of the region that's how they get their perception because they don't have kids in the public schools… so I guess what I am trying to say… the greater world… people who don't have kids in the school district… their perception is built through the media… and that's why I tell folks, listen we have got to be very careful… once we have created a perception that something is wrong it is very difficult to really back

up and try to fix it… it takes years and years and years and years and years…

(Communication Officer, District C)

None of the other officers expressed great concern about the media's influence on District C's public image and reputation. The Superintendent seemed to be more focused on using negative information about the district to drive District C towards improvement.

The leaders of District C were able to describe their procedures for dealing with the news media and bad news reports. The superintendent described her efforts to build a relationship with the local news media:

You know I tend to want to just be honest and forthright… here is the truth as I know it and… if there is something going on and we are wrong I just say we are wrong… I apologize to the public… and people have said to me that they are surprised at that… that I am so open about saying I am sorry… but when we are wrong we are wrong and all I can say is I am going to try to fix it and that shouldn't happen again… if you know somebody is doing that kind of investigative story but I have found to be honest and forthright and to admit when you are wrong and let the chips fall where they may… (Superintendent, District C)

The officers consistently described the general procedures in District C for dealing with the news media. The expectation in District C is that all communication with the news media and all media inquiries must be routed through the communications department. The communications officer described the general process for handling potentially negative news stories. First, district staff immediately notifies the communications department of the

incident. The communication department gathers and verifies the information as necessary. Then the communication department and district staff come up with a strategy to communicate the incident to staff and to the public. A priority in District C is to communicate to parents, staff, and students first before giving it to the news media. In some instances a letter may be prepared and sent to the parents and then released to the news media. In situations where a district specialist may need to speak to the media, the communications officer does the background of the situation to the media first and then the specialist provides the necessary expert information.

In the case of investigative reporters, the communications officer reported that investigative stories are treated with a great sense of urgency and responsiveness to the reporter in order to tamp down the tendency of investigative reporters to over dramatize their stories. The communication officer concluded by saying, "I need to either kill the story or message around it… My number one job is to kill negative stories. And if I can not kill it, then I will work with it." Clearly, District C has strategies to contain negative news stories and limit the duration of negative news reporting.

The communications officer of District C also described how his department works to get positive news out through the news media. He gave the example of the district's new five-year strategic plan that his office would promote through the editorial boards, the daily newspapers, the weekly newspapers, and the television magazine type programs. He went on to describe how good news stories are pitched to the education reporters at the local newspapers and electronic news outlets. He commented that if he was responsive to

reporters when they worked on negative news stories, they would be more likely to accept good news stories from him.

District C is situated in a very active news media market. The district does not appear to have a positive relationship with the news media in what is obviously an intense media environment. The Superintendent and the other district officers were very used to dealing with the news media. There was not a keen sense of urgency regarding the impact of the news media on the district's image and reputation. The district seems to have some long-standing policies and procedures regarding interaction with the news media. Both the board president and the communications officer referred to district protocols regarding staff interaction with the media. The communications officer was able to describe standard operating procedures for dealing with bad news. There was also some indication that historically, the communications department had established a strong working relationship with the news media and had a process in place for promoting good news stories about the district to the news media. The district has some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but it has also developed some external communication strategies in order to transmit District C's story to the public, as an alternative to the news media.

Summary of Media Relations for Districts A, B, and C

All three districts exhibited a strong emphasis on the theme of media relations and a keen awareness of the media's tendency to project a negative image of them. District A takes steps to create a positive relationship with the news media. However, District A has to work very hard to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative. The general strategy

of District A is to minimize contact with the media by issuing statements. The district has some success in getting the news media to report on positive news, but it has also developed extensive alternative external communication strategies to transmit the district's story to external stakeholders. Of the three districts, District A was the least open to the media.

District B cultivates its relationship with the media by being receptive to them and recognizing the stresses the news media are under. District B's communication staff strives to project the district's image through the media, by accommodating the needs of news outlets and strategically exploiting that relationship. The district has hired very experienced media professionals and has developed strategies to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative and to limit the duration of negative news reports. District B has had some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but it has also developed external communication strategies, as an alternative to the news media, in order to transmit the district's story to the public.

District C also manages its relationship with the media. It has strategies to limit negative reporting and promote positive reporting. District C has a long history of attempting to project its image through the media, exclusively. The leadership of the district has historically been very open and accessible to the news media. The district does have some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but, under the leadership of its new superintendent, it has recently developed other external communication strategies in order to more effectively transmit District C's story to the public.

All three districts expressed that they do seek to get good news out to their public through the news media. However, the districts varied in the degree to which they relied on the news media as their exclusive communication medium. All three districts employ some means other than the news media to communicate with their publics. The next major theme that emerged in this study of urban districts was external communication strategies.

External Communication Strategies

The third major theme to emerge in this study was external communication strategies. Urban school districts often depend on the public news media as their primary communication channel through which they project their image of themselves to external stakeholders. This can be an effective strategy if the district has a good cooperative relationship with its local news media. The quality of the urban district's relationship with its local media will have two significant impacts: 1) the willingness of the local news media to report bad news about the district in a fair and balanced manner and 2) the willingness of the local news media to frequently report good news about the district. If the relationship with the local news media is poor, the district can expect extended negative news coverage of district problems and reluctant reporting of good news about the district, both of which hurt the district's public image and reputation.

Effective communication to external stakeholders through the local news media is vital to urban school districts in their effort to project a positive image to their external stakeholders and to build a positive reputation over time. However, urban districts can not count on the news media to devote the amount of air time or print space necessary to present the total

story about the district, so they must develop other communication channels in order to get their message out to their external stakeholders and to the general public. Urban districts must develop other external communication strategies in order to effectively project their image to the public.

The officers of District A, B, and C were asked several questions about their external communications strategies. First, they were asked, "How do you communicate with the general public?" This question was intended to elicit the array of external communication strategies utilized by the district. Second, the district officers were asked, "What role do schools play in the communication process? This question was intended to draw out centralized external communications strategies targeting the general public and district stakeholders versus school-based external communications strategies targeted at parents and local school communities. And finally, district officers were asked, "Are there any other effective communication strategies you utilize?" This question was designed to reveal any other effective communications strategies utilized by the districts.

The sub-theme of external communication strategies emerged during the officer interviews. A specific group of external communication strategies, labeled community engagement strategies, were identified by district leaders as crucial to their success. Districts were either using or planning to use strategies designed to elicit feedback from constituents. The primary characteristic of these community engagement strategies was the creation of opportunities for two-way communication between the urban school district and their

stakeholders. The following sections review the data regarding external communication strategies from each of the three urban districts.

District A External Communication Strategies

The officers of District A reported a broad array of one-way and two-way external communication strategies utilized by the district. They all alluded to the extensive external communication strategies employed by the district as being a very important component of the district's success. District A consistently engages in external communication with key stakeholders, school communities, and the general public. Most impressive was the consistency and quality of District A's execution of both its one-way and two-way external communication strategies.

District A has developed several strategies to communicate information to external audiences including a district newspaper, a district calendar, school newsletters, school marquees, parent teacher organizations, a key communicators program, the district website, and an annual State of the District Address. District A's newspaper comes out four times a year and has a circulation of over 108,000. District A also creates a district calendar that is sent to the homes of all students. This calendar includes district-wide events, district activities, extra-curricular activities, and information about school board meetings. Each school in District A produces a school newsletter in English and Spanish that keeps parents informed about district and school happenings and things that are changing. District A requires that every school use its school marquee to provide information to the school

communities. The district often requires the schools to post a specific message about district activities or accomplishments.

District A also maintains a district's website that has recently been redesigned and updated to be very user friendly. The district took steps to make the website more dynamic and to make it a place where parents can go to get current information. The website includes all recent press releases, district data, and notices of meetings. The website is designed to provide many things parents can use.

One of the most outstanding programs utilized by District A is its key communicators program. District leaders have encouraged every campus to designate the principal, the librarian, or someone as the key communicator for their campus. The explicit purpose of the program is to tell the community about the good things that are happening at the school and in the district. This program, which is found at each school, is designed to generate a steady flow of positive news stories that can be shared with the local news media, especially small newspapers and neighborhood sections of the major newspapers. A school staff member at each school is trained to take kids pictures at school happenings, write up the information, and send it to the neighborhood and local newspapers. This person is responsible for sending out press releases about their school to the community newspapers that cover their area. They also keep the communications department informed about what events are occurring, who is involved, and when the event is taking place. District A has also created a competition among the key communicators. Certificates are given out at the employee

awards banquet for recognized and honored levels of newspaper column inches that appeared in the papers.

Another outstanding external communication strategy used by District A is the annual state of the schools address. The superintendent delivers this address at a breakfast held for business and community leaders. In the address, the superintendent reports on the status of the district and provides data on academic and financial performance. In her address, the superintendent highlights the accomplishments of the past year and gives an overview of the challenges the district faces in the coming years. Several copies of the local newspaper with a picture of the Superintendent of District A and a description of her State of the Schools speech were available in the public lobby of the schools administration building.

District A officers reported a very high level of two-way communication with district stakeholders as being very important to the district's success. District A utilizes a series of standing committees or groups on a regular basis, and it also convenes community groups for input on important special issues such as boundary changes or bond elections for facilities improvement programs. The district also has a special community leadership program to create community spokespersons for the district. There is also a long history of what is referred to by officers as an open door policy that promotes effective two-way communication with community members. The school board of District A also has activities designed to promote two-way communication. Finally, the district conducts annual surveys to obtain feedback from both internal and external audiences.

The Superintendent of District A began immediately to describe how the district communicates through groups, and even utilizes groups in the district's decision-making process. She expressed that her role is to work with all of those advisory groups and to be sure that the right information is given out and that the district has the structures in place to communicate information to people. The superintendent spent a great deal of time describing the series of groups that the district utilizes as a sounding board for district decisions and as a source of ideas. She described the process the district uses to get feedback from these various groups who are usually the first to know what's going on in the district. The most important groups seemed to be the parent group and the superintendent's advisory group composed of representatives from all stakeholder groups.

The parent group was referred to as the district coordinating committee. The superintendent holds two meetings a year with two representatives from each school. The representatives are PTA presidents or they are well respected parent leaders in their own communities. In their first meeting of the year they will receive important information about changes or whatever is occurring at the time. The superintendent will ask the group what kind of information they would like to have at the next meeting which will occur in the Spring, and so then they develop the agenda based on parent feedback. The parents then take that information back to their communities. The superintendent gave the example of the district calendar which has a lot of issues that need feedback from the parents. Another example she gave was that she wanted feedback on changes to the high school grading policy.

The superintendent's advisory group was mentioned by all three officers of District A. This committee is comprised of parents, community members, teachers, and paraprofessionals. The superintendent's advisory group is used a great deal for external and internal communication purposes. The group is frequently utilized to get information out to the organization and the community and to get feedback on important issues. The superintendent gave two examples of how district concerns are communicated to parents and the general public through this committee. She described how this particular advisory group was used to get feedback on revisions to the district's dress code and to proposed calendar revisions. The superintendent also described other advisory groups such as the student group and the business partner group that are utilized to promote two-way communication.

The communication officer described how District A creates special committees for important district decisions such as boundary changes or bond proposals. The district process is to create a draft plan and then have parents and other stakeholders filter it and make recommendations for any changes or revisions. In the process, the district makes sure the stakeholders understand the data on which the plan is based. When the stakeholders have endorsed the plan, including the changes that they recommended, then the plan goes to the school board for final approval. In the communication officer's view, the key to the success of this engagement strategy is to figure out in advance the potential scope of the changes and the stakeholders impacted and then locate parents and stakeholders who can serve on the committee and give their input on what the district is thinking.

The process for planning a bond election in District A begins with the creation of a bond committee of parents and community members. This committee creates its wish list, beginning with the question, "If we had the money to spend, what would we do?" The committee also discusses the results of a district facilities needs assessment conducted by an independent firm. Then the committee discusses what they think the taxpayers will support. The bond committee then divides into sub-committees supported by district staff to research and report on various components of the draft plan. When the process is complete and the final plan is approved, the members of the committee help the district make presentations to the broader community on the detailed plans for the bond election and its potential cost.

Another outstanding community engagement strategy in District A is the district's community leadership program. A special group of community members consisting of parents, community leaders, education partners, and business owners are selected each year to participate in this program. They meet every other month and spend a half day being briefed on a critical aspect of district operations. They are recruited because they are involved in some way with the district and they are trained to be ambassadors for the district to the community.

All of the officers of District A mentioned the open door policy maintained across the district that contributes to good two-way communication. The officers all try to be accessible to employees and community members. Even when parents walk in unannounced or call after hours, district leaders meet or listen to them and their concerns.

The board of District A also has a schedule of community engagement activities. Board members make regular visits to schools and attend events and activities at their schools. The board had developed goals for the number and types of meetings and events that they attend. Their goal is to be accessible to community members and hear concerns as well as share information about district successes and challenges. In legislative years when the state legislature is in session, board members make it a point to meet with legislators in order to share concerns and influence decisions about governance.

Another outstanding community engagement strategy in District A is the practice of conducting annual community surveys. The communication department commissions annual community surveys in partnership with a local university. The university professors help with the construction of the survey and the interpretation of the results. District A has conducted surveys for the last five years. The leaders of District A frequently cited statistics drawn from the surveys, indicating that the information is used to guide district decision-making and gauge the reputation of the district with community members.

District A has developed other external communication strategies to transmit their story to external stakeholders, rather than just relying on the media to project the district's image. District A has developed an array of external communication strategies, including a district newspaper, a district calendar, the district website, school newsletters, school marquees, parent teacher organizations, a key communicators program, and an annual State of the District Address. District A utilizes a wide array of external communication strategies, but relies most heavily on its key communicators program to get positive news into the local and

neighborhood newspapers. In addition to these information dissemination strategies, District A officers credit their community engagement strategies, with parents and community members being included in several district committees on a regular basis, as the most effective way they successfully promote two-way communication. District A has developed a variety of strategies to communicate with external audiences, some fairly standard and others quite creative, such as the key communicators strategy and the community leaders program. District A especially relies on its long-standing community engagement strategies to promote two-way communication with community stakeholders.

District B External Communication Strategies

According to its three officers, District B has recently developed several new strategies to communicate with external audiences. Although there are a large number of strategies to provide information to external stakeholders, there are only beginning efforts to develop effective community engagement strategies. The superintendent of District B also described how she has made special efforts to meet with business groups and parent organizations in order to establish a dialogue with them and rebuild community relationships that had been strained in recent years.

In addition to utilizing the news media, District B has an annual state of the district address, a parent newsletter, periodic phone calls to parents with a phone call out system, an external mailing of district highlights, press releases, advertising, public appearances by the Superintendent, community events for board members, school business partnership

programs, a district website, school websites, a campus communicator program, and the communication officer utilizes Facebook and Twitter.

The superintendent described some of the external communication strategies utilized by District B. She mentioned the standing room only annual state of the district address sponsored by the chamber of commerce. She also mentioned the quarterly parent newsletter and the frequent phone calls to parents that she makes utilizing the district call-out system. She also mentioned the district highlights that are mailed out each year to the business community regarding hot topics and potential negative news. The superintendent reported that she sends out a special heads-up to the business community on hot topics if the need arises. She also mentioned the numerous public appearances she makes at the various community chambers and the business round table, which represents the community's largest employers.

The communication officer of District B discussed her department's practice of developing and strategically placing press releases. She also mentioned the district's strategically placed advertising in the print and broadcast media. She described the numerous community events organized for the board members and mentioned the adopt-a-school partner's program. The communication officer also insisted that Facebook and Twitter are the next big thing in external communications for District B.

All of the officers in District B mentioned the new district website. This was the best website of the three districts studied. It had a great deal of information and was clearly

professionally done. The district had recently approved funding to enhance the website further by creating a parent portal that would allow parents to access their students' grades and see the district curriculum requirements for students. Each school also has its own website, but the communication officer mentioned the challenges of educating schools to utilize their websites effectively.

Similar to District A's key communicator program, District B has recently begun its own campus communicator program designed to get positive news stories to send to the news media. The campus communicators are meeting monthly and nearly all of the schools are participating. District B's officers reported that they are beginning to see positive stories emerging from the campus communicator program.

