



**The School District *of* Haverford Township**

## **Communications Audit Report**

**Prepared by**

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**June 2019**

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# Introduction

## Background and Goal of the Communications Audit

The School District of Haverford Township is a high-achieving school district in Delaware County. It is sought after by families that want a high-quality education for their children. The district's enrollment, currently at about 6,500 students, is growing as new families are moving into the district. The district is also seeing increased enrollment as families that had previously chosen private/Catholic school are now turning to the School District of Haverford Township. In addition to strong academics, parents routinely cite the strong feeling of community that a multi-generational, close-knit, walkable township like Haverford provides as one of the district's strengths.

The research conducted for this audit shows that communication is a growth area for all parts of the school district. While parents and employees speak highly of the district, many offered suggestions for improvements. Haverford employs a communications coordinator who is responsible for updating the website, filming board meetings and school events for broadcast on the district's cable access TV channel, and providing some communication from district office as directed. Many of the gaps identified in this audit require a systemic change in operations and communication patterns and protocols, rather than simply tasking one person with the job of pushing out (or bringing in) more information.

Superintendent Dr. Maureen Reusche contacted Communications Consultant Beth Trapani regarding communications support in fall, 2018. She expressed a desire to gather information about areas in which the district may be able to improve communications, a need for her office to be communicating more proactively, and a need for crisis communications support.

A proposal for a full communications audit was approved by the school board in November 2018. Focus groups with staff, students, parents, and community members were conducted in February and March 2019, and a communications survey was distributed electronically to each of those stakeholder groups (with the exception of students, who had recently been surveyed about other issues) in March/April 2019. Haverford's Communications Coordinator Anna Deacon was instrumental in supporting the survey and audit process.

The audit also included a brief review of existing communication vehicles, including school newsletters, email announcements, and the website.

### **The goals of this audit were to:**

- **Seek data, opinions and perceptions from all major stakeholder groups.**
- **Determine themes and attitudes with regards to communication.**
- **Propose recommendations for ways in which to improve the effectiveness and management of communications based on gathered data and information.**

The National School Public Relations Association conducts extensive research nationwide and finds a strong correlation between high-achieving school systems and those that intentionally focus on proactive, planned, inclusive communications. As communication in a school district increases, employees, parents and community members tend to feel more informed, involved, and invested. Ultimately, this often leads to higher student outcomes and support for schools.

At the same time, school districts are limited in their resources and must carefully choose how they will leverage their communication time, energy, and dollars. Simple changes and systems can be put in place that cost little money and time, but reap huge payoffs in terms of the ability for audiences to feel informed and have a chance to dialogue with school administrators and school board members. The ensuing communication recommendations work to capitalize on these kinds of changes, focusing on simple/easy solutions and methods as well as more time-intensive and potentially expensive ones.

Most of these recommendations will only be successful if the responsibility for them is shared by the district's administrators, as well as those appointed to assist in the implementation of them.

Finally, it should be noted that when school systems undertake a communications audit, it's assumed they wish to view the system and its work through the perception of others. However, whenever opinions are solicited there can be a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is important because it guides improvement. It's also important to recognize the good work of employees, the positive attributes of the system, and the support of the community. It is obvious from surveys and focus groups that there is a tremendous amount of pride in the School District of Haverford Township, its programs, staff, and students.

"This is a fantastic district," said one focus group participant. "Community is our strength, and there is a lot of pride here. We are often compared to wealthier neighboring districts on the Main Line, but we offer balance and we have a lot of really fantastic programs and other strong attributes. This is a really good place to be."

It's important to recognize the community support the district enjoys, as well as the good things happening and the great work being done by the kind, caring and skilled educators and staff members who work for the School District of Haverford Township.

## **Scope and nature of the study**

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a review of district publications, 12 focus groups, and a total of 2,927 surveys:

- 1,990 **parents** out of a possible 4,267 families responded – 46% response rate;
- 22 **administrators** out of a possible 40 – 55% response rate;
- 330 **teachers** out of a possible 443 – 74% response rate;

- **259 staff members** (anyone working for the district not identified as a teacher or administrator) out of a possible 476 – 54% response rate;
- **326 community members** out of a possible 18,000 - 2% response rate

The focus groups were each approximately an hour to an hour and a half long, conducted in February and March 2018 in the school district by Communications Consultant Beth Trapani (Trapani Communications). Participants were identified by administrators. It was recommended they make an attempt to choose a diverse group instead of only selecting “the usual suspects” – people who are always quick to volunteer, lead initiatives, etc. Groups varied in size from 6 to 25 participants (average size was 20), and they were instructed to speak freely without fear that their comments would be attributed to any one individual. Many participants were very forthcoming and quick to respond with praise, criticism, and suggestions for improvement.

The same basic questions were put forth to each group, such as:

- What is your overall perception of the school district?
- What kinds of communication are working well?
- What could be better?
- Do you feel informed?
- Does anyone solicit your feedback or input?
- Where do you get information about the district and where/how would you like to get information?
- What changes do you think the district could make to better communicate?
- What are your priorities for areas of improvement?

From these questions sprang a lot of facilitated conversation as the group drilled down to specifics on some areas that were clearly important to them. At times, conversations veered into directions that were not germane to communications (e.g. a complaint about the way grading/scheduling is completed, inconsistencies in teaching styles, inconsistencies in activities in schools, etc.) This is a common challenge in school focus groups. As much and as quickly as possible, participants were redirected back to the topic of communications. However, some of the topics explored do overlap with communications (such as the view of parents that the high school should offer more college planning outreach.)