District B has only recently made an effort to increase its involvement with the community during the tenure of its current superintendent. The superintendent of District B participates regularly in a business round table and has made an effort to meet with parent and teacher organizations in the city. These efforts are reported to have established relationships, but have not necessarily created a true two-way dialogue between the district and its external stakeholders. The superintendent of District B explained how her district has increased its efforts to strengthen ties to parents and school communities through meetings with the city-wide board of the PTAs and through family math and literacy nights. The communication officer of District B referred to the superintendent's efforts to rebuild relationships with the community which has opened up opportunities for the school district as a whole.

District B utilizes an array of external communication strategies. In addition to utilizing the news media, the district has an annual state of the district address, a parent newsletter, periodic phone calls to parents with a phone call out system, an external mailing of district highlights, participation in a business round table, press releases, advertising, public appearances by the superintendent, community events for board members, school business partnership programs, a district website, school websites, a campus communicator program, meetings with parent/teacher organizations, and the communication officer utilizes Facebook and Twitter. The district has some community engagement strategies to promote two-way communication, but at this point in time, most of those activities center around the superintendent. These community engagement activities have served to establish positive relationships, but have not yet established complete two-way communication.

District C External Communications Strategies

The officers of District C reported an array of external communication strategies designed to provide information to community stakeholders. Most notably, District C has a longstanding reliance on communication with its external stakeholders through the news media. Under the leadership of its new superintendent, District C has recently committed to developing an extensive series of meetings with external groups in order to engage stakeholders and establish two-way communication.

According to district officers, District C has developed several strategies to communicate with external audiences including letters to parents, the district calendar, e-mails to parents, an external newsletter, and the district website. However, District C expends most of its

external communications effort on getting its message out to the public through the news media. District officers meet with editorial boards, hold news conferences for the release of reports, and issue frequent media advisories. District C also has some limited indication of the practice of gathering positive news from schools and pitching the positive stories to the news media. District C often uses media coverage of the discussions during its monthly board meetings to frame district issues. The media often covers the reports about the district and its operations that are released during the board meetings. In District C, these external communication strategies are the primary means by which information is shared with important external stakeholders. District C has only recently begun to develop community engagement strategies to promote two-way communication directly with its external stakeholders.

District C has recently committed to developing an extensive series of meetings with groups to engage stakeholders. The community engagement strategies utilized by District C include parent round tables, meetings with ministers, a parent and community engagement office, a parent hot line, parent/teacher organizations, and parent ombudsmen in 85 schools. The Superintendent of District C, who has been in place less than a year, is clearly striving to make engagement of parents and other community members a top priority. She clearly understands the importance of listening to the community and she has begun to meet with parent groups and ministers on a quarterly basis. A whole new set of community meetings in different district neighborhoods are being planned. She created a parent and community engagement office in the district and established a parent hot line. She has also begun a move to revive parent/teacher organizations at every school. One of her most important acts

was to create a position of parent ombudsman at 85 struggling schools. The superintendent of District C also described the community engagement sessions she implemented for the development of the district's new strategic plan.

According to district officers, District C has developed several strategies to communicate with external audiences, including letters to parents, the district calendar, e-mails, an external newsletter, and the district website. However, similar to District B, District C expends considerable effort to get their message out to the public through the news media. They meet with editorial boards, conduct news conferences for the release of reports, and utilize press releases and media advisories. District C also pitches news stories to the media. In addition to these information dissemination strategies, District C has recently committed to developing an extensive series of meetings to engage stakeholders. The community engagement strategies utilized by District C include, parent round tables, meetings with ministers, the creation of a parent and community engagement office, the establishment of a parent hot line, the re-establishment of home/school organizations, and has placed parent ombudsmen in 85 schools. The Superintendent, who has been in place less than a year, is clearly striving to make engagement of parents and other community members a top priority. There has been a recent push under the leadership of the new superintendent to develop a set of new community engagement strategies to establish a two-way dialogue with community stakeholders. Currently however, District C depends on the news media a great deal to get their story out to the general public.

Summary of External Communication Strategies for Districts A, B, and C

All three of the urban districts showed strong indications of a heavy emphasis on external communication strategies, but showed considerable variation in the number and quality of external communication strategies. District A has developed an array of external communication strategies, including a district newspaper, a district calendar, the district website, school newsletters, school marquees, parent teacher organizations, a key communicators program, and an annual State of the District Address. District A attempts to pitch positive stories to the news media, but relies most heavily on its key communicators program to get positive news into the local and neighborhood newspapers. District officers credit their community engagement strategies, with parents and community members being included in several district committees on a regular basis, as the most effective way they successfully communicate with external stakeholders.

District B utilizes an array of external communication strategies. In addition to utilizing the news media, the district has an annual state of the district address, a parent newsletter, periodic phone calls to parents with a phone call out system, an external mailing of district highlights, participation in a business round table, press releases, advertising, public appearances by the Superintendent, community events for board members, school business partnership programs, a district website, school websites, a campus communicator program, meetings with parent/teacher organizations, and the Communication Officer utilizes Facebook and Twitter. District B's campus communicator program is similar to District A's key communicator program, but has only recently been implemented. The district has some community engagement strategies to promote two-way communication, but at this point in

time, most of those activities center around the superintendent and board's participation in community activities.

According to district officers, District C has utilized several strategies to communicate with external audiences, including letters to parents, the district calendar, e-mails, an external newsletter, and the district website. However, similar to District B, District C expends considerable effort to get their message out to the public through the news media. They meet with editorial boards, conduct news conferences for the release of reports, and utilized press releases and media advisories. District C also pitches news stories to the media. District C has committed to developing an extensive series of meetings with groups to engage stakeholders. The community engagement strategies utilized by District C include, parent round tables, meetings with ministers, the creation of a parent and community engagement office, the establishment of a parent hot line, the re-establishment of home/school organizations, and the placement of parent ombudsmen in 85 schools. The Superintendent, who has been in place less than a year, is clearly striving to make engagement of parents and other community members a top priority for District C.

Districts build their reputation by projecting an image to their stakeholders. District management seeks to manage the district's relationship with the media, and when things are at an optimum, they manage to project their image through the media. However, management can not rely solely on the news media to communicate effectively with their public. They must develop other external communication strategies to project a positive image to the public and to balance the public's perceptions that are based on the media's

projected image of the district. Now we turn to another theme. The image that management

projects to its external stakeholders is also received by employees and can affect employee

identity. Table 3 shows a comparison of the external communication strategies of all three

districts.

Identity

The next major theme to emerge in this study was the concept of identity (Gioia, Schultz, &

Corley, 2000). Identity is the way employees feel about membership in an organization and

the degree of loyalty they feel to that organization. How employees feel about membership

in the organization is also tied to how they perceive the performance of the organization and

their perceptions about the integrity of organizational leadership. How employees feel about

membership in the organization is highly impacted by what others say about the

organization during personal interactions and also through public pronouncements others

make about the organization, such as news media and organizational monitors' reports.

In addition to being sensitive to what others say about the organization, employees are also

keenly aware of how organizational leaders portray the organization.

Table 3

Comparison of External Communication Strategies

Strategy	District A	District B	District C
Projected Image	News media	News media	News media
	Key communicators	Campus communicators	Letters to parents
	District newspaper	Parent newsletter	External newsletter
	School newsletters	Phone calls to parents	E-mails?
	District calendar	District highlights (mail)	District calendar
	District website	District website	District website
	School websites	School websites	
	School marquees	Public advertising	
	State of the District	State of the District	
		Facebook and Twitter	
Community Engagement	PTO/PTA	PTO/PTA	PTO/PTA
	District committees	Business Round Table	Parent round tables
	Business partners	Business partners	Ministers meetings
	Leadership Program	Public appearances	Engagement Office
		Community events	Parent hot-line
			Parent ombudsmen

Employees are sensitive to any perceived discrepancies between what is projected by management and what their direct experience tells them or that is reflected to them from external stakeholders. Employees are also extremely sensitive to what they perceive as deliberate misrepresentations about the organization. If employees feel a great difference between the image the district projects and the image they construe that the external public holds, then they may feel that organizational leaders are being dishonest and consequently lose trust in them. This comparison of projected, reflected, and personal organizational images by employees has been labeled image congruence, a sub-theme of identity.

District officers were asked the question, "Are employees proud to be members of your organization." This question was intended to get district leaders' take on how employees feel about membership in the district and the degree of loyalty the employees feel for the district. The district officers were also asked, "Have you had any recent incidences of whistleblowers?" The purpose of this question was to ascertain the degree of trust of district leaders.

District A Identity

Officers of District A reported a high level of positive identity among employees of the district. They based their comments on evidence from district employee surveys, indicators of pride of membership, and the low employee turnover rate. They also reported a very low level of distrust of district leadership and an absence of employees taking issues to the news media.

The superintendent and the communication officer both cited employee survey data to support their judgment that the employees of District A were proud of their membership in the district and therefore had a strong positive identity. The superintendent of District A began by saying:

> I'm going to tell you from the surveys and the data and the feedback that we get. The majority of our employees feel like this is a family and they are very happy here. They feel like there are things that we try to do for them and they take a lot of pride in what they do and they want to be here to work for the kids we serve. That is my take and that is the feedback I get. Of course I also know, I would say ninety percent of our people are pretty happy here. I think about ten percent of our people think there are things we should do differently and those kinds of things and of course that is one of the purposes of having the [superintendent advisory group] and some of those big committees, they are there to tell us what they are concerned about and those kinds of things. (Superintendent, District A)

The Communication Officer of District A also commented on the high rating all employee groups give District A. He reported that employees gave the district an A or strong B for its performance in relation to other school districts. He cited the district's open door policy and high level of trust as factors that negated employees going outside the organization to air their grievances. The communication officer also described the indications of pride of membership displayed by the district's employees through the wearing of service pins and through conversations and testimonials from employees.

The board president made reference to the district's low employee turnover rate. The board president cites the teacher retention rate as an indication that employees of District A have a positive identity, when she says, "Yeah, when you look at retention of teachers … while we are not happy, we are still losing teachers… we feel that it's stable… that there are loyal people staying in the district." She felt that the employee retention rate was the best indicator of a generally satisfied work force.

District A leaders' comments supported the general theme of positive identity, suggesting a general positive congruence between District A's projected image and the employees construed external image. The superintendent said that employees had ample opportunities to express any concerns they might have about the district and the way it is run. She talked about the many e-mails and letters she received identifying issues that someone thought needed to be addressed and the process she uses to investigate issues and communicate the results. The communication officer also discussed the rare instances of district staff going to the media and attributed it to the high level of trust built up in the district.

The officers of District A feel that in general, the district's employees have a positive identity and have a high degree of loyalty to the district. The officers report that there is almost no whistle-blowing activity or other expressions of employee dissatisfaction in the district. The officers reported that they maintain a high level of internal communication in order to keep their employees engaged and committed. The officers of District A feel that in general, the employees of District A have a positive identity and are loyal to the district.

District B Identity

The officers of District B also believe that their employees have a generally positive identity. The three District B officers reported that their employees are loyal to the district, but they also described a considerable degree of whistle-blowing activity and other expressions of employee dissatisfaction. This degree of employee dissatisfaction suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between District B leadership's projected image of the organization and the employees' personal and construed external images of the district.

When asked if the employees of the District B are proud to be members of the organization, the superintendent ventured that the critical mass were proud, but that there were some disgruntled employees. The board president of District B also felt that in general, employees are proud to be members of the district, but also referred to the small group of disgruntled employees:

> The 50,000 foot answer to that is, yes I do. Now as you get closer and look within, you've got a small group of people who get their jollies by being critical… Is that… if you've got a group of 12,000 people I mean you are going to have that… so it is not unusual, but I think by and large the people in the district are proud to work for the district and I think a lot of these folks have been working for the district… I mean they are fighting a really big battle with an awfully short stick, but they suit up and play every day… well why would they do that… I mean it's not like they are making a fortune out of doing it… they are dedicated to what they are doing and it's

not an easy job… I don't get a whole lot of stuff from people, but there is always this little group… they are going to criticize anything. (Board President, District B)

The communication officer expressed a different view on the identity in District B. She felt that teachers felt a great sense of loyalty to their schools, but not to the more distant group of people in central office that they identified as the district. She also felt that the department the employees worked in and the length of their service was a factor in their sense of district loyalty.

District B leaders' responses supported the general theme of positive identity, but the frequency of whistle-blowing activity and other indications of dissatisfaction suggest a weak congruence between management's projected image and the employees construed external image. The superintendent said that there were a large number of whistle-blowing and other behaviors expressing dissatisfaction when she first arrived, but she felt that it had settled down quickly. She distinguished whistle-blowers, who have a legitimate concern about an organizational issue that needs to be addressed, from "under-miners and saboteurs," whose goal is to create controversy and undermine the district leadership. She attributed the decline in the instances of whistle-blowing behavior to the installation of the district employee hotline, the high visibility of district leaders, and follow-up on legitimate concerns. The board president of District B described an anonymous letter he recently received alleging that maintenance employees were being paid for hours that they didn't work. He turned it over to the superintendent and an investigation was underway. The

communication officer of District B also confirmed that there is a level of dissatisfaction among employees within the organization:

> Yes, definitely there are always people who are instigators… their purpose in life is to complain… they in fact perhaps even seek their fifteen minutes just by being complainers… there are people for whom there are no right answers and we've had some of that recently … yes…we took the first one and we shot 'em… (laughter) We are giving this interview from the local jail… But outside this building it's a bunker mentality…. you know being a political entity you have to be careful of whose toes you step on… and we are just not frankly aggressive enough to go out and pull the rug from underneath the jerks who are out there trying to screw things up… (Communication Officer, District B)

The board president of District B gave a lengthy account of one recent situation where employees in the payroll department were questioning the district's implementation of a new payroll system. He felt that their motivation was primarily to undermine the district's new leadership and to resist organizational change and improvement. He continued to discuss the ways in which changes introduced in the organization by the new superintendent were being resisted by employees and even some board members, suggesting that the behavior of board members was a factor in encouraging employees to raise somewhat unfounded issues about district operations.

According to the officers of District B, there is a general positive identity among employees. The officers report that employees are loyal, but there is a considerable degree of whistle-

blowing activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. There was a noticeable level of hostility toward "under-miners" and "instigators" on the part of district leaders. There was also a hint that board members played a role in encouraging employee reports of wrongdoing. The superintendent identifies an employee hotline and her visibility and follow-up of employee concerns as very important to reducing the levels of employee dissatisfaction.

District C Identity

Two of the officers of District C believe employees have a negative identity. All of the officers report that there is a considerable degree of whistleblower activity, premature leaking of information to the news media, and other expressions of employee dissatisfaction. The degree of employee dissatisfaction present in District C suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees' personal and construed external image of the district.

When asked if the employees are proud to be members of District C, the superintendent said that she thought they were not. She felt that the employees felt beaten down and she hoped that by being transparent and listening to them, that they would begin to feel like they were all on the same team. The board president also said that there were a large number of "demoralized members of our employee team who feel that they are on the front lines and are put upon, but don't have a good understanding of why, wherefore... what do I mean to

this thing… so I don't think we do nearly a good enough job in terms of helping support employees' morale and connection with the district."

The communication officer of District C expressed a different view of employee morale and employee loyalty to the district. When compared to other government agencies and private companies he had worked in, he felt the teachers and principals of the district were very proud of their chosen avocation and were very focused on serving students. He felt that the employees' dissatisfaction arose from their lack of involvement in district decisions and their desire to be independent professionals. His opinion was that teachers and principals were very independent and did not want to be told what to do. They wanted the freedom to structure their schools and classrooms without interference from central office. The communication officer felt that there is a great sense of pride among employees of the district, but their loyalty was focused more on their school than on the district as a whole. He admitted that there were some employees who were not happy with their organizational membership.

According to the majority of the officers, then, in general, the employees of District C do not have a positive identity as members of the district. They may be proud of their profession and their own personal commitment to the mission of the district, but they are not happy with the state of affairs in the district. Officer comments focus on the lack of communication with employees and a lack of employee involvement in decision-making.