Some notes regarding the focus groups and surveys:

- The response rate to the communication surveys was fairly low, with the exception of the teacher group (75%). Teachers were given dedicated time during faculty meetings to respond to the survey. It’s recommended that the district survey annually to evaluate its communications efforts and any potential changes. Survey participation may increase as the district improves communication and outreach.

- The surveys did not drill down very specifically at each school level. Future surveys can focus on school-specific information if the district chooses to do so. It's recommended that a first-time survey focus more generally on the *district* culture as a whole. However, many survey responses did identify issues at specific schools and levels.
- The high school student focus group was polite and respectful and had several actionable suggestions. The district chose not to survey high school students this year since they had just been surveyed on other topics.
- The open-ended comments at the end of the surveys contain a lot of information and suggestions. It's recommended administrators read these comments. These will not be made part of the public report since some contain sensitive personal information related to personnel and/or students. Many do not pertain directly to communications and instead focus on operations, teaching, programming, management, etc.
- Detailed results of the focus groups and summary of survey comments have been provided to the administration for their careful review.
- Despite any communication challenges, support for the school district is strong, and all groups pointed to the excellent staff, students, and parents, and said they felt proud to be a member of the School District of Haverford Township's school community.

## Guiding Principles for the School District of Haverford Township's Communications Efforts

- 1. *All communication efforts must be tied to the district's goals and objectives.***  
Communication efforts must be driven by the district's overall mission, goals and objectives, and be designed to support teaching and learning. Employees and parents must be given the utmost consideration since they are the keys to increased student achievement.
- 2. *Strategic communication requires research and evaluation to be woven throughout the communication effort.***  
This audit is a starting point. In order to see growth in communications, the district will need to continue to ask employees, parents, and community members for input and involvement into the development and review of new publications, websites, meeting structures, communication plans, etc. Additionally, major communication systems should be evaluated annually, and communication should be a component of the annual evaluations of district administrators and principals.
- 3. *Internal communication must be a priority.***  
No communication effort will be successful if employees feel undervalued, disenfranchised, confused, or uninformed. Staff members have the ability to make or break the image of their school district. Many of them live in the community, and many have close relationships with the district's parents. Employees should be provided with the information, tools, and training to become ambassadors for the district. While they might not agree with all district-level or building-level decisions, if they're well informed and involved in the processes they are more likely to support them or at least not disparage administration and board members for making the decisions.
- 4. *Any communication effort should be viewed from the lens of many different audiences, with an eye on engaging and involving, rather than disenfranchising.***  
The district will enjoy greater support by collaborating with its many different audiences and by thinking specifically about what kinds of information each audience needs and how they can be engaged and involved.
- 5. *The district should work to ensure communication is an integral part of any plans for changes, improvements, etc.***  
Each major initiative, change, etc. should have its own simple communications plan, and that plan should be shared with administrators to ensure that everyone is operating with consistent messages and information, and understand who is responsible for each part of the communication.
- 6. *Technology should be used to support an efficient, timely and effective system of communication.***

The district should continue to work to refine its use of its website, email, texting, message boards, social media, and other means of communicating through technology.

7. ***Communication must be two-way.***

When school districts work to improve communication, they most often focus on getting information out to their audiences, but don't have processes in place to gather information and feedback. While Haverford's employees, parents and community members are seeking more information, they are also looking for ways to have their own opinions heard and valued. It will be important for the district to find ways to do this if it is to gain support and trust from its constituents.

8. ***Good communication practices begin at the top.***

Haverford's administrative teams must embrace and model good communication. Their communication needs to be proactive, thorough, collaborative, inclusive, and transparent. Emails and phone calls must be returned in a prompt fashion, there must be a concerted effort to communicate decisions to all of those affected, and ideally, those affected should be part of the decision-making process whenever possible.

## **Review of Publications**

Numerous newsletters, website updates, and social media posts were reviewed for this audit. Most seemed to be fairly well written, clear, concise, and informative. It's difficult to know without more in-depth research whether the school newsletters are providing the kinds of information that parents want. Several of the school newsletters (listed as the Monday Message) are simply bulleted lists of notes/calendar items. While this simple format is a great way to review important notes/information/calendar items, at times it may be important to put out more detailed information (including photos, expanded stories, etc. for parents such as highlights on programs and projects.) It may also be helpful for schools to include district news in their Monday Messages. Most parents surveyed did say they felt informed about what was happening in their child's school.

In February 2019, the district began publishing a digital, district-wide newsletter called Haverford Happenings. It's recommended this continues and be strategically expanded and strengthened in coming school years.



## Key Findings

Several common themes emerged from the focus group discussions and surveys:

### Overall Communication Strengths

*While this audit primarily contains information about areas in which the district can improve communications, it's important to note there are several strengths from which work can begin and be used as a foundation for growth.*

1. Visitors feel welcome in the schools. There was praise for the district's secretaries and office staff and all groups said they felt the schools are welcoming. School secretaries are the gatekeepers of a building and their jobs tend to be demanding and busy as they are continually shifting gears to answer phone calls, assist staff and students, assist their principal, manage the flow of the building, and greet visitors warmly.
2. Students of different cultures and ethnic groups as well as different learning styles and abilities are warmly embraced by the school district (according to a majority of survey respondents).
3. Parents feel informed about events and activities in their children's schools.
4. Communication from teachers is generally seen as strong.
5. The school superintendent is visible in schools and at district events. Several staff members said they appreciated how she made herself available to staff by holding 'office hours' at each school.
6. There is a great deal of pride among employees, parents, and students about the school district.

## Common Perceptions and/or Concerns

1. Each employee group said that employees would like more involvement and inclusion in decision making. Some also felt that the employees impacted by decisions are not always informed in a timely manner, and that communication about decisions is not always thorough, proactive, or adequate. Employees also said they want to know the *why* behind decisions, when possible.
2. Most employee groups and parent groups felt as though their opinion is not valued or solicited frequently enough by the district.
3. There is a sense among most employee groups that there is a communications divide between the Oakmont Administration building staff and school building staff. Numerous times employees mentioned that they would like to see the administration working more closely as a team.
4. Each employee and parent group felt as though rumors are a significant issue in the school district, and wished there was a way the district could work to control them. Respondents repeatedly mentioned that Facebook is a major source of rumors.
5. Several parents said they would like additional help/information about the college applications process. Many parents and students said they would like the college planning process to begin in earnest in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In general, there was a sense that there is “too little, too late” in terms of assistance with applications, deadlines, necessary tests, course selection directed toward building a transcript for college admissions, and college planning in general. (The high school has increased its parent nights in the last few years, but parents and students will want more.)
6. Across all groups there was a sense of disconnection from the Haverford School Board. Each group said it would like access to a brief summary of what is to be discussed at board meetings, decisions that have been made, etc., rather than having to read through lengthy meeting minutes or try to seek out the information posted on the website.
7. Employees and staff said they’d like to see a protocol to more clearly and effectively communicate policies and procedures.
8. Most employee groups said they would like to receive more information from their supervisors. There is a sense that information they should know (e.g. a schedule change) is not being adequately shared.
9. There is a sense from all groups that each school operates with its own set of rules and culture. While some of this is to be expected, wide variances also create a barrier to a sense of district unity.

10. A large percentage of each group said they are not satisfied with the website redesign, find the website difficult to navigate, and are frustrated that online calendars have errors and inconsistencies.

11. Parents feel the elementaries and PTO's need to work more collaboratively.

## Recommendations

This report contains more recommendations than can be accomplished in a single year. It is recommended that the district identify target areas to address each year and build them into a Strategic Communications Plan.

### **Recommendation 1: Commit to a change in culture with regards to communication.**

Any culture change in a professional organization must originate with leadership. It's recommended that the entire administrative team commit to inclusive, collaborative, transparent communication, and participate jointly in communications training, self-reflection and evaluation. This could begin with a review of this audit so administrators can look for growth areas. No singular person on the team can be responsible for a systemic change, shift, or improvement in communications. It must be shared by all of the district's administrators. "*How will we communicate about this?*" should become a question administrators ask regularly of themselves and each other.

### **Recommendation 2: Improve and strengthen internal communication.**

Employees who are involved in decision making, who are informed, and who feel valued, function more effectively and are more supportive of their district's efforts. The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to communicate about a decision or issue, it's essential the communication process begins with staff.

Suggestions for action include:

#### **a. Make a greater attempt to involve employees in decisions that impact them.**

Morale often hinges on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. Administrators can solicit their input via committees, surveys, focus groups, etc. earlier in the decision-making process. It's important to explain to staff that not every decision can be made with staff input. However, decisions that will have a significant impact on staff should include employee input whenever possible. It's suggested that administrators discuss this and work together to find ways to involve employees in decision-making processes. Administrators can also look to other high-performing school districts for examples of staff collaboration models.

When administrators are considering new initiatives, it's important to prepare a simple communications plan to involve and communicate with staff about the decision, its timeline, etc. While gathering input may slightly extend decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in efficacy and morale.

It's important to note that research shows that many school administrators unknowingly under-communicate. Because they are so intimately involved with their decisions and processes, there's the tendency to assume that if they've talked about an important change or initiative once or twice, or sent out a memo, that people have 'heard.' Research also shows it takes multiple communications for someone to truly absorb a message. Many employees, including teachers, are so laser focused on their classroom work and the details of their own responsibilities (interfacing with students, parents, etc.) that they sometimes 'miss' some of the district-wide news.

- b. **Ensure meeting minutes/summaries/handouts are kept for all staff/faculty meetings, and more directly communicate where these summaries can be located online.** In multiple focus group sessions, staff said that if they missed a meeting, they might miss critical information and there was really no way to obtain it. Several suggested that each meeting be followed up with a handout/email summarizing what was covered. Some administrators do maintain minutes, but it's not clear that all do. Some employees said they are not included in staff meetings and feel 'out of the loop' because of it. When critical meetings are held, a summary of key decisions/information should be sent to all staff.

- c. **Examine/clarify the purpose of faculty/staff meetings and involve employees in agenda development.**

Focus group and survey comments showed there's some disagreement/confusion around the purpose of faculty/staff meetings and whether these meeting should or should not be used to share 'housekeeping' information. Teachers said they felt an inordinate amount of time was spent on modeling icebreakers as a classroom tool, rather than other topics for which they wanted more help/collaboration.

- d. **Create a district communication protocol that encourages broader sharing of information, including the creation of fact sheets, summaries, and frequently asked questions.**

Many teachers and staff members said they felt as though people who need to have information are often left without it. The solution is not to share everything with everyone, because this will create information overload. However, a protocol that looks at each change/initiative/communication and analyzes how best to ensure that everyone who might need to know about it does receive it, could help to ensure more thorough communication. The district has already begun creating fact sheets for major topics such as new construction. Simpler versions of these could potentially be helpful for internal issues/changes that may arise, such as a change in schedules, procedures, etc.