When asked if there were recent instances of whistle-blowing in District C, the officers all indicated that there were. The superintendent and board president both alluded to the frequent leaks to the press about impending district decisions or initiatives. The board president joked that she thought the district employees had the news reporters on speed dial. She felt that the district inspector general was effective in identifying and investigating legitimate concerns. The communications officer spoke of a very high frequency of employees taking organizational issues to the news media:

> That happens every month with one issue or the other… and that could be from anonymous e-mails to the media or phone calls or someone directly identifying themselves and saying I disagree with this or the other… this usually comes up from a reporter telling me I have got x, y and z, and the allegations are these, and you know I gather as much information as I can from the reporter and then… we… try to get to the bottom of what the actual allegations are and what I would consider to be in my sense the truth or the real truth behind the allegations. Did someone get fired or someone lose a position? What's behind the scenes on this on these complaints… I can only work with facts, the real facts because that is all I have as a communicator so that is what I try to get to as quickly as possible internally… (Communications Officer, District C)

According to the superintendent and the board president of District C, their employees definitely have a negative identity. The communications officer feels that the employees have a positive identity, but he admits that there is a high number of disgruntled employees going to the news media. All of the officers in District C report that there is a considerable

degree of whistleblower activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. This negative employee identity contributes to the frequency of employees leaking information about internal decisions to the news media. There is an obvious sense of distrust between employees and the leadership of District C. Although there are some internal communications strategies in place, District C leaders realize they need to do much more to engage district employees.

Summary of the Theme of Identity for Districts A, B, and C

Of the three districts, District A had the strongest indication of a positive identity among employees. Officers of District B reported that the majority of the employees positively identify with the district, but that the frequency of whistle-blowing activity and other indications of employee dissatisfaction are of concern. The Officers of District C reported that their employees have an overall negative identity and there is a very high incidence of whistle-blowing and other signs of dissatisfaction.

The officers of District A feel that in general, the employees have a positive identity and are loyal to the district. District A was the only district that uses independent surveys to evaluate its image and reputation. Employee surveys suggest that all groups of District A employees rate the district as a high B or an A. The employees are reported to be loyal and there is a distinct lack of whistle-blowing activity, suggesting that there is a very high degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the construed external image of the district.

According to the officers of District B, there is a general positive identity among employees. The officers report that employees are loyal, but they also admit there is a considerable degree of whistle-blowing activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. The district has created an employee hotline, and the superintendent identifies her visibility and follow-up of employee concerns as very important to reducing employee dissatisfaction.

According to the Superintendent and the Board President, the employees of District C have a negative identity. The officers report that there is a considerable degree of whistleblower activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. However, the district officers attributed dissatisfaction to the lack of involvement of employees in the decision-making process of the district.

The next theme focuses on the degree to which this state of image congruence is currently being addressed in the three urban school districts through internal communication strategies.

Internal Communication Strategies

The next major theme to emerge in this study was internal communication strategies. Internal communication is related to the concept of identity. The way employees feel about membership in the organization and the degree of loyalty they feel to the organization is

related to how much information they receive from management about the status and direction of the organization. How employees feel about membership in an urban school district is also tied to how they perceive the performance of the organization and their perceptions about the quality of district leaders' decisions. Employees are keenly aware of how their leaders portray the organization, so the amount and integrity of information they receive from urban district leaders strongly affects their perceptions.

Internal communication strategies are the tactics and activities designed by urban district leaders to provide information to internal stakeholders and employees. Most of these strategies are designed to provide frequent information to employees in a one-way flow. And, it is this flow of information from management that employees compare to their direct perceptions of the organization and to how they believe it is perceived by the news media and the public. Internal communication strategies influence employee identity.

A second type of internal communication strategy emerged from the interviews of district leaders, employee engagement strategies. Employee engagement activities are designed by urban district leaders to both provide information to internal stakeholders and to elicit feedback from them. District leaders frequently cited their efforts to listen to employees as important to gaining their commitment to the direction of the district, especially as the urban school district strives to improve and meet the challenges it faces. Employee engagement strategies may play an even larger role than simple information giving in creating a positive identity in urban school districts.

A third sub-theme of internal communication, board communications, emerged in two of the three urban districts. Board communications represents the set of tactics and activities designed to provide information to board members and to elicit feedback on organizational decisions from the board members. In two of the three districts, either the superintendent or the board president cited the quality of communication between the superintendent and the board as being critical to the district's success.

District officers were asked three questions that were designed to draw information on their district's internal communication strategies. The first question asked was, "Where do employees get their information about the district?" The purpose of this question was to ascertain if district leaders could articulate specific strategies they had created in order to open up communication channels with employees. This question was also intended to determine if district leaders perceived other communication channels with employees that they did not design and control. Examples would be the news media or other external stakeholders such as employee organizations. The second question was, "How do you communicate with schools and school communities?" This question was intended to draw out information about how district leaders communicate to other internal stakeholders. The third question was, "How do you communicate important organizational issues to employees?" This question was designed to elicit district leader's deliberate communication strategies related to the challenges facing the organization and the improvement strategies the district leaders intended to implement in order to meet those challenges. It was this last question that also elicited comments from leaders in two of the districts about board communications. The following sections provide the district leaders' responses to these

questions in terms of internal information-giving strategies and employee engagement strategies.

District A Internal Communication Strategies

Given the indications of strong identity that emerged in District A, the expectation would be that this urban district has highly effective internal communication that has a high congruence with its projected image. The officers of district A described the highest total number of information-giving activities of any of the three urban districts, but they often cited the two-way employee engagement strategies as being the most critical to the district's success. They had the most well developed employee engagement strategies of the three urban districts studied. The superintendent of District A also mentioned the importance of her communication with the school board members.

District A officers reported that employees get their information from a monthly employee newsletter, a special publication following board meetings, superintendent messages in publications, phone messages from the superintendent, mass e-mail from the superintendent, the district website, special letters from the superintendent, and top down communication through the administrative structure. District A produces a monthly employee newsletter. This employee newsletter highlights the positive things that happen in the district and includes many employee recognitions. The district uses this vehicle to highlight district employees who present at various workshops and conventions. The employee newsletter includes key dates and events that are of importance to employees. Each employee newsletter also includes a message from the Superintendent about current issues in the

district. After hard copies have been distributed, the employee newsletter is also posted on the district's website.

Another internal communication publication in District A is the summary of monthly school board meetings. This publication comes out within twenty-four hours of District A board meetings and primarily summarizes the big things that occurred at school board night, including staff assignments, grant recipients, employee recognitions, and major decisions. This publication includes pictures of employees and students recognized at the board meeting. The board president commented that she believed this was the most popular publication for school and district administrators since it represented a record of the District A's key decisions. The board meeting summaries are distributed electronically, posted on the website, and hard copies are also circulated to schools and central office departments.

District A officers also mentioned other forms of internal communication with employees such as e-mails and phone messages from the superintendent. These forms of communication were most often used for special situations to communicate important district issues to employees such as raises, budget cuts, changes to the calendar, or other things that would have a significant impact on employees. Phone messages and e-mails to employees are used sparingly for immediate strategic internal communication.

All of the officers in District A mentioned the district's website. Every publication produced by the district is also posted on the website and remains accessible to employees throughout the school year. The district also utilizes an intranet which requires employees

to log on through the district's website. The superintendent commented that this promoted communication with employees because recently posted communication instruments were immediately visible to them as the signed on at the beginning of their work day.

The officers also mentioned the importance of the top-down communication process through the district's chain of command. All District A staff members also get information from their supervisors. Teachers receive information from their principaols and from curriculum directors for their subject areas. Bus drivers and other non-instructional personnel also get information directly from their supervisors. This top-down communication allows some opportunity for feedback, but it is also the most official form of direct communication. The superintendent described how very important issues get communicated to employees through multiple channels.

The communications officer described how a formal letter from the superintendent is used for special circumstances. This is strategy is used to explain difficult issues affecting employees. It is particularly important in containing false rumors. Because of its importance, such a letter is very carefully crafted and then vetted by the entire district leadership team.

So, District A has a well developed set of strategies for internal communication. These strategies are clearly used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. But the leaders of District A allude to the employment engagement strategies as being the most important to the district's success.

District A utilizes certain communication strategies to engage employees, such as involving employees early in the change process, responding to employee issues, and conducting employee surveys. The most outstanding characteristic that emerges in District A is its consistent involvement of both external and internal stakeholders in major district decisions. The district utilizes its internal structures of cabinet and round table to involve top-level and mid-level managers in key decisions. The discussion in these sessions is a two-way back and forth intended to thoroughly discuss the ramifications of a given decision. The decisions are then shared with front-line administrators for further feedback. The superintendent describes the process District A utilizes to communicate big changes as moving very slowly, involving all of the affected groups, and when possible, implementing changes incrementally over time.

The board president gave an example of how the board and superintendent listened to employees. She gave an extended example of how bus drivers had come to the school board and superintendent to make the case for air conditioning all of the district's buses. The board listened and was persuaded by their presentation to incorporate air conditioning buses in the bond election proposal. She also commented on how the organization makes it a point to recognize employees for their efforts.

The Communication Officer described the district's process for conducting annual surveys of all employee groups. These surveys have been conducted over five years. There is a separate survey for teachers, bus drivers, maintenance workers, and cafeteria workers. Employees know that the district responds to the information.

The Superintendent of District A spoke of a particular area of internal communications that was important to her, communications with the School Board. Effective communications for the superintendent include communication upward to the governing board as well as out to the community and down to employees. The board president also spontaneously spoke of an important aspect of board briefings that promotes effective communication between the board and the superintendent and her staff. She also identified board operating procedures for briefing new board members to support the continuous effectiveness of District A's board and governance activities.

District A officers reported that employees primarily get their information from a monthly employee newsletter, a special publication following board meetings, superintendent messages in publications, phone messages from the superintendent, mass e-mail from the superintendent, the district website, special letters from the superintendent, and top down communication through the administrative structure. District A also has created many ways to recognize employees and frequently focuses on the accomplishments of employees in their internal communications. District A also utilizes several communication strategies to engage employees in two-way communication such as involving employees early in the change process, responding to employee issues, and conducting employee surveys. An additional sub-theme that emerged during the study was communications with the school board. District A Superintendent said she has to focus on this area.

District B Internal Communication Strategies

Given the indications of poor identity that emerged in District B, it is not unexpected that this urban district does not currently have highly effective internal communication that is in high congruence with its projected image. The officers of District B described a number of information-giving activities currently employed in the district, but cited internal communication as an area that needs to improve. There were a limited number of employee engagement strategies cited by the officers. Also, in District B, it was the board president who mentioned the importance of improving communication between the superintendent and the school board members.

District B officers reported that employees currently get their information from mass e-mails from the superintendent, a special publication following board meetings, the district website, and communication through the administrative structure. The superintendent of District B expressed her belief that better internal communication is needed in the district:

> Well, the employees… we need better internal communication because I think we tend to think of them as employees in a group and they are actually different groups of employees… teachers want different information than the maintenance crew and the painters and the operations and the food service people need things in Spanish… they are almost all Spanish speaking or at least a significant majority of them are… so I think we need to get more personal with our internal communication… I would like to be able to find the time to communicate on a more personal level with the different employee groups… I think that is one of my deficits I need to fill in… (Superintendent, District B)

The communications officer concurred with the superintendent that District B still needed better internal communication. She described the message from the superintendent that is put out by e-mail weekly to employees and then is posted on the website. The message from the superintendent draws some questions and comments back from employees. She also mentioned that the superintendent sends out a Christmas letter and thank you to employees. The superintendent also holds a convocation for employees at the beginning of each year and attends all principals meetings in order to promote effective internal communication.

The officers of District B all cited the improved website as the primary vehicle for internal communication. On the subject of communicating important organizational issues, the communication officer said that a multi-platform approach anchored by the district website is utilized. The website is also used to post highlights of school board meetings. As in District A, employees are very interested in the decisions made at board meetings.

So, District B currently utilizes several strategies for internal communication, but district officers recognize it as an area that needs improvement. These strategies are used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. District B currently seeks to engage employees by meeting with principals and utilizing a strategy known as rolling polling.

The communication officer described her staffs efforts to meet with principals at their monthly meetings. She also described the recently implemented practice of rolling polling. A communications staff member pushes a cart through the administration building and presents people with questions about current district initiatives. If the employee gets the

right answer, they are given a district promotional item with the district's new logo. The staff is using this as an opportunity to get feedback from employees on the latest initiatives.

The Board President of District B also spoke of a particular area of internal communications that was troubling to him, communications between the Superintendent and the school board. His concern was that board members were not getting information about important decisions ahead of the board meetings. He expressed a concern that the board members did not have enough time to read and understand the supporting data before they were asked to vote on the issue.

District B currently utilizes several strategies for internal communication, but district officers recognize it as an area that needs improvement. The officers stated that employees currently get their information from mass e-mails from the Superintendent, a special publication following board meetings, the district website, and communication through the administrative structure. These strategies are used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. District B also employs certain communication strategies to engage employees, such as meeting with principals regularly and by utilizing a strategy known as rolling polling. Communication between the superintendent and the school board was mentioned as a problem by the board president.

District C Internal Communication Strategies

The employees of District C were found to have an overall negative identity. This would suggest that there was an absence of effective communication strategies or evidence of

poorly executed communication between the district's leadership and the employees of the organization. The officers of District C all said that better internal communication is needed in their district. The officers cited some internal communication channels, but recognized that employees felt left out of the communication process.

The officers of District C reported that their employees currently get their information from a district television station, weekly e-mail blast message from the superintendent, a district newspaper, district convocations, top down communication through principals, through the daily newspapers, and by word of mouth. The superintendent expressed her desire to include internal communication strategies in the strategic plan under development and to solicit input from employees.

The superintendent expressed that she did not feel the television station was being fully utilized. She described the weekly e-mail message she put out to all staff members on a variety of topics. She also described the bi-monthly newspaper that goes out to all of the district with a message from the superintendent. Her focus in this instrument is to highlight staff who have done exceptional things. She also described the frequent convocations with principals with regional superintendents to share information about district improvement. The board president of District C said she thought the employees mostly get their information from the daily news papers and the communication officer thought that they got most of their information by word of mouth.

So, District C currently utilizes some strategies for internal communication. These strategies are used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. In addition,

District C has recently begun to utilize certain communication strategies to engage employees. Under the leadership of the new superintendent, District C has begun to utilize employee roundtables designed to promote two-way communication with employees. The Superintendent said that she holds teacher roundtables every month to promote a two-way dialogue with teachers about their work. Her purpose for holding these round tables is to get teacher input into how the school system can be improved. She also described how she walks around and talks to people in the administration building. She has also held brown bag lunches with groups of employees to hear what they think.

The issue of communications between the Superintendent and the Board did not come up in interviews of the District C officers. None of the officers mentioned this as a critical component of internal communications in District C. This could mean that the seasoned Superintendent is currently doing a good job of communicating with her Board. The theme of adaptive instability and mutability was the next theme to emerge in this study.

The officers of District C reported that employees currently get their information from a district television station, weekly e-mail blast message from the Superintendent, the district newspaper, annual convocations, top-down communication through principals, through the daily newspapers, and by word of mouth. Under the leadership of the new superintendent, District C has recently begun to utilize employee engagement strategies designed to promote two-way communication with employees.

Summary of Internal Communication Strategies in Districts A, B, and C

The theme of internal communication was most strongly indicated by the officers of District A. District B officers identified internal communication as an area needing improvement. District C was just beginning to improve its internal communication and employee engagement strategies.

The officers in District A reported that employees get their information from a monthly employee newsletter, a special publication following board meetings, superintendent messages in publications, phone messages from the superintendent, mass e-mail from the superintendent, the district website, special letters from the superintendent, and top down communication through the administrative structure. District A also utilizes several communication strategies to engage employees, such as involving employees early in the change process, responding to employee issues, and conducting employee surveys. A new sub-theme that emerged during the study was communications with the school board. District A Superintendent said she has to focus on this area.

District B currently utilizes several strategies for internal communication, but district officers recognize it as an area that needs improvement. The officers stated that employees currently get their information from mass e-mails from the Superintendent, a special publication following board meetings, the district website, and communication through the administrative structure. These strategies are used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. District B also employs certain communication strategies to engage employees, such as meeting with principals regularly and utilizing a strategy known as

rolling polling.   Communication between the Superintendent and the School Board was mentioned as a problem by the Board President.

The officers of District C reported that employees currently get their information from the district television station, a weekly e-mail blast message from the Superintendent, the district newspaper, annual convocations, top-down communication through principals, through the daily newspapers, and by word of mouth. Under the leadership of the new superintendent, District C has begun to utilize employee round tables designed to promote two-way communication with employees. Table 4 provides an overview of the internal communication strategies utilized in the three urban districts.

Adaptive Instability/Mutability

The next major theme that emerged in this study were the concepts of adaptive instability (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) and mutability (Clemens & Cook, 1999) which drive organizational change and improvement. This theme is focused on the dynamic tension that exists between identity, image, and reputation which can create the opportunity for organizational improvement. The desire for change that arises from that dynamic tension can be used by district leaders to adapt or mutate the organization in a new direction in order to respond to the challenges presented by the operating environment.

An important component of an urban school district's projected image and reputation is the perception of both external and internal stakeholders that the organization is responding effectively to the challenges it faces. Stakeholders want to be assured that an urban district

is improving and that it is moving in the right direction. Stakeholders also want to be assured by the district leadership that the organization is improving and that it is responding effectively to internal and external challenges. Superintendents and other urban district leaders must use internal and external communication to promote organizational improvement in order to help their organizations evolve in new directions.

Table 4

Comparison of Internal Communication Strategies

Strategy	District A	District B	District C
Projected Image	District website	District website	District website
	Superintendent e-mails	Superintendent e-mails	Superintendent e-mails
	Line communication	Line communication	Line communication
	Board meeting summaries	Board meeting summaries	District newspaper
	Employee newsletter		District television
	Superintendent: -written messages -phone messages -special letters		News media Word of mouth
Employee Engagement	Involvement in decision-making	Principal meetings	Annual convocation
	Response to employee issues	Rolling polling	Employee round tables
	Open door policy		
	Employee recognition		
	Employee surveys		

Adaptive instability/mutability has two sub-themes, desired future image (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) and structural elaboration (Meyer, 1984). The first sub-theme is the desired future image of the organization created by management to give employees and other stakeholders the sense of the direction that organizational change is headed. The district officers were all asked, "What is your role in district communication?" The purpose was to ascertain if they saw themselves as the primary person responsible for setting the direction of the school district and defining its desired future state. Setting the direction for improvement would entail capitalizing on the district's perceived challenges by communicating them to all internal and external stakeholders and then engaging all stakeholders, especially employees, in evolving the organization in a new, positive direction. This sub-theme was often expressed by district officers when they made reference to their strategic planning activities.

The second sub-theme, structural elaboration, emerges when areas of needed organizational improvement are identified and the leadership then takes steps to increase organizational capacity to successfully meet those challenges. The district officers were also asked the question, "What kind of training or preparation in communication and/or media relations have you had?" The purpose of this question was to hear the thoughts of district officers about their own capacity and the capacity of the organization to meet organizational communication needs. The goal was to determine if district leaders felt they had the right knowledge and skills to communicate effectively and if not, what other steps they had taken to close that gap. The following sections present the comments of the officers of all three districts on organizational improvement.

District A Adaptive Instability/Mutability

The officers of District A seemed to clearly understand their role in identifying organizational challenges, formulating a strategic direction for the district, and communicating it to internal and external stakeholders. Officers made frequent references to organizational challenges and developing plans to meet them. The superintendent of District A previously described how she communicates the challenges the district faces and its future direction to the community when she delivers the 'State of the District' address. The superintendent makes this report a review of the current results of the district, a statement of the current challenges before the district, and where she thinks the district must go in order to meet those challenges. The Superintendent spoke of the challenges facing the district such as meeting academic improvement goals and meeting the needs of the students. The board president of District A also refers to the district leaders' systematic efforts to identify challenges and lead organizational improvement when she described the district's involvement with a business model for organizational improvement:

> We began this venture in the Baldridge business model several years back, and what that has allowed the district to do is to document the processes… it's very interesting. Because with this work that we've just done… *we recognized from the beginning that if we were going to sustain or maintain any changes or reform of any sort that we needed to communicate it* (emphasis added)… but the important thing here was that here was the plan for the year… the plan was communicated to the administrative cabinet… to the vertical leadership…to the principals… so in other words, we were not expecting that the teachers would know and do these things

without having prepared everyone in the organization to understand it to the extent

that they would be able to see it and recognize it. (Board President, District A)

District A has successfully created a culture of improvement that focuses on the challenges

of meeting the needs of its students. There is a strong culture of improvement where all

staff understand there is room for innovation and improvement. Members of District A

seem to be focused on a relentless search for a better way. They have a strategic plan that

has been in place for many years and they systematically communicate it to both internal

and external stakeholders.

The Board President also described the elaborate process District A has used to create its

desired future image through its strategic plan and communicate it to stakeholders. The

district has developed a mission, a vision, and goals that are revisited annually. Each year

the district tries to define more clearly what the vision and goals are and communicate them

to district staff and school communities. As part of a carefully designed communication

plan, board members also have a role in communicating the plan. Their involvement shows

the degree to which the district is committed to the plan. District A has clearly

communicated its direction and focus over time to stakeholders and continuously adapts to

the organizational challenges that arise. The officers have focused on establishing

organizational communication capacity over time.

The superintendent of District A admitted that she had not had a great deal of formal

training in organizational communication, but that she complimented the communications

capacity that had been established in District A over time. The Superintendent of District A responded to the question about her previous communication training by saying:

> I would say that I probably have not had as much training as I need to, but it is interesting because the people who are here… because of the capacity that we already had… has made a big difference. I do lean on it a lot. (Superintendent, District A)

District A has built up a great deal of communications capacity and the superintendent admits that she relies on it. The board president of District A described her own communications preparation. Her primary source of communications training has come from the state school board association and the regional education center. The communications officer described his experience in radio and television as a news editor, marketing professional, and reporter. The communication officer also spoke highly of the state school public relations association as a source of training in marketing and communications for school district communications staff.

The officers of District A clearly set the direction for improvement of the district by capitalizing on the district's perceived challenges and by communicating them to all internal and external stakeholders. The officers then engage all stakeholders, especially employees, in the process of evolving the organization in a new, positive direction. The district has developed a strategic plan that is actively communicated to all employees and school communities. Particularly apparent is the district's commitment to high expectations and continuous improvement.   The improvement of District A has been recognized nationally.

District A officers reported the highest level of communications and media relations training of any of the three districts. The superintendent did not report a great deal of communications training, but she relies on the communications department for support. The board president reported a great deal of training through her involvement with regional and state level board member associations. The communications officer of District A pointed to his experience as a news reporter, editor, and marketing executive as being extremely valuable in his current role. He also gave a great deal of credit to the state level association of communications professionals for providing support and expertise.

District B Adaptive Instability/Mutability

The officers of District B seemed to clearly understand their role in identifying organizational challenges, formulating a strategic direction for the district, and communicating it to internal and external stakeholders. Officers made frequent references to the development of the district's strategic plan and the process of monitoring its implementation. The superintendent of District B summarizes her approach to engaging stakeholders in organizational improvement:

> We develop a roll out plan and it's very specific… who is going to do what when … who are the stakeholders… who needs what information when and we have both personal communication and written communication… we work really hard on that and I think we have done a really good job in that area and that's learning the hard way how not to do it… from sad experience… *so you know you've got to bring people along and you can only bring them along with good communication*

(emphasis added)… so any time we are going to have a major change, we have a

very specific roll out plan. (Superintendent, District B)

Under the leadership of its current superintendent, District B has tackled several difficult

issues regarding malfeasance, district finances, and student achievement. In order to focus

and lead the district forward, the superintendent led the development of a strategic plan for

District B.

District B has developed a strategic plan and uses it to direct and track organizational

improvement on its major challenges. The communication officer of District B described

how the organization's strategic plan is used to guide daily decisions and track the success

of departments in meeting their goals. The communication officer also described how the

plan is used to keep district staff focused on the right activities to bring about improvement

and to ignore those that do not move the organization forward. In her opinion, the strategic

plan is the instrument that is helping to bring District B up to date. The plan is also used to

identify areas of strength and weakness in the organization. District B seems to be engaged

in meaningful change and understands the importance of communicating a desired future

image in the improvement process.

The officers of District B varied in the amount of training and preparation they had in using

communications to promote organizational change. The superintendent of District B

described her own preparation for effective communication as inadequate. She had very

little practice at doing on-camera interviews. She talked about the mental confusion she

experienced when the bright lights were suddenly shined in her face, causing her to make mistakes and fumble in her delivery.

The board president of District B reported that his communications expertise had come from his business career and through his participation as a member of the board of a variety of non-profit organizations. In his industry, the professional organizations sponsor seminar for executives on communications and media relations. He had a great deal of experience in talking to reporters a great sense of how to maintain an appropriate relationship with them.

The communication officer of District B described her own professional communications preparation and experience, the superintendent's efforts to recruit her, and the qualifications of some of the persons she had hired to work in her communications department. She had over thirty years of print and television news experience. She had built up a large communications department with a number of persons with communications and media experience equal to hers.

The Superintendent spoke of her thought process in creating a professional communications department and the school board's support:

> When I came we had somebody who was an English major heading the communications department and a couple of secretaries and a couple of other people that I don't know what they did… so I completely wiped that department out… and staffed it with a professional staff of media people … I think that was a shift that needed to occur in our business … you can probably still find smaller districts where

you have educators… they don't have the background… they don't have the understanding or the expertise to run a media office and so we've gone from the guy who walks out into the street and talks to the press to truly needing media… mass media… not just for communication but for production… A good testament to our communications… coming off of an horrible FBI… horrible situation here… highest [bond] passing rate in the state… 72%! (Superintendent, District B)

The officers of District B seemed to clearly understand their role in identifying organizational challenges, formulating a strategic direction for the district, and communicating it to internal and external stakeholders. District B seems to be engaged in meaningful change and understands the importance of communicating a desired future image in the improvement process. Officers made frequent references to the development of a strategic plan and the process of monitoring its implementation.

The officers of District B differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a professional communications department, District B has built a communications department comprised of media professionals from the public news media and marketing arenas.

District C Adaptive Instability/Mutability

The officers of District C also seemed to understand their role in identifying organizational challenges, formulating a strategic direction for the district, and communicating it to internal

and external stakeholders. The officers, especially the superintendent, made frequent references to the development of a strategic plan. The superintendent articulated her goal in building and communicating a strategic plan:

> I am communicating because I am trying to get people to get into a sharing… to share in this plan and to call it their own and to understand what we are trying to do …but I communicate in multiple ways with multiple groups… but then I see my job is to create mechanisms within the school system for that vision to get out and for people to share in it and create mechanisms outside of the school system in the larger media world and in the community… saying can you join into this and I think that is really important… that there are messages that are given for various constituent groups and the ultimate goal is to get people to share in the vision and then want to work toward a common purpose… for me which is about the kids and improving achievement and improving the opportunities for young people, the district, and the larger community… but I would like to be strategic and thoughtful about what we are doing… (Superintendent, District C)

The superintendent offered an example of how the school system needs to change by becoming more open to parental involvement in schools. She related how she had encouraged parents to visit their child's school and then had to intervene when a parent was prevented from visiting her child's classroom. The superintendent is very focused on the challenges of serving students and engaging parents and staff in supporting their students' success. She communicates both the problems currently inherent in the district culture and her vision of how the district needs to be more receptive to parents.

All of the officers of District C referred to the district's new strategic plan. The superintendent alluded to the name of the strategic plan as an indication of its intended purpose to capture the district community's imagination and the need for a communications component in the plan. The board president made reference to turnaround schools and how the plan was intended to address their needs.

The officers of District C described some formal training in communications and media relations. The superintendent reported that she had only one small unit of study in an urban superintendents' training program at a prominent university. In this unit she learned how to work with the news media and how to craft a message and use the media to get the message out. She also learned how to engage community groups or constituent groups in district improvement. The board president of District C said that she had no formal communications or media training. She had learned a little about crafting messages for others to deliver in her work as a community organizer. Strangely enough, the communication officer said that he had no formal training in communications either. He had gained his experience in marketing and public relations working for the city government and for a computer software company.

The superintendent and the board president expressed concern about the lack of communications capacity in the district. The superintendent stated her intention to include a communications plan in the strategic plan. She wanted the plan to address the communication needs of the district as a whole and the needs of individual schools. Her greatest concern was finding the right leadership for the communications department.

District C is engaged in substantial change efforts and understands the importance of communication in the improvement process. The district is currently developing a strategic plan to communicate a new direction for the district. This plan is intended to define the future of the district and focus improvement efforts. The leadership of District C is striving to involve stakeholders in the development of the strategic plan in order to create ownership of district improvement efforts.

The officers of District C differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a professional communications department, District C plans to conduct a review of its current communication department and its capacity. Most notably, the communication officer did not have extensive experience and training in communications and media relations.

Summary of Adaptive Instability/Mutability in Districts A, B, and C

All three of the districts showed strong indication of a focus on organizational improvement through adaptive instability/mutability, desired future image, and structural elaboration. Districts A and B have a well-developed strategic plan that is used to provide focus and direction to the district. District B aggressively monitors the progress on the strategic plan to drive improvement efforts. District C is in the process of developing a new strategic plan. The districts vary in the amount of communications capacity they have built in their organizations and in the length of time that capacity has been in place.

The officers of District A clearly set the direction for improvement of the district by capitalizing on the district's perceived challenges and by communicating them to all internal and external stakeholders. The officers then engage all stakeholders, especially employees in the process of evolving the organization in a new, positive direction. The district has a strategic plan which is updated regularly and systematically communicated to the internal and external stakeholders. The officers of District A differ in their levels of training and preparation in communications, but rely heavily on the capacity of the communications department. District A has put in place a strong communications department comprised of media and communications professionals. This department has been in place for almost fifteen years. The improvement of District A has been recognized nationally.

District B is engaged in substantial change efforts and understands the importance of communication in the improvement process. The district has developed a strategic plan which communicates the direction of the organization and seems to use it to aggressively manage the change process. The officers of District B differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a high-capacity communications department, in the last three years District B has built a communications department comprised of media professionals from the news media and marketing arenas.

The Superintendent and School Board of District C are currently engaged in developing a strategic plan. This plan is intended to define the future of the district and provide focus for improvement efforts. In order to create ownership of the plan, the leadership of the district

has made a concerted effort to involve stakeholders in the planning process. The officers of District C differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a professional communications department, District C plans to conduct a review of its current communication department and its capacity. The next theme deals directly with the concept of organizational reputation.

Reputation

The final theme to emerge in this study was the concept of reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Reputation is the relatively stable, long-term collective judgments of an organization by outsiders. District officers were asked, "How is your district viewed by the community?" The purpose of this question was to ascertain whether or not the officers felt their district had a positive reputation within its community and what some of the issues related to the district's reputation might be.

Based on our theoretical construct, reputation has three sub-themes, environmental dependency (Meyer & Rowan, 1983), legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Singh, Tucker, & Meinhard, 1991), and accountability (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The first sub-theme of reputation, environmental dependency, means reliance on public trust and financial support in order to sustain the organization into the future. The public's willingness to support a district financially is assumed to be a proxy for district reputation and the level of trust the community currently holds for the district. The district officers were asked, "Have you been able to get public financial support in the recent past?" The purpose of this question was to

determine if the districts had recently received financial support from their respective communities and to give officers an opportunity to discuss any issues related to reputation that might have influenced the public's desire to provide support to the district.

The second sub-theme of reputation, legitimacy, refers to the state of being in accordance with established or accepted patterns and standards. An urban school district's reputation might be affected if it were seen to be too far outside the normal range of expectations for the make-up and behavior of an urban school district. The researcher wanted to determine if any issues of reputation mentioned by district officers could be identified as legitimacy concerns.