- e. **Establish a District Staff Communication Council**

Bring employees of each type (support staff, teaching staff, etc.) together for a minimum of three to four times a year to meet with the superintendent and other district administrators to discuss district initiatives, progress, positives, concerns, etc. This would be an excellent opportunity to open the flow of communication between district office and the schools. Minutes from these meetings should be shared with the entire staff shortly after the

meetings. It's important that other administrators are included since one of the main concerns from staff is that administrators aren't informed and don't communicate.

- f. Enhance the use of small teacher committees for a number of specific matters.** Teachers who serve on these committees can interface regularly with administrators and bring topic-specific concerns to them as well as help them to build rapport with staff.
- g. Implement a district-wide internal newsletter/memo (consider a biweekly or monthly simple format – simply bullets, etc.) that includes information about curricular changes, events, activities, issues, etc. in the schools as well as district-wide issues (e.g. new Raptor system, etc.)**
- h. Post a list of district office staff members (potentially with photos) on the internal website along with job descriptions (a 'who to go to') so that staff can more easily get a sense of who district office administrators and staff are, what they're responsible for, and what they can address.**
- i. Consider surveying all staff (in addition to teachers who are already surveyed) to find out where they feel they need additional training.** There's a sense that staff would appreciate more training on any number of systems and protocols. This concern was mentioned numerous times in focus groups and surveys by teachers and staff. Teachers felt similarly about some things, as well. Again, a staff/teacher professional development committee could potentially help to address this.
- j. Use a detailed, monthly calendar review protocol for administrators to address the feeling from staff that information comes to them late and is sometimes disorganized.**
- k. Strengthen communication among the administrative team both at the district office level and in the schools.** Just as cabinet-level administrators meet weekly, it's important for schools with multiple administrators to meet at least once a week to determine who is covering calendar items and have a plan for each. In addition, it's important to discuss communication with staff.
- l. Implement a new procedure in schools that ensures staff and teachers receive the same communication that goes home to parents (regarding non-routine matters).** Whenever possible, internal staff should receive information first and be informed so they know what's happening *before* the information is disseminated to parents. Emergencies are the exception (in this case all groups can be notified simultaneously with email/text.) Several teachers/staff say that students and parents know about things before they do.
- m. Work with custodial, food service, and support staff to better strengthen communication and involvement in decision-making.** Increase efforts to include them in staff meetings. Administrators should meet with these groups on a regular basis to solicit their input and

feedback and talk with them about how best to support them in their work and ensure they are receiving adequate information. Share feedback from this report with all supervisors.

- n. Ensure that maintenance staff are included in notifications about building lock-downs so they don't attempt to come to a building during an incident.** Develop a procedure to ensure that principals are working with facilities director/maintenance staff to notify them about these incidents.
- o. Encourage employee feedback/suggestions**  
Develop additional ways – electronically or on paper – that employees can make suggestions for improvements at the building and district level. Additionally, consider offering employees a chance to ask about rumors they hear, then offer administrators a chance to address them.
- p. Establish an employee recognition program**  
Identifying and recognizing employee accomplishments and achievements can be an important part of continuing to create positive culture and communications.

**Recommendation 3: Work to address the feeling of disenfranchisement from the support staff, custodial staff, cafeteria staff, and others.**

Suggestions for action include:

- a. Establish regular meetings with the superintendent's administrative team and union leadership to address issues.**
- b. Ensure superintendent meets regularly with support staff to discuss concerns, initiatives, etc.**
- c. Discuss concerns/issues with the administrative team and create protocols to address/improve concerns.**
- d. Recognize support staff by profiling them in "A Day in the Life" feature in district newsletters (internal and external).**
- e. Recognize support staff during annual "Support Staff Appreciation" day (similar to "Teacher Appreciation Week").**
- f. Ensure support staff are included in all school communications. Brainstorm ways to get around the fact that many staff don't have access to email throughout the day. Explore whether information can be shared via text.**

**Recommendation 4: Increase parity and consistency in communication from school to school to create a stronger sense of district unity.**

Suggestions for action include:

- a. Provide training and protocols for principals and administrators with regards to communication. Allow principals to collaborate on communication best practices.
- b. Bring principals together to meet with InterDistrict Council (PTO Presidents) to discuss emergent issues.

**Recommendation 5: Develop a district-wide communications plan that includes a crisis communications component.**

It's recommended that Haverford develop a communications plan that is simple, clear, and updated annually. Any plan should include timelines and staff members responsible for completion. This communications audit provides a foundation for developing such a plan.

Also, developing a crisis communications plan as a part of this process gives administrators a chance to think through potential scenarios and establish and review protocol with staff.

Parents and staff noted several times in focus groups and surveys that communication during 'crisis' points tend to be lacking. It will be important for the district to recognize that what it considers a crisis may not be the same thing that resonates as a crisis for staff and parents.

**Recommendation 6: Create a standard practice to establish a communications plan for each significant district initiative or key issue as it arises.**

It's recommended the district develop a communications plan for key issues. Each plan should incorporate answers to the following:

1. Who needs to know?
2. What do they need to know?
3. When do they need to know?
4. How will we tell them?
5. What do we want them to do with the information they receive?

Key Messages and Frequently Asked Questions should be developed for each issue. Both can be distributed to staff members and parents, so they fully understand the reasoning and timeline for initiatives.

**Recommendation 7: Provide communications training to administrators and other staff members.**

Communication training would help the administrative council to operate with the same guiding sense of communication guidelines, and would give them a chance to discuss emerging communication issues.