The third sub-theme, accountability, refers to the public's perception of an organization's efficiency and effectiveness. An urban school district's reputation could be affected if it were viewed as inefficient and wasteful of its resources or ineffective in the performance of its core process of effectively educating students. The district officers were asked, "Is the public's opinion of the district improving or declining? Why?" The purpose of this question was to determine what reasons officers would give for the direction of the district's improvement or decline in reputation and whether those reputation issues were concerns about organizational legitimacy or organizational accountability.

District A Reputation

The officers of District A felt that the district had a generally positive reputation in its community. The superintendent of District A estimated that over 80% of the community

thought the district was doing a decent job. She believed that the community's opinion of the district was improving because of growing awareness of how hard the district had worked to improve student achievement and win three major awards. The board president offered a different way of looking at the district's reputation. She felt that the low voter turnout at district board and bond elections indicated that the public was generally satisfied with how the district operated. The communications officer also thought the district's reputation was good in the community. He cited district survey data of parents where the majority of parents thought the district was an A in comparison to other school districts. He also cited the number of other districts that came to study the district and understand the factors contributing to its academic success.

So it seems that officers of District A feel that the district has a generally good reputation, especially with the parents in their community. They are not as sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district. District A was able to pass a substantial bond election for capital improvements in 2007. The superintendent of District A said, "That was my going away present from [the previous superintendent]. She got that bond passed."

District A officers did not have a lot to say about legitimacy as a reason for the district's improving reputation. The superintendent gave a comment in that area when she said, "So, for the most part, we have people moving here to be part of our district … they come for Pre-K, they come for special ed services, they come for bilingual services…so we have

people who move in the district…" Her point seemed to be that people came for those programs because they were of a good standard.

The superintendent of District A identified improving student achievement results as the primary reason for District A's improving reputation:

> I think some of the academic success we have had over the years has changed the perception of the community and they hear a lot about the good things that are happening in their schools. And you know the community where the kids are older and they are out of college and they are gone and it's the grandparents who are there… you know, they remember what the neighborhood school did for their kids ... (Superintendent, District A)

The board president of District A offered two perspectives of the district's reputation, an insider's view and an outsider's view. She said that outsiders come to the district looking to learn the secrets of its success in serving its urban population, but she noted that insiders who live in the district probably don't have a complete understanding of the amount of work that has gone in to building the district's success. She also made reference to the fact that the district went from predominantly white in 1976 to only five percent white in 2009. She took this to mean that the white community had decided District A was not a good school district and wanted their children to attend elsewhere.

The communication officer of District A saw it yet another way. He felt the district has stayed at the respected level, but that it is not a district that homebuilders would advertise the schools as a reason people should purchase a home there.

> Man that is a tough one… with all those awards … I think God has blessed us to just stay at that level that we are… it is respected… so I think we are kind of staying at the respected level despite our challenges and the fact that we have had some challenges… like I said the curriculum has really given us something to write about… but you can't crack whatever that code is that says… you rarely would see, if ever, [District A] on the bill board of a home builder… you just won't find that, because they are dealing with those perception issues… And they are dealing with demographic issues too… (Communication Officer, District A)

In summary, the officers of District A feel that the district has a generally good reputation, especially with the parents in their community. The officers feel that the district has an improving reputation, but they vary in what they identify as the level of that reputation. They are not as sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district. They point to increasing student achievement and public recognition as factors contributing to improvement in district reputation. However, the board president and the communications officer of District C both allude to the issue of district demographics as a mediating factor in district reputation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). However, because of the general support of the community, District A has been able to garner public financial support.

District B Reputation

The officers of District B generally agreed that the reputation of the district is improving. Each of the officers in District B made statements that they believed the reputation of the district had more to do with demographics than with legitimacy or accountability. The district was able to get public financial support in the recent past. However, there were no statements that District B had a good reputation. The superintendent of District B cited mostly anecdotal evidence that some members of the community who approached her and staff members who sent her e-mails believed the district was improving.

The board president believes that the public's opinion of District B is mixed and its reputation is mixed. He related how his wife who is a realtor consistently hears from clients how bad the school district is. His wife has told him that a lot of people don't want to put their kids in District B. The board president said that he personally feels the public's image of the district is improving, but he also identifies the issue of race as a major part of the discussion of District B's reputation. In his opinion, more parent involvement is needed to assist struggling poor and minority students and suggested that more differentiation of programs and educational settings are needed in the district to meet their needs and to hold white students in the district. The board president went on to speak of a high level of support for District B from the business community because the businesses needed "people who are educated and can add, subtract, multiply, and divide… can speak the King's English and write a complete sentence… can understand a little bit of math so they can run that computer that runs that lathe…"

The communication officer was less certain about the current reputation of District B and suggested that race and socioeconomics have more to do with the reputation of the district than anything. She felt it depended on what neighborhood or part of town a school was located and the demographics of the area. The superintendent of District B also identified the issue of race as being a major part of district reputation when she said:

> I think the public in general still have the image of when you have the majority of kids are children of color there is still… for right or wrong… that stereotype image that the schools are not… not good and violence and all that kind of stuff… I don't think that is because of the school system… I think that is because of our culture… (Superintendent, District B)

So it seems that officers of District B feel that the district has a mixed reputation and that to a great extent, demographics and socioeconomics play a large part in determining that reputation. They are not sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district, but they feel the public's opinion is improving.

The officers of District B are very aware of the district's dependence on the public for financial support. In November 2007, the district passed a 596.3 million dollar bond package. This was significant because this was on the heels of a financial scandal where district employees had gone to federal prison for misapplication of funds. The communication department and the superintendent had worked extremely hard to convince the public to support the bond election, which passed with over 70% approval from the voters.

The superintendent of District B made a comment related to legitimacy. When asked if the district did any community or employee surveys, she said that she did not believe the public would support that kind of expenditure for the district in tough economic times. Her concern was that spending money on surveying would be perceived as a luxury in a time when the budget is tight. She believed the public might support it at a later time.

The superintendent of District B was clearly concerned about the issue of accountability when she described how the district's ten low performing schools were affecting the district's reputation. Those schools were receiving the bulk of media attention every time assessment results were released. She complained that with four different state and federal accountability systems in place and the results coming out at different times, the schools were frequently in the news. She felt that the accountability pressure on these schools was actually making it difficult to turn the system around as a whole because the negative press on the low performing schools "colors the image."

The board president of District B also alluded to the public's concern about accountability. He commented that the public did not have an accurate picture of how the resources were being utilized and what the true performance of the students was. He also discussed the former superintendent's lack of understanding of the public's expectation of accountability for effectiveness and efficiency in the expenditure of bond funds. Although the superintendent was not personally responsible for the financial problems, the public held him accountable for his failure to take responsibility and his lack of effective response to the situation.

In summary, the officers of District B feel that the district has a mixed reputation and that to a great extent, demographics and socioeconomics play a large part in determining that reputation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). They are not sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district, but they feel the public's opinion is improving. The Superintendent and Board President of District B seem keenly aware of the public's expectation of district accountability for student achievement and fiscal responsibility. As evidenced by their comments, the officers of District B are very aware of the district's dependence on the public for financial support.

District C Reputation

The officers of District C felt that the district has a very poor reputation. The Superintendent of District C began by saying:

> Well I think people in this city have in many ways lost hope for the school system…
> I think they want to believe again and so part of what they see in me is ok, here we
> go again, but we really don't think it is going to happen but we'll give her a shot, you
> know we'll give her a chance… because they waste money over there and you know
> and they let the kids… half the kids drop out… (Superintendent, District C)

The superintendent went on to suggest that the poor reputation of District C was linked to the poor self-image of the city itself and poor self-esteem of the entire region. The board president also felt that the district has a poor reputation in the community, but she reported that there is some hope that the district is improving. The Board President of District C said:

If you asked people, they would still say the schools are a problem… there was a poll done recently where people cite the public education still as a problem here and one that is going to negatively hurt us if we don't fix it… but then when asked if they thought five years from now that it would be better, the same, or worse, they are hopeful… so they say that they think it will be better… which says to me that people recognize that there is still a long way to go but they think there are some positive, good things being done… There is a lot of feedback that I get in my rounds where people feel… they are willing to be part of a solution… they are not sitting on the sidelines saying oh god, god bless you… you know, hope for the best… (Board President, District C)

The communications officer of District C said that the reputation of the district is poor, but the reputation is different in different communities based on the quality of the local school. His opinion was that the community's overall perception of the district has been improving recently based on increasing student achievement. The general consensus of the District C officers seems to be that the district has a poor reputation, but that the reputation is improving and the improvement trend is attributed to the improvement in student achievement.

Despite the overall poor reputation, District C has been able to get public support for increased funding. The board president of District C described the funding mechanisms for District C, which receives funding through a combination of city and state revenue. The voters in the area do not directly approve funding for schools, so, the district has to focus on

lobbying the city and state elected officials in order to increase its funding. However, those officials are clearly affected by the district's reputation for accountability. The communications officer commented that District C does go out and sell bonds for capitol improvement and that a 1.5 billion dollar capitol improvement program was recently approved.

The board president was the only officer in District C to express a concern about legitimacy when she commented that improving the communication capacity of the district would have to be considered very carefully from a cost perspective. She said that the district would have to be cautious about the public perception about the district spending money on marketing itself rather than using the money to put teachers in the classroom.

All of the officers commented on the public's expectation for district accountability. The superintendent discussed the public's expectations of her regarding a focus on improving the basic instruction in the district for all students. The board president commented that recent increases in funding were approved with the expectation that the funding was going directly to improving instruction in the classroom. The communication officer commented that the public's perception of the district's academic effectiveness was improving, but the perception of safety is still of concern to many. In his opinion, the parents were more concerned about programs for their students than about the overall budgets. He commented that the waves of reform activity in the district had created an expectation of faster improvement.

In summary, the officers of District C feel that overall, the larger community thinks of the district as a failure. The general consensus of the District C officers is that the district has a poor reputation, but that reputation is improving. The improvement in reputation is attributed to improved student achievement, but the public's concern now is the rate of improvement. The officers point out that the community believes the district has shown improvement recently and will continue to show improvement in the future. The communication officer believes that some parents think highly of the district, based primarily on their experience with a particular school. All of the officers seem keenly aware that the public expects continued improvement in both student achievement and fiscal responsibility. Despite the public's somewhat negative opinion, the district continues to receive funding from the state and city government and has been able to receive public support for a large capital improvement program.

Summary of Reputation for Districts A, B, and C

All three of the urban districts are clearly attuned to their reputation in their respective communities. However, they districts vary widely in the kind of community reputation they hold. District A has a well-documented, very positive reputation. District B has a generally positive reputation, and the officers feel that reputation is improving. District C has a somewhat negative reputation, but two of the three officers believe that reputation is improving. In District A and in District B, officers were cognizant of the role of demographics, socioeconomics, and race in determining their reputation. In each of the three districts, only one officer made comments that suggested a concern about legitimacy as a component of reputation. All of the districts were keenly aware of the expectations of

accountability in the effectiveness and efficiency of their students' achievement and in the operations of the district. In both District A and District B, race and demographics were mentioned as a component of the reputation of the urban district. In District B, all three officers alluded to race and demographics as a component of the district's reputation. All three districts were aware of their dependence on their community environment for continued support.

The officers of District A feel that the district has a very good reputation, especially with the parents in their community. They are not as sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district. The improvement of the public image of the district is attributed to the improvement in student achievement. Two officers commented on the role of race and socioeconomics in limiting the district's reputation. Because of the general support of the community, District A has been able to garner public financial support.

The officers of District B feel that the district has a mixed reputation and that to a great extent, demographics and socioeconomics play a large part in determining that reputation. They are not sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district, but they feel the public's opinion is improving. All three officers in District B mentioned race and socioeconomics as factors that impact the district's reputation. The Superintendent and Board President of District B seem keenly aware of the public's expectation of district accountability for student achievement and fiscal responsibility. As evidenced by their comments, the officers of District B are very aware of the district's dependence on the

public for financial support. They have recently passed a major bond issue and expect to go back to the public for a tax increase to support operations.

The general consensus of the District C officers is that the district has a poor reputation. Two of the three officers believe that reputation is improving. They attribute the improvement in reputation to improved student achievement. They report that the public's more recent concern is the rate of the district's improvement. Despite the public's somewhat negative opinion, District C continues to receive funding from the state and city government and has been able to receive public support for a large capital improvement program.

This concludes the individual case results section of this study. The next section will provide a cross-case analysis of the three urban school districts. The next section will report the similarities and differences in projected image, media relations, external communication strategies, identity, internal communication strategies, adaptive instability/mutability, and reputation between the three urban districts.

District Cross-Case Analysis

This section will present a comparison of the results of the thematic analysis from the three urban districts. Each of the following sub-sections will discuss the similarities and differences between the three urban districts regarding a particular theme. The seven major themes of projected image, media relations, external communication strategies, identity, internal communication strategies, adaptive instability, and reputation will be compared.

Projected Image

All three of the urban districts A, B, and C demonstrated a focus on the theme of projected image. District A exhibited the strongest overall indication that it is actively engaged in long-term reputation building efforts. The image projection efforts of District A focused on the strengths of the district itself, in contrast to the image projection efforts in District B and C, which focused more on the superintendent as leader of a broken and ineffective district. District B was the only district to exhibit a strong emphasis on the sub-theme of district identity.

Leaders of District A indicated that they are constantly seeking opportunities to project a positive image of the school district to the community. Although District A does not have a heavy focus on district identity, they do make an effort to incorporate reference to awards and grants into every form of internal and external communication at their disposal. District A has clearly been engaged in reputation building for the longest period of time because of the stability of its communications department. An additional strength in District A is the high level of marketing experience of its communications officer.

District B is also engaged in long-term reputation building efforts under the leadership of its current superintendent and the up-to-date communications department she has created. District B leaders have recently invested a great deal of time and energy in creating a positive projected image of the superintendent and the new direction of the district under her leadership. The officers of District B all seem to understand the importance of their role in representing the district to the public in a positive light. Of the three districts studied,

District B currently has the most advanced strategies designed to build a strong district identity because of the media professionals brought in three years ago.

Because of its strong focus on reputation building, projected image, and district image, District B is perceived as the strongest overall in this thematic area of reputation building and projected image. In District B, however, the communications department centers a great deal of its effort on projecting the image of the superintendent herself and increasing her appeal to the public. The effect is that the public can think well of the superintendent, but not be convinced that the district itself has improved. If the superintendent were to leave, the improvement in public image might not be sustained.

District C also engages in reputation building activities, but seems more focused on defining the desired future image of the district rather than highlighting its current positive aspects. The officers each seemed to understand their role in representing the district to the public, although there was some confusion of roles in the image projection process. The new superintendent is clearly focused on projecting an image of the organization to the public, and the communication Officer sees his role as supporting that process. However, the board president sees the superintendent's role as discussing the daily operations of the district and her role as projecting long term goals. District C was reported to have some focus on district identity by one of its three officers and there was some evidence in district artifacts that suggested that this was true. There was also evidence that the previous superintendent had been the primary focus of image projection activities rather than the district itself.

In summary, based on the results of the study of these three districts, urban school districts must consciously focus on projecting a positive image to their community. Ideally, urban districts should adopt strategies to create a well conceived district image through the use of logos, symbols, communication standards, and standardized communication formats. The image projection efforts of urban school districts should be designed to focus primarily on the general image of the district, rather than focus exclusively on the superintendent as leader hero. In order to maximize the communication process, districts should also acquire communications staff with communications, marketing, and media relations training. Finally, urban districts should establish clear roles and expectations for district leaders in the image projection process.

Media Relations

All three of the urban districts A, B, and C exhibited a strong emphasis on the theme of media relations. All of the district officers in all three districts had a keen awareness of the media's tendency to project a negative image of their districts. All of the officers of all three districts also seemed to understand the need for their districts to cultivate a positive relationship with the news media, but there were differences in approach on the part of the district leaders to managing their personal relationships with the news media, editorial boards, news editors, and news reporters.

District A takes steps to create a positive relationship with the news media by responding promptly to all media inquiries. However, District A has to work very hard to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative. The general strategy of District A is to

minimize contact with the news media by issuing statements rather than granting interviews. District A has some success in getting the news media to report on positive news, but it has also developed extensive alternative external communication strategies to transmit the district's story to external stakeholders. Of the three districts, District A was the least open to the news media.

District B cultivates its relationship with the media by being receptive to them and recognizing the stresses the news media are under. District B's communication staff strives to project the district's image through the media, by accommodating the needs of news outlets and strategically exploiting that relationship. The district has hired very experienced media professionals and has developed strategies to keep news stories from becoming unnecessarily negative and to limit the duration of negative news reports. District B has had some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but it has also begun to develop alternative external communication strategies.

District C actively promotes its relationship with the news media. The communications staff works to limit negative reporting. District C has a long history of attempting to project its image through the media, exclusively. The leadership of the district has historically been very open and accessible to the news media. The district does have some success in getting the media to report on positive news, but, under the leadership of its new superintendent, District C has recently begun to develop other external communication strategies in order to more effectively transmit its image to the public.

In summary, urban school districts must be very aware of the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with the news media. First, they should make contact with the news media and establish a dialogue about the challenges the district faces. Second, it is very important that urban districts respond promptly to media inquiries in order to respect the media's reporting deadlines. Third, urban districts must carefully manage their engagement with news reporters as a news story develops. Limiting interviews and the strategic use of written statements may be helpful in limiting the duration and impact of negative news stories. Fourth, when the media has reported on a negative aspect of the district, urban district leaders can regain some public support by inviting the respective news media outlet to do a follow up report on the district's corrective action. Fifth, if the urban district is successful in building its relationship with the news media, it may be able to get the media to report more frequently on positive aspects of the district and thereby enhance the district's image. As part of their relationship with the news media, some urban districts have had success in improving their image by helping the news reporters and news editors meet their production needs. Finally, urban districts must develop alternative external communication strategies to provide other channels for projecting their image to their public.

External Communications Strategies

All three districts showed strong indications of a heavy emphasis on external communication strategies. District A and District C exhibited a strong emphasis on two-way communication through community engagement strategies. Table 3 provided a comparison of the external communication strategies of the three districts studied.

District A has developed an array of external communication strategies, including a district newspaper, a district calendar, the district website, school newsletters, school marquees, parent teacher organizations, a key communicators program, and an annual State of the District Address. District A attempts to pitch positive stories to the news media, but relies most heavily on its key communicators program to get positive news into the local and neighborhood newspapers. District officers credit their community engagement strategies, with parents and community members being included in several district committees on a regular basis, as the most effective way they successfully communicate with external stakeholders.

District B utilizes an array of external communication strategies. In addition to utilizing the news media, the district has an annual state of the district address, a parent newsletter, periodic phone calls to parents with a phone call out system, an external mailing of district highlights, participation in a business round table, press releases, advertising, public appearances by the Superintendent, community events for board members, school business partnership programs, a district website, school websites, a campus communicator program, meetings with parent/teacher organizations, and the Communication Officer utilizes Facebook and Twitter. District B's campus communicator program is similar to District A's key communicator program, but has only recently been implemented. The district has some community engagement strategies to promote two-way communication, but at this point in time, most of those activities center around the superintendent and board's participation in community activities.

According to district officers, District C has developed several strategies to communicate with external audiences, including letters to parents, the district calendar, e-mails, an external newsletter, and the district website. However, similar to District B, District C expends considerable effort to get their message out to the public through the news media. They meet with editorial boards, conduct news conferences for the release of reports, and utilized press releases and media advisories. District C also pitches news stories to the media. District C has committed to developing an extensive series of meetings with groups to engage stakeholders. The community engagement strategies utilized by District C include, parent round tables, meetings with ministers, the creation of a parent and community engagement office, the establishment of a parent hot line, the re-establishment of home/school organizations, and the placement of parent ombudsmen in 85 schools. The Superintendent, who has been in place less than a year, is clearly striving to make engagement of parents and other community members a top priority for District C.

In summary, drawing best practices from all three of the urban districts studied, the ideal external communication plan for an urban district would begin with a carefully cultivated relationship with the news media to extract the maximum possible benefit from district news releases and press conferences. That relationship with the news media would be greatly enhanced by a district key communicators program that produces a steady stream of positive news stories to the news media. All urban school districts should adopt the practice of delivering an annual "State of the District" address that summarizes district progress and explains district challenges. Such an event helps to educate the news media while also

providing important context for external stakeholders to deepen their understanding of district decisions.

In addition to the State of the District address, urban districts should periodically mail or e-mail district highlights to external stakeholders. Urban districts should also consider professional advertising as a strategy for highlighting district accomplishments in order to attract students, parents, and high quality staff. Urban districts should produce a periodic newspaper, district calendar, and parent newsletter. Urban districts should utilize an automatic phone system to get important messages to parents, especially in times of crisis. The urban district's website should serve as the anchor for all communication efforts with links to all communication artifacts created by the district. Individual school websites, newsletters, and marquee messages should also be used strategically to support district external communication.

In order to promote effective two-way communication with external stakeholders, urban districts should maintain active parent teacher organizations. Urban districts should also regularly meet with stakeholder committees to discuss district activities and decisions and to solicit stakeholder feedback. Some urban districts have found it useful to create community engagement offices that are responsible for organizing public appearances of district officers, community events, and participation in local community and business organizational activities. Successful urban districts should also consider holding parent round tables, the utilization of parent liaisons in targeted schools, and the creation of a parent hot-line to deal with parent issues. Another good idea for urban districts is to hold

periodic meetings with local religious leaders. Most successful urban districts also promote a business partner program for school business partners. The most successful district studied has created a community leadership program and conducts an annual community survey to provide concrete data on the public image of the district.

Identity

Of the three districts studied, District A had the strongest indication of a positive identity among its employees. Officers of District B reported that the majority of the employees positively identify with the district, but that the frequency of whistle-blowing activity and other indications of employee dissatisfaction are of concern. The officers of District C reported that their employees have an overall negative identity and there is a very high incidence of whistle-blowing and other signs of dissatisfaction.

The officers of District A feel that in general, the employees have a positive identity and are loyal to the district. District A was the only district that uses independent surveys to evaluate its image and reputation. Employee surveys suggest that all groups of District A employees rate the district as a high B or an A. The employees are reported to be loyal. There is a distinct lack of whistle-blowing activity, suggesting that there is a very high degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the construed external image of the district.

According to the officers of District B, there is a general positive identity among employees. The officers reported that employees are loyal, but they also admitted there is a considerable

degree of whistle-blowing activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. The district has recently created an employee hotline, and the superintendent identifies her visibility and follow-up of employee concerns as very important to reducing employee dissatisfaction.

According to the Superintendent and the Board President, the employees of District C have a negative identity. The officers report that there is a considerable degree of whistleblower activity and other expressions of dissatisfaction, which suggests that there is a low degree of image congruence between the leadership's projected image and the employees construed external image of the district. However, the district officers attributed dissatisfaction to the lack of involvement of employees in the decision-making process of the district.

Internal Communication Strategies

The theme of internal communication was most strongly indicated by the officers of District A. District B officers identified internal communication as an area needing improvement. District C was just beginning to improve its internal communication and employee engagement strategies. Table 4 compared the internal communications strategies of the three districts.

The officers in District A reported that employees get their information from a monthly employee newsletter, a special publication following board meetings, superintendent messages in publications, phone messages from the superintendent, mass e-mail from the

superintendent, the district website, special letters from the superintendent, and top down communication through the administrative structure. District A also utilizes several communication strategies to engage employees, such as involving employees early in the change process, responding to employee issues, and conducting employee surveys. A new sub-theme that emerged during the study was communications with the school board. District A Superintendent said she has to focus on this area.

District B currently utilizes several strategies for internal communication, but district officers recognize it as an area that needs improvement. The officers stated that employees currently get their information from mass e-mails from the Superintendent, a special publication following board meetings, the district website, and communication through the administrative structure. These strategies are used to keep employees abreast of what is going on in the district. District B also employs certain communication strategies to engage employees, such as meeting with principals regularly and utilizing a strategy known as rolling polling. Communication between the Superintendent and the School Board was mentioned as a problem by the Board President.

The officers of District C reported that employees currently get their information from the district television station, a weekly e-mail blast message from the Superintendent, the district newspaper, annual convocations, top-down communication through principals, through the daily newspapers, and by word of mouth. The latter two strategies are not considered the ideal way urban district employees should receive their information from district leaders. Under the leadership of the new superintendent, District C has begun to

utilize employee round tables designed to promote two-way communication with employees.

In summary, internal communication with internal stakeholders in urban school districts should begin with frequent communication from the Superintendent in the form of written messages, phone messages, e-mail messages, and special letters. Best practice urban districts provide board meeting summaries to employees immediately after board meetings to keep them informed of important district decisions. Other standard internal communication practices include employee newsletters, district websites, and district television. Urban districts must also make an effort to provide consistent communication to employees through the chain of command.

Successful urban districts should also adopt effective employee engagement strategies that promote two-way communication. One of the most fundamental issues is the regular involvement of employees in the district decision-making process. Another important issue is the timely response to employee issues and the maintenance of an open door policy in the district. Best practice districts also identify frequent employee recognition as a critical component of employee satisfaction. Other best practices include the use of employee round tables and the practice of conducting regular employee surveys to guage the degree of employee satisfaction and to identify critical employee issues.

Adaptive Instability/Mutability

All three of the urban districts studied showed a strong indication of a focus on organizational improvement through adaptive instability/mutability, desired future image, and structural elaboration. Districts A and B were found to have a well-developed strategic plan that is used to provide focus and direction to the district. District B also aggressively monitors the progress on the strategic plan to drive improvement efforts. District C was in the process of developing a new strategic plan. The districts vary in the amount of communications capacity they have built in their organizations and in the length of time that capacity has been in place.

The officers of District A clearly set the direction for improvement of the district by capitalizing on the district's perceived challenges and by communicating them to all internal and external stakeholders. The officers then engage all stakeholders, especially employees in the process of evolving the organization in a new, positive direction. The district has a strategic plan which is updated regularly and systematically communicated to the internal and external stakeholders. The officers of District A differ in their levels of training and preparation in communications, but rely heavily on the capacity of the communications department. District A has put in place a strong communications department comprised of media and communications professionals. This department has been in place for almost fifteen years. The improvement of District A has been recognized nationally.

District B is engaged in substantial change efforts and understands the importance of communication in the improvement process. The district has developed a strategic plan

which communicates the direction of the organization and seems to use it to aggressively manage the change process. The officers of District B differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a high-capacity communications department, in the last three years District B has built a communications department comprised of media professionals from the news media and marketing arenas.

The superintendent and school board of District C are engaged in developing a strategic plan. This plan is intended to define the future of the district and provide focus for improvement efforts. In order to create ownership of the plan, the leadership of the district has made a concerted effort to involve stakeholders in the planning process. The officers of District C differ in their personal levels of training and preparation to effectively communicate and improve the district's image, identity, and reputation. Recognizing the need for a professional communications department, District C plans to conduct a review of its current communication department and its capacity.

Reputation

All three of the urban districts are clearly attuned to their reputation in their respective communities. However, they districts vary widely in the kind of community reputation they hold. District A has a well-documented, very positive reputation. District B has a generally positive reputation, and the officers feel that reputation is improving. District C has a somewhat negative reputation, but two of the three officers believe that reputation is improving. In each of the three districts, only one officer made comments that suggested a

concern about legitimacy as a component of reputation. All of the districts were keenly aware of the expectations of accountability in the effectiveness and efficiency of their students' achievement and in the operations of the district.

In District A and in District B, officers were cognizant of the role of demographics, socioeconomics, and race in determining their reputation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). In both District A and District B, race and demographics were mentioned as component of the reputation of the urban district. In District B, all three officers alluded to race and demographics as a component of the district's reputation. All three districts were aware of their dependence on their community environment for continued support.

The officers of District A feel that the district has a very good reputation, especially with the parents in their community. They are not as sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district. The improvement of the public image of the district is attributed to the improvement in student achievement. Two officers commented on the role of race and socioeconomics in limiting the districts reputation. Because of the general support of the community, District A has been able to garner public financial support.

The officers of District B feel that the district has a mixed reputation and that to a great extent, demographics and socioeconomics play a large part in determining that reputation. They are not sure that the larger community thinks they are a great school district, but they feel the public's opinion is improving. All three officers in District B mentioned race and socioeconomics as factors that impact the district's reputation. The superintendent and

board president of District B seem keenly aware of the public's expectation of district accountability for student achievement and fiscal responsibility. As evidenced by their comments, the officers of District B are very aware of the district's dependence on the public for financial support. They have recently passed a major bond issue and expect to go back to the public for a tax increase to support operations.

The general consensus of the District C officers is that the district has a poor reputation. Two of the three officers believe that reputation is improving. They attribute the improvement in reputation to improved student achievement. They report that the public's more recent concern is the rate of the district's improvement. Despite the public's somewhat negative opinion, District C continues to receive funding from the state and city government and has been able to receive public support for a large capital improvement program.

Table 5 represents a summary comparison of the strength of the themes and sub-themes as indicated by the officers' comments about conditions in their districts and artifacts collected from the districts. If all three officers of a district mentioned the theme, it was considered strongly indicated. If two of the three officers of a district mentioned the theme, it was identified as present. If only one of the three officers mentioned the theme, it was considered vaguely present. The final chapter will further discuss the results of this study and address the research questions posed in earlier chapters. This chapter will also discuss the implications for further research, the implications for practice, and the relationship of the results to the theoretical framework.

Table 5

Cross-Case Comparison of Thematic Analysis

Themes and Sub-Themes	District A	District B	District C
Projected Image	1-StronglyIndicated	1-Strongly Indicated	2-Present
Media Relations	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated
External Communication Strategies	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated
Identity	1-Stongly Indicated (positive)	2-Present (generally positive)	3-Vaguely Present (negative)
Internal Communication Strategies	1-Stongly Indicated	2-Present	2-Present
Adaptive Instability/Mutability	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated
Desired Future Image	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated
Structural Elaboration	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	2-Present
Reputation	1-Stongly Indicated (Very Positive)	2-Strongly Indicated (Positive-Improving)	2-Present (Mixed-Improving)
Environmental Dependence	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	2-Present
Legitimacy	3-Vaguely Present	3-Vaguely Present	3-Vaguely Present
Accountability	1-Stongly Indicated	1-Stongly Indicated	2-Present

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study seeks to determine the relevance of the concepts of image, identity, and reputation (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) to urban school systems and their ability to sustain improvement and maintain public support. The theoretical framework for the study is drawn from public affairs research and new institutionalism. The study utilizes a qualitative collective case study approach (Stake, 1995) applied to three urban school districts in different geographic regions of the United States. The superintendent, board president, and communication officer of each district were interviewed, using the same set of interview questions. Each interview was coded, utilizing a theory-based thematic code. In addition, district communication documents and websites were also examined. Each district was analyzed individually, and then the three districts were compared, based on the thematic code.

In this final chapter, I will summarize and discuss the results of the study. I will also discuss the implications for further research, the implications and recommendations for practice, and the relationship of the results to the two theories. I also include a discussion of the limitations of the study. After a summary of the results in the next section, I will discuss the results in relation to the research questions presented in Chapter I.

Summary of Results

Districts A, B, and C were analyzed utilizing a theory-based thematic code that was expanded and modified as the analysis progressed. In all, there were seven major themes and eleven sub-themes. The primary themes included projected image (Gioia et al., 2000), media relations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990), external communication strategies, identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), internal communications strategies, adaptive instability/mutability (Gioia et al., 2000; Clemens & Cook, 1999), and reputation (Gioia et al., 2000). Projected image included the sub-theme of corporate identity (Gioia et al., 2000). Media relations included the sub-theme of media projected image (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). External communications included the sub-theme of community engagement strategies. Identity included the sub-theme of image congruence (Corley et al., 2000). Internal communications included the sub-theme of employee engagement strategies and board communication. Adaptive instability/mutability included the sub-themes of desired future image and structural elaboration (Gioia et al., 2000; Clemens & Cook, 1999; Meyer, 1984). The final theme of reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990) included the sub-themes of legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1983), accountability (Rowan & Miskel, 1999), and environmental dependence (Meyer & Rowan, 1983).