**Recommendation 8: Establish consistent communication guidelines and expectations for administrators.**

It was apparent in the focus groups that there seems to be no clear process for internal communication, and information is often shared in an inconsistent and sometimes scattershot manner. Administrators should clearly understand their roles in communicating key information in a timely manner, be given an opportunity to collaborate on communications, and eventually be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. However, they should not be expected to do this in a vacuum and should have support from a communications professional and the opportunity to collaborate with peers. A communications component can be included in administrators' evaluation criteria.

**Recommendation 9: Strengthen communication around K – 12 articulation (sharing information from one level to the next).**

Provide more opportunities for staff at different levels to collaborate and share information.

**Recommendation 10: Establish expectations for communication between teachers and parents**

73% of parents responding to the survey said communication from their child's teachers is proactive and effective. This is a strong response. However, several times in surveys and in focus groups parents noted that there's a wide range of communication from teachers (a common issue in school districts). **It's suggested that administrators work collaboratively with teachers to promote proactive communication with parents throughout the school year.** Perhaps templates can be provided to make classroom-to-home communication simple. (Teachers who already have exemplary communications in place can share examples to be used as templates.)

**Recommendation 11: Explore ways to improve communication regarding the transition from elementary to middle school and middle to high school.**

**Recommendation 12: Expand communication from and with the School Board of Directors and administration.**

Each of the focus groups agreed they'd like a brief summary of school board discussion/action items to be emailed to them. Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Develop fact-sheets about initiatives and changes the Board is considering that include the description, reasoning, timeline, next steps, how to provide feedback, meeting dates, etc.**

- b. Develop a one-page summary of each board meeting to be emailed to staff/parents/community and posted on the website** (allow parents and staff to opt into/out of this communication.)

**Recommendation 13: Strengthen outreach to the Haverford community.**

Like most school districts, Haverford struggles to find ways to reach its community members who don't have children in the school district. In surveys, 75% of community members said they'd like to see a quarterly newsletter from the school district, summarizing major decisions and initiatives, and highlighting positive stories about the district. Distribution may be a challenge, but perhaps the district can partner with the Township to achieve this. It's also suggested that they partner more closely with the library and other community centers where people gather.

It is not recommended that the district print a paper newsletter and mail it to each home. This becomes expensive and the news that's printed quickly becomes outdated. It can also be a labor-intensive endeavor.

**Recommendation 14: Reevaluate the job duties of the district's Communications Coordinator.**

It's recommended the Superintendent work with the Communications Coordinator to ensure that her time is being spent in ways that help support and address some of the issues brought forth in this audit. It's recommended a job description be jointly developed that best seems to best match the district's communications goals/needs. Currently it appears that more time should be spent focusing on written communication as opposed to videotaping events for the district's TV station, since it doesn't appear to have strong viewership.

**Recommendation 15: Address concerns from students/parents that they aren't receiving enough assistance on college planning/financial aid.**

Survey and focus group participants (both parents and students) said they'd like additional help and would appreciate it much earlier in their child's time in high school. Many said counselors are very well intentioned but simply can't keep up with the volume of students who need assistance. Other local high-performing school districts may have models/templates that Haverford can use to help provide additional information to students at an earlier time.

**Recommendation 16: Create a plan to fix H-Vision or develop a new way to deliver information to students.**

Students and teachers at the high school are frustrated that the TV's in their classrooms and cafeteria aren't working, and students miss important announcements as a result.

**Recommendation 17: Evaluate the use of the district's cable access TV channel.**

This may be a useful, untapped source of programming and information. However, it's unclear how many community members/parents watch it, or would watch it, if additional programming is added. It's recommended that additional research be used to identify whether this is a potential growth area or whether it is draining resources that could be directed elsewhere.

**Recommendation 18: Address the inability for the district's PTO's to communicate directly with parents in the schools.**

The "backpack law" (a ruling that states that no information other than district-specific information can go home in backpacks or be distributed to parents, stemming from a lawsuit about the distribution of religious materials) is a serious impediment to communication between the PTO's, schools, and parents. It's recommended the administration and PTO's work together to find solutions such as providing every parent with a link or information to "opt in" to PTO communication since this ruling has significantly stymied communication. It is also recommended that the administration and PTO leadership work together to develop a more clear working relationship and address challenges.

**Recommendation 19: Consider the possibility of adding a district Facebook page that does not allow comments.**

Parents, teachers, and staff said Facebook is a source of many rumors and negative information about the school district. Currently, the ever-evolving social media landscape shows people 30 and older (parent demographic) primarily use Facebook rather than Instagram or Twitter. In an effort to combat some of the negativity associated with Facebook posts, and provide accurate information, the district could open a Facebook page that does not allow comments and is simply an opportunity to post information. This recommendation would need thorough discussion by administration. Many districts successfully exist without a social media presence and rely solely on email/texting.

**Recommendation 20: Evaluate the district's use of tools to notify parents about bus delays.**

Numerous parents said that Twitter is their only timely way to receive information about bus delays. Perhaps one of the district's communication systems allows for text notification.

**Recommendation 21: Improve use of a unified calendar for the district's website.**

Repeatedly, teachers, parents, and staff said they were frustrated that multiple calendars show inconsistencies and errors. Many requested a unified calendar that could warehouse information for each school. This topic deserves evaluation and attention.

## Summary

The Haverford School District is filled with passionate, talented educators and other staff members who care very deeply about their students and education. Employees, parents, students, and community members take great pride in the district's academic reputation, and appreciate the sense of community that exists in the district.