All three districts were found to be engaged in reputation building efforts, consisting primarily of activities designed to project a positive image to the public. In two of the three districts, Districts B and C, the superintendent was identified as the primary spokesperson and the "face' of the district. In District A, the communications officer was the primary district spokesperson. The Superintendent and the Board President did not often submit to

media interviews. Of the three districts, only District B was found to be making a concerted effort to build a strong corporate identity through a "visual identity guide" and through procedures designed to exert quality control over external communication.

All three districts were found to be heavily engaged in managing their relationship with the news media. All of the districts seemed to be very aware of the news media's potential impact on the districts' public image and reputation. All three districts reported that they expend considerable effort to contain and limit negative news reports. Also, all three districts make concerted attempts to "pitch" positive news stories about the district to the news media. District A had the most well established procedures for collecting positive news stories from within and getting them published or reported in the media. District A and B had the most experienced, professional staff drawn from the world of news media.

All three districts had expended considerable effort to establish other channels of external communication that were not dependent on the news media. These channels consisted primarily of district publications, district websites, and district leaders' involvement in community events and activities. An important finding of this study was the districts' emphasis on community engagement activities. District A had developed the most elaborate community engagement efforts to promote two-way communication with parents and community stakeholders through an elaborate set of committees. Over a long period of time, District A has taken great pains to involve community members and parents in important district decisions. District A was also found to be utilizing a "key

communicators" program designed to get schools involved in promoting the good things happening in their schools to the local neighborhood newspapers.

The three districts reported a range of employee identity from positive to negative. District A reported a positive identity with few whistle-blowers and other indications of employee dissatisfaction. District B reported a generally positive employee identity, but also reported the presence of a great deal of whistle-blower and undermining behaviors that express the dissatisfaction of employees with the current state of the district. District C reported a negative, but improving employee identity, with frequent whistle-blowers and leaks to the media. In District B and C, employee dissatisfaction was most often associated with a lack of involvement in key decisions about the districts' improvement efforts. There was little direct focus on the issue of image congruence in the comments of the officers from any of the three districts.

The internal communications strategies reported by the districts were varied. The most common strategies included e-mail from the superintendent, employee newsletters, and the district website. Once again, District A had the most well developed internal communications strategies and had also gone to greater lengths to engage employees and maintain an open-door policy. District C had begun to hold meetings with employees to discuss issues. The critical importance of board communication emerged as a theme in two of the three districts.

The general theme of organizational improvement was strongly present in all three districts. All three districts either had a strategic plan or were in the process of developing a strategic

plan to adapt and grow their organizations in a positive direction. This strategic plan was the expression of the desired future image of the districts and was clearly intended to guide the improvement efforts of staff. A great deal of effort is expended in all three districts to communicate the plan and the necessity for the plan to employees and to the community at large. A large portion of the conversation with officers in all three districts focused on their efforts to communicate the districts' improvement efforts. In terms of structural elaboration, District A and B had already created a professional communications department to guide their communications efforts with the media, stakeholders, and employees. District C described its intentions to evaluate and improve its communications department in the future.

Finally, the reputation of the districts varied. District A reported a very positive reputation; District B reported a generally positive and improving reputation; and District C reported a poor, but improving reputation. There were many comments by officers from all three districts about the importance of accountability for the effectiveness of student achievement, the efficiency of district operations, and/or the degree of district fiscal responsibility in establishing the reputation of the respective district. All three districts did acknowledge their dependence on their community for support. However, all three districts had been able to secure substantial additional financial support from their communities in the recent past without regard to the variation in their overall district reputation. The issue of race and demographics was cited in two of the three districts as an outer limit on their districts' potential reputation.

The next section discussed the results of this study in relation to the research questions outlined in Chapter I.

Discussion of Results

This section will attempt to answer the research questions posed in the first chapter. The research questions were posed in relation to the public affairs research concepts of image, identity, and reputation. Additional questions related to the district communication strategies utilized to interact with internal and external stakeholders.

Should Urban School Systems Engage in Long-Term Reputation Building Efforts?

The immediate answer is yes. Reputation building refers to the long-term efforts of organizational leaders to create an upward trend in organizational reputation by projecting a positive image of the organization to the public and by creating a strong organizational identity (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia et al., 2000). The objective of district leaders should be to create and sustain a positive image of the organization in the minds of community stakeholders. In order to do this, the leaders of urban districts must focus on communicating the accomplishments of the district, while effectively addressing the challenges the district encounters. District leaders, especially the superintendent, should focus on accomplishments of the district, not just on the superintendent. Unfortunately, district leaders and communication staff can begin to focus on the accomplishments of the leader or superintendent to the exclusion of focus on the organization itself. When doing so, the communications staff is attempting to build confidence in district leadership and the direction the leaders are taking the district.

All three of the districts studied seemed to be attempting to build their reputation, but were going about it in different ways. District A clearly had the best reputation and had accomplished that reputation by taking a long-term approach to reputation building. In District A, the focus was on the district and not the district leaders per se. In District A, the communications department acts as the spokesperson for the district and handles all of the interaction with the news media. District leaders in District A, especially the superintendent, avoid contact with the news media but represent the district at public functions and other district managed interactions with stakeholders. They tell the district's story, taking a long-term view.

In contrast to District A, District B communications staff seemed to be promoting the superintendent rather than the district. Making the superintendent likeable does help make the public more receptive to the district in the short term, but does not necessarily change the public's image of the district itself in the long term. This can be problematic when the superintendent leaves and a new leader takes over. The public's perception may be that it was the leader who caused temporary improvement, but when that leader has departed, the organization will rapidly revert to its old norms.

In District C, the strategy for reputation building seemed fragmented, with the superintendent, the board president, and the communications officer each having a different focus on how and when to project the district's image and what the content of that projected image should be. The superintendent was avoiding media exposure and placing her staff in leadership roles. This could be effective in preventing an exclusive focus on the role of the

superintendent.   However, the communications staff was focused on promoting the superintendent in her role, while the board president was focused on the board's role in projecting the long-term issues of the organization.

In order to build the district's reputation, all district leaders have to market the success of organization (not just the superintendent) to its public over time. The leaders have to create a clear corporate identity and a perception of organizational competence. District leaders must manage their relationship with the news media and avoid prolonged negative media exposure. They must effectively address the challenges that arise. They must employ effective internal and external communication strategies. District leaders must also understand the importance of responsiveness, openness, involvement, and engagement of stakeholders. In order to effectively manage these critical activities, district leaders must obtain the right expertise in marketing, media relations, and communication.

How Is the Public's Image of an Urban School System Formed and Maintained?

Most members of the public form an image of an urban school system that has many tributary antecedents (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Members of the public may remember their own personal school experiences when encountering a school district. If they have children, they may have a perception of the organization that is impacted by their own personal experiences with their child's school. Those who own or conduct businesses in the community sometimes interact with the students the district has produced while they are students or after they have graduated. Members of the public may also come in contact with employees of the urban district. All of these are legitimate information sources feeding the

public's perception of an urban school district, but the overwhelming source of information for the public is the news media.

The vast majority of the public does not have children in school and may not be in daily contact with the urban school district directly. These members of the public get most of their information about the district from news media reports. Media reports of incidents about the urban school district, both positive and negative, have the greatest impact on the public's perceptions about the district. Of particular importance are media reports given by organizational monitors such as financial auditors, governmental regulators, and, in this age of educational accountability, student assessments.

District leaders must be very aware of these various sources of information and make it their business to aggressively communicate accurate, balanced information to the public that appropriately provides an accurate context for understanding the challenges the district and its students face. Districts have to aggressively manage their relationship with the news media to limit negative media reporting and promote positive news reports. In addition, urban districts must communicate with the public through a variety of channels other than the news media. Urban school districts have to actively engage and educate the public over time, if they want to project a positive public image and build a positive reputation.

How Does the Public News Media Impact an Urban School System's Public Image and

Reputation?

There is no question that the news media significantly impact an urban school system's public image and reputation (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). Every district studied cited the importance of working with the news media. Intense and prolonged negative media scrutiny can seriously damage an urban district's image and reputation. The news media projects an image of an urban district (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). If that media projected image is consistently negative, with little or no reporting of positive organizational aspects, the urban district will have a very difficult time of building and maintaining a positive reputation in their communities. A negative media projected image and corresponding poor reputation can have severe consequences for an urban district. Negative consequences of prolonged negative news reporting include difficulty in attracting competent personnel, out-migration of families and students, and decline in financial support from local taxpayers.

Over time, urban school districts must build and manage a positive relationship with the news media. First, the urban district must be responsive to the new media, allowing appropriate access and providing information as requested. Second, urban districts must respect the news media's constraints and provide information in a timely manner. News media entities have news deadlines and will increase their pressure on districts that delay or fail to provide them with the information that is the commodity they need in order to do their business. Third, urban districts must work hard to educate news reporters on the context surrounding their story interests. Because of their deadlines, news media can rush a story

and thereby misrepresent or negatively slant the story. Often the news media fail to understand the complexity of the situation and the full story context. Finally, urban districts must supply the news media with news content. News media outlets are businesses that are in competition with one another to sell advertising in order to make money. To stay in business, news media entities must gain a share of the local news market. Unfortunately, the quickest and most efficient way to gain market share is to report news that attracts readers, listeners, or viewers, and most often, the most attractive news stories are negative and sensational. In order to build a positive image and reputation over time, urban districts have to make it their business to give the news media a steady supply of interesting, positive news stories to report while also limiting the number and duration of negative news reports.

How Important Is Effective, Honest Communication with External Audiences?

In the absence of district information provided through other communication channels, most members of the public get their information about an urban district from the news media (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). If the district has a positive relationship with the news media, it may succeed in limiting the number and duration of negative news stories and increasing the number of positive stories. On the other hand, if the district's relationship with then news media is bad, the media projected image of the district will likely be very bad. Even in the best of circumstances, urban districts have a difficult time projecting a positive image through the news media, so other channels of external communication are very critical, and, the nature of that communication is also critical.

In a context where many negative things are said of the school district, the district must not appear to minimize or deny bad aspects (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). Instead, the urban district must focus on providing balanced and accurate information. An urban district must highlight the effective strategies it is earnestly employing to combat the negative issues it faces. The appropriate image for an urban school district facing major challenges is to project itself as an improving district. The district should never represent itself as great or even good. It should instead say that it is constantly striving to find better ways to serve its students. External audiences will be more receptive to a message of improvement than a false projection that everything about the urban district is wonderful. The leaders of all three urban districts seemed to embrace this important concept.

What Are the Most Effective Urban District External Communication Strategies?

Despite the difficulty of doing so, every urban district must attempt to communicate with the public through the news media. The first step in effective communication through the news media is to develop a positive relationship with the local news media. This is best accomplished by being responsive to the news media, by getting to know the news editors of the various news outlets, and, when appropriate, by having meetings with the editorial boards of the local news papers. Some districts host occasional meetings with representatives of all the news outlets. This process of engaging the media has to be handled carefully and is best guided by a communications officer who has news media experience.

Another way to build a relationship with the news media is through a key communicators program. District A had the best example of this type of program where school staff

members are trained to regularly develop and turn in positive news stories about their campuses, especially highlighting the successes of students. These positive stories help meet the news media's need for content. The positive stories generated by schools also help create a bank account of good will that can help support the reputation of the school district and give it a little insulation from the negative impact of the inevitable bad news stories that emerge from time to time.

In addition to a key communicators program, urban districts should maximize other forms of external communication such as district newspapers, district calendars, and letters to parents. These targeted communications help create a steady flow of information to the community. Another important external communication medium is the district website. A good website should be easy to navigate, well maintained, and updated regularly. The content of the website should include district news releases, links to news reports about the district, district and school performance data, district and school contact information, and maps. School websites are also a good idea if there are uniform district school website standards and regular update procedures in place. Effective districts also encourage regular school newsletters to school communities and the effective use of school marquees.

Another effective external communication channel utilized by urban districts is the creation of an annual "State of the District" address where the superintendent gives a report to community leaders and school community representatives. The news media often attends this kind of event as well. This type of program allows the district leadership to present a full picture of district challenges and accomplishments supported by data. Urban district

leaders should also make frequent public appearances and attend community events. These district leaders should have a unified, clear message about the district that they can deliver on a moments notice.

Perhaps the most effective external communication strategies are community engagement strategies that allow two-way communication between the district and community stakeholders. Having parent and teacher organizations at each school and at the district level was seen as very important in successful urban districts. Other important parent engagement activities mentioned by districts were parent round tables, a parent hotline, and parent ombudsmen.

Other community engagement activities mentioned by successful urban districts included standing district committees, school and district business partners, involvement in local business roundtable organizations, district leadership programs and regular meetings with ministers and religious leaders. Standing district committees which met frequently and gathered important community input on major district decisions were cited as very important in District A. All of the districts mentioned school and district business partners and involvement with the local business round table organizations as being very important to maintaining key relationships in the community. District A also cited its leadership program which educated community leaders to be district ambassadors as being very helpful in creating community good will. District C mentioned its meetings with ministers and other religious leaders. These community engagement strategies are obviously most effective when they are implemented with integrity over time.

Does the Positive or Negative Identity of District Employees Affect Public Perception?

From the study of three urban districts, there is reason to suspect that there is a relationship between employee identity and public perception of an urban district, but the evidence was not clear cut that there is a causal relationship (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). District A reported relatively high levels of positive employee identity and cited employee survey data to substantiate it. District B reported a generally positive employee identity but cited frequent expressions of employee dissatisfaction. District B also reported a reputation that had been impacted by financial scandal but that was improving of late. District B leaders cited mostly anecdotal data to substantiate their reports. District C reported a negative employee identity and a mixed reputation. In districts B and C, the issue of negative employee identity seemed to be related to the lack of employee involvement in decision-making. Perceptions of the integrity of district leadership seem tied to the degree to which employees are listened to prior to decisions being made, rather than just the frequency, quantity, or quality of the information they receive. This whole area of employee identity and the degree to which employee identity affects public perceptions of the organization needs further study.

Is Honest and Congruent Communication with Employees <u>and</u> External Audiences

Important?

Based on the evidence presented in this study, the congruence of internal and external communication was not the overriding issue expressed (Corley, Cochran, & Comstock, 2000). From the district leaders' perspectives, the issues of employee satisfaction were most often linked to involvement in decision-making and the opportunity to air grievances.

District A was the only district that suggested a connection between its communication with employees and employee satisfaction. District A also had the most well developed internal communication channels with employees and school communities.

What Are Some of the Most Effective Urban District Internal Communication Strategies?

District A officers consistently reported the greatest number of internal communication strategies. They cited an employee newsletter and a report following board meetings giving a summary of board decisions and employee changes as two very popular internal communications instruments. The officers in District A, as well as the officers in the other districts, also cited the importance of superintendent communications to employees through written messages in district publications, phone messages, e-mail messages, and special letters on important topics. All three districts cited their website as an important internal communication tool. District C relied on its district television station for internal communication. All three districts cited communication through the chain of command as very important.

District A reported the use of employee engagement strategies such as involvement in decision-making, effective response to employee issues and a long-standing open door policy as part of its management culture. District A also seemed to make employee recognition a major part of all of its internal communication. Most impressively, District A had a standing procedure for conducting annual employee surveys and utilizing the data. District B reported limited employee engagement in principal meetings and through a rolling polling practice it had recently instituted in central office. District C had only recently

embarked on a series of employee round tables to begin to engage employees more effectively.

Do Leaders of Successful Urban School Districts Consciously Develop and Maintain

Effective Communication Strategies Targeted at Both Internal and External Audiences in a

Deliberate Effort to Sustain Organizational Direction, Support, and Improvement?

All of the district leaders made reference to their districts' efforts to develop strategic plans and use them to guide district improvement (Gioia et al., 2000). All of the districts also reported efforts to make the case for organizational change and improvement based on district challenges. All three groups of officers seemed to understand the need to never stop improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their districts.