At the time of this audit, it appears that the biggest communication gap in the district exists among employees who feel they are not as involved as they'd like to be in most decision making processes, and at times feel disenfranchised and devalued as a result of a perceived lack of communication. There appears to be an understanding by employees that some decisions must be made without staff input, however there is a sense that staff/teacher perspective is not frequently enough considered or included. In addition, staff and teachers say they often feel uninformed about a lot of the reasoning behind decisions.

Roughly 50% or fewer of all faculty and staff members feel they have a sense of a clear direction from district office with regards to goals, initiatives, and procedures. About the same amount feel informed about what's happening in the district and/or their school. Clearly, there is a need for improved and increased internal communication.

Parent numbers are much stronger, with a general sense that parents do feel informed but have identified areas of weakness such as the district's website re-design, a need for additional college planning assistance, and an improved working relationship with the elementary schools' PTO's.

All internal and external audiences said rumors are a significant distraction in the district. Rumors often occur when there's a lack of solid information about things the school community is talking about or cares about. If the district can begin communicating more proactively with its audiences, it's entirely possible that people will begin to turn to the district as an official source of information, rather than social media.

Communication is the backbone of any organization and sets the tone and direction for initiatives and daily operations. By simply taking time to briefly plan communication for each change or initiative, as well as tighten up daily communication structures, the district will find itself communicating more inclusively and in a timelier manner. Every staff member must contribute to communication improvements, but certainly the change must be led by administrators. And, every segment of the staff must be included in communication, so everyone feels informed and valued.

Some simple, effective communication improvements could certainly help each segment of the district's audiences feel more included and informed. In today's educational environment, strong communication is a necessity. It's one critical way to make an already excellent school district even stronger and more effective.

## Appendix 1 - Summaries of Surveys

### Key Assumptions used for the analysis:

- Areas with 70% or more agreeing to a statement was considered a strength.
- Areas with less than 50% disagreeing with a statement were areas considered a focus for improvement (areas of concern).
- Areas with 50% to 69% agreeing with a statement, but also included approximately 20% to 30% responding as neutral were considered areas to watch.

### **Administrator Survey Summary**

22 administrators out of a possible 40 – 55% response rate

#### Areas of Strength – 70% or more agreeing to a statement

1. Our district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information I should know. (73%)
2. Our schools do a good job of communicating important information. (73%)
3. My supervisor clearly and effectively communicates information that I should know to adequately do my job. (77%)
4. My supervisor is receptive to issues or challenges I may face and works to find a resolution. (91%)
5. I am pleased with the level of communication from the superintendent. (72%)
6. Our district embraces students and families of all cultures and ethnic groups. (75%)
7. Our district embraces students of all learning styles and abilities. (73%)
8. I am pleased with the district's website re-design. (72%)
9. I find the website to be a useful source of information. (77%)
10. I feel confident and hopeful about the direction the school district is heading. (86%)
11. I'm proud to be an employee of the district. (90%)

#### Areas of Concern – 50% or fewer agreeing to the statement

1. Administrators attempt to include input from staff when making major decisions. (50% agree, 23% neutral)
2. There is a good degree of parity/consistency between schools at the same level (45% agree, 26% neutral)

#### Areas to Watch - 50% to 69% agreeing to a statement but 20% or more as neutral

1. I feel as though there is clear direction from district office with regards to goals, initiatives, and procedures. (64% agree, 23% neutral)
2. I feel as though policies and procedures are clearly communicated. (64% agree, 23% neutral)
3. My opinion as an employee is valued. (60% agree, 18% neutral)

4. I believe visitors (parents, guardians, etc.) feel welcome in our buildings. (60% agree, 27% neutral)
5. Rumors in the district are a distraction and I'd like the district to find a way to better manage this issue. (60% agree, 32% neutral)
6. Each of our schools operates with its own sets of rules/guidelines and may not necessarily connect with the rest of the district. (60% agree, 36% neutral)

The most effective way to deliver information to me is:

1. Email (21%)
2. Text message (15%)
3. Staff meeting (7%)

The place I am most likely to go for information about our district:

1. Email (11%)
2. Supervisor/Principal (9%)
3. Other staff members (8%) and Website (8%)

I would like more information about:

1. Our administration's plans for the district – tied with:
2. Positive things happening in other schools across the district
3. District finances – tied with:
4. Professional development opportunities

I would like more direct communication from the school board (81%) and the school district (84%) in the form of meeting summaries, and/or quarterly newsletters discussing initiative, programs, news, etc.

## **Teacher Survey Summary**

*330 people responded to the survey out of a possible 443 = 74% response rate*

Teachers were given time to complete the survey during a faculty meeting. This likely increased participation.

Areas of Strength – 70% or more agreeing to a statement

1. I believe visitors feel welcome in our building. (74%)
2. Our school district embraces students and families of all cultures and ethnic groups. (81%)
3. Our school district embraces students of all learning styles and abilities. (83%)
4. I am proud to be a teacher in the district. (89%)

Areas of Concern – Fewer than 50% agreeing to the statement

1. My school clearly and effectively communicates information. (47% agree)

2. I feel as though administrators attempt to include input from staff when making major decisions. (31% agree)
3. I feel as though policies and procedures are clearly communicated. (40% agree)
4. I know who to go to with questions/concerns in the district. (62% agree)
5. I feel each of our schools operates with its own set of rules/guidelines and may not necessarily connect with the rest of the district. (71% agree – in this case, a negative.) and I feel there is a good deal of parity/consistency between schools at the same level. (15%)
6. I am pleased with the district’s website re-design. (38% agree, 39% neutral)

Areas to Watch - 50% to 69% agreeing to a statement but 20% or more disagreeing

1. My supervisor clearly and effectively communicates information that I should know to adequately do my job. (53% agree, 19% neutral)
2. I feel as though there is a clear direction from the district office with regards to goals, initiatives, and procedures. (52% agree, 20% neutral)
3. Our district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information I should know. (63% agree)
4. I am pleased with the level of communication from the superintendent. (65%)
5. I find the website to be a useful source of information. (55%)
6. Rumors in the district are a distraction, and I’d like the district to find a way to better manage them. (52%)
7. I feel confident and hopeful about the direction the district is heading. (58%)

The place I am most likely to go to for information:

1. Other staff members (37%)
2. Email
3. Supervisor/Principal
4. Website

The most effective way to deliver information to me is:

1. Email
2. Staff Meeting
3. Text Message

In would like more information about:

1. Decisions about daily operations
2. Professional development opportunities
3. Positive things happening in other schools
4. Academic progress of our students
5. School Board decisions

I would like more direct communication from the school board (82%) and the school district (62%) in the form of meeting summaries, and/or quarterly newsletters discussing initiative, programs, news, etc.

### Themes from Teacher Survey Comments

- Administrative staff doesn't seem to work together collaboratively; It feels like it's Oakmont versus the buildings and there's a disconnect between the two.
- There are a number of inconsistencies in procedures, protocols, and the answers received from administrators.
- There's a lack of team work.
- Teachers would like to have more input and involvement in decision making.
- Teachers would like more support from administrators with regard to student discipline.

## **Staff Survey Summary**

*259 people responded to the survey out of a possible 476 – 54% response rate*

*Areas of Strength* – 70% or more agreeing to a statement

1. I believe visitors feel welcome in our building(s). (79%)
2. The school district embraces students and families of all cultures and ethnic groups. (78%)
3. Our district embraces students of all learning styles and abilities. (83%)
4. I am proud to work in the school district. (79%)

*Areas of Concern* – Fewer than 50% agreeing to the statement

1. I feel my opinion as an employee is valued. (43%)
2. I feel as though there is a clear direction from district office with regards to goals, initiatives, and procedures. (44% agree, 29% neutral)
3. Administrators attempt to include input from staff when making major decisions. (26% agree, 33% neutral)
4. Policies and procedures are clearly communicated. (46%)
5. I feel there is a good deal of parity/consistency between schools at the same level. (27% agree, 51% neutral)

*Areas to Watch* - 50% to 69% agreeing to a statement but 20% or more disagreeing

1. Our district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information that I should know. (59%)
2. The school/building here I work tries to communicate effectively. (59%)



3. My supervisor is receptive to issues or challenges I may have and works to find a resolution. (63%)
4. My immediate supervisor clearly and effectively communicates information I should know to adequately do my job. (68%)
5. I know who to go to with questions/concerns. (57%)
6. I'm pleased with the level of communication from the superintendent. (54%)
7. I feel as though my position is valued by our school community. (55%)
8. Each of our schools operates with its own set of rules/guidelines. (50%)
9. I'm pleased with the district's website redesign. (50%)
10. I feel the website is a source of useful information. (62%)
11. I feel rumors are a distraction and I'd like the district to find a way to better manage this. (62% agree, 33% neutral)
12. I feel confident and hopeful about the direction of the district. (60%)

The most effective way to deliver information to me is:

1. Email
2. Text message
3. Staff meeting
4. Paper in mailbox

The places I am most likely to go to get information about our school district:

1. Other staff
2. Supervisor/principal
3. Email
4. Website

I would like more direct communication from the school board (74%) in the form of meeting summaries, and/or quarterly newsletters.

I'd like a staff newsletter summarizing important issues, changes, etc. (83%)

I would like to have more information about the following:

1. Our administration's plan for the district.
2. Decisions about daily operations.
3. Positive things happening in other schools across the district.
4. School board decisions.
5. Professional development opportunities.

Themes from Staff Survey Comments

- Rumors are a consistent problem
- There's a lack of teamwork
- Staff aren't respected
- Staff would like more involvement and input

## **Parents Communication Survey Summary**

1,990 people responded to the survey out of a possible 4,267 – 46% response rate

### Areas of Strength – 70% or more agreeing to a statement

1. Our district clearly and effectively communicates information I should know. (79%)
2. I feel informed about what's happening in my child's school. (86%)
3. I feel my child's school communicates information that I need to know in a timely manner. (85%)
4. Communication from teachers about my child's progress is proactive and effective (73%)
5. I feel welcomed in my child's school. (87%)
6. Parents/teacher conferences are well organized and useful. (74%)
7. School policies and procedures are clearly communicated. (73%)
8. Our district embraces students of all learning styles and abilities. (71%)
9. I feel confident and hopeful about the direction our district is heading. (73%)
10. I'm proud to be a parent in this district. (86%)

### Areas of Concern – Fewer than 50% agreeing to the statement

1. I am pleased with the school district's website re-design. (44% agree, 40% neutral)
2. I feel there is a good deal of parity/consistency between schools at the same level within the district. (38% agree, 51% neutral)

### Areas to Watch - 50% to 69% agreeing to a statement

1. I feel my opinion as a parent/guardian is valued. (65% agree, 26% neutral)
2. I know who to go to with questions/concerns in the district. (65% agree, 19% neutral)
3. I would like more time for parent/teacher conferences. (37% agree, 44% neutral)
4. I find the website to be a useful source of information. (68% agree, 19% neutral)
5. Our school district embraces students and families of all cultures and ethnic groups. (68% agree, 25% neutral)
6. I feel satisfied with the support my child has received with planning for the next building level or college transition. (64% agree, 41% neutral)
7. I feel as though I receive enough communication from our school superintendent. (51% agree, 32% neutral)

### The most effective way to deliver information to me is:

1. Email
2. Paper sent home
3. Text messages
4. Website

### I would like to have more information about the following:

1. Information about how to better help my child academically.

2. Academic progress of my child.
3. Happenings in my child's school.
4. Our administration's plan for the district.
5. School board decisions.