District A has a strategic plan that had been in place for a long period of time. District A seemed to keep its plan in the forefront of its actions and took steps to update the plan periodically. District B had developed a plan in the past three years, under the leadership of its current superintendent. District C was just beginning the process of developing a plan. Based on the success of District A, it would seem that an effective urban district has a strategic plan that guides the decisions of the district through a succession of superintendents. District C seemed to be the most plagued by leadership turnover and a lack of long term focus in its improvement efforts.

Further, based on the improvement cited in District B, a successful urban district utilizes metrics and data to measure its progress on its strategic plan. Both District A and District B

make frequent reports to the public and to their own employees about district progress. The leaders of these two districts reported being honest about district challenges and progress. They acknowledge the organizational warts and develop strategies to improve in critical areas. The leaders of successful urban districts highlight the successes and good things about the system, but embrace their districts' challenges.

How Can the Reputation of an Urban School System be Changed or Improved?

Improving the reputation of an urban school district is a long-term process that will likely exceed the term of any one superintendent (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). District leaders must be honest about the challenges the system faces and transparent in all ways about what is occurring in the system. Leaders have to acknowledge the flaws in the system and develop meaningful strategies to improve those aspects. While the system is undergoing improvement, district leadership should take steps to constantly highlight the good things about the system and point out the successes that occur from time to time. District leaders should tackle new problems immediately and allow stakeholders, including the news media, see the district take earnest steps to improve. District leaders should adopt a posture of constant organizational improvement.

In order to get the message of improvement out and to be able to highlight the good aspects of the system, district leaders must develop a positive and responsive relationship with the news media. The goal of leadership should be to actively tell the district's story through the news media, while avoiding intense prolonged negative media scrutiny. Because it is unlikely that an urban district can fully tell its story through the news media, district leaders

must also actively develop alternative channels of external communication and engage external stakeholders in dialogue of district improvement. In order to reinforce the message of improvement and motivate employees to commit to organizational development, district leaders must frequently communicate with employees and engage them in a dialogue of improvement as well. These major strategies will help improve an urban district's reputation over time.

However, if the officers in two of the districts studied are correct, there may be an outer limit to the ability of urban district leaders to build a positive reputation in urban school districts because of the public's beliefs about race and demographics. This aspect of reputation building in urban district settings needs further study.

What Role Do Sophisticated Communication Strategies, systems, and Processes Play in

School Systems' Ability to Sustain or Increase Public Support?

Communication strategies do play a role in helping urban districts sustain and increase public support. Based on the study of three districts, districts will often increase their efforts to communicate with community stakeholders during times when they are seeking increased financial support. In all three of the districts studied, the public has increased its financial support of the districts in the recent past. Given the relatively poor state of the reputation of two of the districts studied, who were able to secure significant increases in financial commitment from their communities, public support was not absolutely dependent on the districts' reputation. The success in gaining public financial support may depend more on

how well the district leaders communicate district needs for increased financial support to key community stakeholders than on the urban district's overall reputation.

Implications for Further Research

This study was designed to explore the relationship of public affairs concepts of image, identity, and reputation (Gioia et al., 2000) to urban school districts. Leaders of urban districts were asked questions regarding their districts' communication practices, but were not directly asked about the public affairs concepts. The intent was to determine if the leaders consciously approach their roles in district communication activities from an image and reputation building perspective. The general conclusion from this study is that the leaders do consciously engage in image, identity, and reputation building activities, but they are not always well grounded in the concepts and do not always act in unison in their efforts. Further research is needed in how best practice districts formulate their communication strategies to most effectively build the reputation of their urban school districts.

One of the issues that needs to be explored further is the issue of communication activities that focus on the attributes and activities of the leader or superintendent rather than focusing on the attributes of the organization itself. It is as if the communication departments of some districts focus their energy on promoting the superintendent rather than the district. This is understandable in many urban district environments where the selection of the superintendent may generate a certain amount of controversy, so the communication efforts in the early stages of the new superintendent's service focuses on legitimizing the person chosen as superintendent and the particular policies or initiatives they intend to pursue.

Urban district leaders should be very sensitive to the perceptions of community stakeholders and employees about their improvement efforts and the images they project (Corley et al., 2000).

This problem appears to be exacerbated in urban districts where there is no strategic plan for district improvement sanctioned by the board that supercedes the succession of superintendents. Each new superintendent enters the district environment and is expected to develop and implement a plan of action that produces improvement results fairly quickly. The relatively rapid turnover of superintendents creates a situation where there are frequent starts and stops in improvement initiatives.

A second area that needs to be further researched is community engagement strategies that are successful over time in helping to build the reputation of urban districts. This is an area where the size of the district may be a limiting factor in how effectively all community stakeholders can be meaningfully engaged. The type of engagement activity my be more or less successful, depending on the size of the district and the degree to which district staff can implement and manage the strategy with integrity.

A third area that needs further research is the concept of employee identity in an urban district setting (Gioia et al., 2000; Corley et al., 2000). Employees in urban settings need to be asked more directly what kinds of information they are interested in having and when they would like to have it. Is it merely that they wish to be informed with integrity and desire that their leaders accurately represent the true status of the district, or is it that they

wish to be more effectively engaged in district decisions and recognized for their contributions?

Another area that needs much further study is the concept of reputation itself in relation to urban districts (Gioia et al., 2000). Studies are needed that expand our understanding of all the components of reputation. Not just reputation from an accountability or legitimacy perspective (Rowan & Miskel, 1999), but also from the perspective of different stakeholder groups. How do parents judge the reputation of a district as compared to business leaders or to taxpayers without children attending the schools in the local school system. And finally, studies are needed that delve more deeply into the reputation of urban school districts from the perspectives of diversity, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and district wealth (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

Implications for Practice and Recommendations

One strong implication of this study is that all urban districts need some form of a strategic plan with goals, objectives, initiatives, and measures to guide their improvement efforts. A well developed strategic plan that is regularly revised and updated and that guides decision-making in the district is the best expression of the urban district's *desired future image* (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 20000. Based on the three districts studied, the involvement of the governing board in the development and revision of the strategic plan, as well as the board's overall commitment to the plan, is very critical. Districts with boards that focus on the improvement plan for the district over time have been able to build the strongest, most positive reputations. Urban districts where the board selects a superintendent to support the

board's strategic plan have better reputations than those that hire a superintendent to tell the board what the strategic plan should be. Urban district leaders should speak with one voice about the desired future image of the district.

A major component of the district's strategic plan should be focused on external and internal communication. If an urban district does not currently have a communications plan, a communications audit should be conducted to determine what communications strategies are in place and what the relative effectiveness of those strategies is. The district should have specific strategies designed to improve its relationship with the news media. The board and officers of the district should have a clear understanding of who speaks to the news media and when. The communications plan should also include specific external communication strategies designed to provide information to external stakeholders both through the news media and independent of the news media. Community engagement strategies should also be included in the communication plan. Internal communication and employee engagement strategies should also be included in the plan. Finally, the communication plan should include annual community and employee surveys to provide feedback to district leadership on the status of the district reputation. The district's reputation should be built over time through specific improvement strategies and frequently monitored for improvement.

The projected image of the district must focus on the district's improvement over time. An image of constant improvement and immediate attention to problems and issues must be projected through the media and other external and internal communications strategies. In general, when district issues arise and gain public attention, they must be confronted

immediately and appropriately. When issues are found to be systemic, the district should report systemic improvements and corrections. When district issues are found to be student or employee related, they must be investigated and handled appropriately with respect to student and employee privacy issues.

A final strong implication of this study is that districts need professional communications expertise to effectively manage the communications functions needed in the intense media environment found in most urban settings today. The leaders of urban districts could benefit from more explicit training and preparation for communications, media relations, and public affairs. The communications department of an urban district needs to be the right size in comparison to the communications challenges it faces. The first component of an effective communications department would be media relations. A second major component would be external communications, business partnerships, and community engagement. A sub-component of external communications would also be parent involvement and parent engagement. A third major component would be internal communications and employee engagement. Specific expertise in marketing and electronic communications is also essential to modern communications in an urban context.

Relationship of Results to Theory

New Institutionalism

All of the officers interviewed in all three urban school districts seemed to understand the importance and the urgency of district dependence on their community for economic support

and survival. This finding seems to confirm the importance of the new institutional concept of *environmental dependence* (Meyer & Rowan, 1983). Very few of the officers made comments that suggested they were focused on issues related to concerns about the public's perception of the *legitimacy* of the organization as a whole or the legitimacy of individual components of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). The over-riding concerns expressed by all officers about organizational reputation were related to the new institutional concept of *accountability* (Rowan & Miskel, 1999) and its impact on district reputation. District officers also made comments that supported the concept of continuous organizational improvement consistent with the new institutional concept of *mutability* (Clemens & Cook, 1999).

As Dacin et al. (2002) noted institutions such as urban school districts do change over time. They suggested that institutional theorists and researchers ought to develop new understandings of the manner in which institutions are created, transformed, and extinguished and the way in which institutional processes interact to affect institutional change (Dacin et al., p. 45.) The primary sources or drivers of institutional change in urban districts were found to be performance pressures exacerbated by the political pressure arising in the context of intense media scrutiny of urban districts performance. It seemed in every case that urban districts responded to this pressure for organizational change by developing a strategic plan or *desired future image* for continuous organizational improvement and engaging in image management activities.

Meyer and Rowan (2006, p. 2) identified three important conditions in the current educational institutional environment: greater pluralism, greater accountability, and a knowledge-dependent economy. The public is now has more choices for education providers and is paying very close attention to the quality of these educational providers and the quality of the education their children are receiving. The interviews with urban district leaders confirmed that the news media are thriving on the conflict generated by this closer public scrutiny of education and that this public scrutiny and heightened media attention is most intense in urban school district environments.

Charles Bidwell (2006, p. 46) called for a study of how communication and persuasion are employed to create commitment to institutions. Urban school districts are clearly exhibiting a greater focus on improved performance and on image management activities in response to the public pressure and to sustain public commitment to urban education. Urban school district leaders are finding meaningful research on communication, media relations, and public persuasion in public affairs research on image management.

Public Affairs Research

All of the officers interviewed in all three urban districts seemed to have a grasp of the importance of the public affairs research concept of long-term *reputation building* (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). They also all clearly understood the impact of the news *media projected image* on district image and understood the importance of *media relations* (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Corley et al., 2000). The public affairs research concepts of *image* and *reputation* (Gioia et al., 2000) were clearly understood by district leaders, but the concept of

identity was not often articulated in a manner consistent with public affairs research. Finally, as in the case of new institutional concept of mutability, the similar concept of *adaptive instability* (Gioia et al., 2000) from public affairs research was strongly mentioned by all district officers.

A specific goal of this study was to determine if the public affairs research concepts of *image, identity, and reputation* (Gioia et al., 2000) are relevant to urban school districts. The concepts were found to be generally relevant to urban school districts. The officers of urban districts seemed to be generally aware of their district's image in the community and their role in projecting and improving that image.

The officers were also clearly cognizant of the positive or negative identity of employees in their districts. The district officers attributed poor employee identity to lack communication with employees and lack of employee involvement in district decision-making. Officers in districts where the employees had a positive identity attributed that positive identity to the frequent recognition of employees and the opportunities afforded to employees to share their concerns with leadership. None of the district leaders attributed employee identity to issues of *image congruence* between *projected* and *reflected images* as suggested by Corley et al. (2000).

The concepts of organizational *adaptive instability*, from public affairs research (Gioia et al., 2000) and *mutability*, from new institutionalism research (Clemens & Cook, 1999), were found to be important to urban district leaders. They all mentioned, in one way or another,

the need to effectively respond to organizational challenges by sharing information with internal and external stakeholders and focusing the resulting motivation on long-term improvement efforts. All officers seemed aware of the importance of engaging internal and external stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue about the challenges their districts face.

The public affairs concept of organizational *reputation* (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990) was clearly apparent in the comments of urban district officers. The new institutional concept of organizational *accountability* for effectiveness and efficiency (Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 2006) was the most dominant theme related to reputation. The new institutional concept of *legitimacy* (Rowan & Miskel, 1999) was not mentioned as much more than the occasional concern about the public's perception about the most appropriate expenditure of funds. The biggest surprise was that in two of the districts, officers linked the urban district's reputation to issues of *race, socio-economic status, and demographics* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) and suggested that the reputation of an urban district was ultimately limited by these factors.

<div align="center">Limitations</div>

This study is limited to data collected from only three large, urban public school systems in 2008 and 2009. Small, private, rural, and suburban districts were consciously excluded from the study. This small sample of large, urban public school districts limits the ability to generalize the findings to all school districts. The limitations of this study involve participant sampling and lack of theoretical saturation; limited involvement of participants in theory development and revision; and the idiosyncratic aspects of investigator bias. The

researcher is a former district official from a large urban school system. Personal experiences may unduly bias the researcher's interpretation of participant comments. The study also includes a limited focus on issues of race and other socio-economic factors commonly associated with the public image and reputation of urban school districts.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between public affairs research concepts of image, identity, and reputation and new institutionalism concepts of legitimacy and accountability to urban school districts. The officers of urban districts were generally aware of their district's image in the community and their own role in projecting and improving that image. The officers were also clearly cognizant of the positive or negative identity of employees in their district, but this study failed to provide evidence that identity is directly related to issues of image congruence between projected and reflected organizational images.

The concepts of organizational adaptive instability, from public affairs research, and mutability, from new institutionalism research, were found to be important to urban district leaders. The officers all mentioned, in one way or another, the need to effectively respond to organizational challenges by sharing information with internal and external stakeholders and focusing the resulting motivation on long-term improvement efforts.

The public affairs concept of organizational reputation was clearly apparent in the comments of urban district officers. The new institutional concept of organizational accountability for

effectiveness and efficiency was the most dominant theme related to reputation. The new institutional concept of legitimacy was not mentioned as much more than the occasional concern about the public's perception about the most appropriate expenditure of funds. In two of the districts, officers linked the urban district's reputation to issues of race, socio-economic status, and demographics and suggested that the reputation of an urban district was ultimately limited by these factors. Implications of this study include the need some form of a well developed strategic plan with a communications component that focuses on projecting the image of district improvement over time.

A final strong implication of this study is that districts need professional communications expertise to effectively manage the communications functions needed in the intense media environment found in most urban settings today. The process of establishing and maintaining a positive reputation in urban school districts needs further study from the perspective of district employees, parents, and a variety of community stakeholders.

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APPENDIX

Thematic Code

Code	Theme	Definition
RB	Reputation Building	Creating a positive, upward trend in reputation.
RB-PI	Projected Image	Image of the organization communicated by management to insiders and outsiders
RB-CI	Corporate Identity	Consistent, targeted representations of the organization; corporate symbols, communication strategies, and media
MR	Media Relations	Tactics/activities designed to promote a favorable relationship with media
MPI	Media Projected Image	The role of the media in establishing the public's image of the organization
ECS	External Communication Strategies	Tactics/activities designed to provide information to community stakeholders
ECS-CES	Community Engagement Strategies	Tactics/activities designed to elicit feedback from community stakeholders
ID	Identity	How employees feel about membership in the organization; degree of loyalty
ID-IC	Image Congruence	Employees' perception of match between projected, construed external, and reflected images
ICS	Internal Communication Strategies	Tactics/activities designed to provide information to employees and internal stakeholders
ICS-EES	Employee Engagement Strategies	Tactics/activities designed to elicit feedback from employees and internal stakeholders
ICS-BC	*Board Communication	Tactics/activities designed to provide information and elicit feedback from board members
OI	Organizational Improvement	Improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency.
OI-AI/M	Adaptive Instability/Mutability	The dynamic tension between identity, image, and reputation that creates the opportunity for change. The way organizations reproduce their core functions within legitimate boundaries while mutating and adapting in order to survive
OI-DFI	Desired Future Image	Visionary perception the organization would like external others and internal members to have
OI-SE	Structural Elaboration	Building organizational capacity
R	Reputation	Relatively stable, long-term, collective judgments of an organization by outsiders
R-L	Legitimacy	Being in accordance with established or accepted patterns and standards
R-Acct	Accountability	Public's perceptions of organizational efficiency and effectiveness (control of technical core)
R-ED	Environmental Dependence	Reliance on public trust and financial support in order to sustain the organization into the future

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