In rank order with 1 being the first, indicate the place you are most likely to go for information about the school/school district:

1. Email
2. Website
3. My child
4. Other parents
5. Social media

#### Themes from Parent Survey Comments

- Parents would appreciate increased and earlier college planning assistance. (6 comments)
- Website difficult to navigate; Online calendar isn't updated/consistent (52 comments)
- District expects parents to 'know' what many events/activities are about, and how the system is navigated
- Parents would like increased communication from School Board.
- District should be more parent-friendly with regards to offering evening conferences, putting out calendars earlier for class parties/special events
- Parents would like more teachers to be more proactive in communicating their child's academic progress if he/she is struggling
- Parents would like improved communication from transportation department regarding late buses, bus accidents, etc.
- Several parents (36) indicated the student-led parent/teacher conferences at the middle school present a variety of challenges and don't give them an opportunity to talk with teachers without their children present.

### **Community Members Communication Survey Summary**

326 people responded to the survey. 234 people (72%) indicated they had children or grandchildren attending the schools. 92 (28%) indicated they did not have children attending the schools. There are approximately ----- taxpayers in the school district and numerous other community members. This survey response represents about \_\_\_% of that population.

The survey was posted on the district's website and emailed to our township commissioners, state representatives, the local Rotary Club, the district's education foundation embers, and the township recreation department. Printed fliers were placed at the library, Community Recreation and Environmental Center, township building, Oakmont Administration building

(main office and Board room) and the tax preparation office at Oakmont (free tax service to seniors). It was also posted on the district's social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram.

Areas of Strength – 70% or more agreeing to a statement

1. I believe the quality of our school district impacts my property value. (91%)
2. I am proud to be a resident/community member in the district. (81%)

Areas of Concern - Fewer than 50% agreeing to the statement

NONE

Areas to Watch - 50% to 69% agreeing to a statement but 20% or more disagreeing

1. The district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information that I should know. (53%)
2. I feel confident and hopeful about the direction in which the district is heading. (59% agree, 28% neutral)

I would like more information about student achievement, student success stories, and activities and events in the district that I could attend. (75%)

I would like to see a quarterly newsletter from the school district, summarizing major decisions and initiatives, and highlighting positive stories. (75%)

In rank order, would like to have more information about the following:

1. Our administration's plan for the district.
2. School board decisions.
3. Events open to the community
4. Budget decisions
5. Academic progress of students
6. Sports schedules
7. Student success stories

In rank order with 1 being the first, indicate the place you are most likely to go for information about the school/school district:

1. Website
2. Email
3. Students
4. School newsletter
5. Social Media
6. Newspapers
7. Staff Members

8. Other residents
9. Board meetings/minutes

In rank order with 1 being the first, indicate how you would most like to **get** information about the district.

1. Website
2. Email
3. Paper mail in box
4. School Board meeting or minutes
5. School newsletter
6. Social Media
7. Newspaper

Themes from Community Survey Comments

- Website is difficult to navigate
- Community would like to see a district-wide newsletter
- District assumes that parents have been through the system and know what events and activities are about, etc.

## **Trapani Communications**

### **Beth Trapani – Credentials/Background**

Beth Trapani is a school communications consultant who works with districts and schools around the region, helping them to better reach and interact with their many audiences. Her focus is on helping school districts build support, internally and externally, to strengthen their systems and provide increased opportunities for schools and their students to succeed.

Beth provides support to numerous school districts around the Greater Philadelphia region, and works with the Chester and Delaware County Intermediate Units to offer training and support for school administrators. She also provides training for Penn's Graduate School of Education's School Study Councils and the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. She is routinely contacted by superintendents to help manage change processes, pressing issues, and crisis situations, as well as to support their daily efforts to proactively improve communications.

For years Beth was one of the Delaware Valley's most familiar voices and faces in her role as a morning anchor and reporter for KYW radio, KYW CBS-3, and UPN-57 TV News in Philadelphia. She spent the first part of her career as a print and broadcast journalist, working at newspaper and radio stations across Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh's KDKA and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. She graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon University.

After leaving news, Beth transitioned to work in a Philadelphia public relations firm, using her media skills to help corporations such as Temple University Health System, the Kimmel Center, and Comcast, focusing primarily on crisis communications. She's been working with schools for the last 15 years.

Her services include:

1. Support and guidance during crisis situations: developing communication strategies, shaping messages, communicating internally with staff and externally with parents and the community, and dealing with the media.
2. Working with and teaching administrators to manage change, implement new initiatives, engage the community, and communicate both good and bad news.
3. Training and mentoring administrators and other staff on a variety of communications topics.
4. Communications audits and needs assessments to determine communication strengths, weaknesses, and areas for growth.
5. Development of communications plans that align with the district's comprehensive plan.
6. Writing/editing key documents and speeches for websites, newsletters, etc.
7. Helping administrators to explain and disseminate complex issues such as test scores and budget data.
8. Media coaching and training to help staff deal with the press.
9. Video storytelling and packaging.
10. Development of transition plans for incoming superintendents.

A client list and more information are available at: [www.TrapaniCommunications.com](http://www.TrapaniCommunications.com)