



COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT REPORT

**Sun Prairie Area School District
Sun Prairie, Wisconsin**

October 2021

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INTRODUCTION

The Sun Prairie Area School District has earned a reputation as a very high-performing and well-run school district that continues to improve. With this last point in mind, the district recently engaged in a strategic planning process that is used throughout the district in its day-to-day work.

The district is currently working with an interim strategic plan. The plan, which is prominently displayed on the district website (<https://www.sunprairieschools.org/district/strategic-plan>), includes three pillars: Core Purpose; Safety and Basic Needs of Students, Staff, and Families; and Effective Operations.

In addition, the district promotes its vision and mission. The district's vision is to be "Recognized as a high performing district of choice that reflects the cultures of our diverse community." The district's mission is to "Inspire and prepare every child, every day, by providing relevant, engaging and innovative learning experiences in and out of the classroom."

Aligned with the district's vision and mission are four goals. Among these is a Community Engagement Goal, which is to "Excel in how we serve all stakeholders and build relationships with families, community members, and businesses that promote positive outcomes for students."

The Sun Prairie Area School District leans on these items: they are more than just talking points. Over the course of many conversations with district administrators and board members, these items emerge as foundational to the district. Therefore, in keeping with this, this audit document uses the district's vision, mission, and goals (especially the goal related to engagement) as the lens through which this work is done.

Of particular note is the district's use of the phrase "reflects the cultures," which is included in the district's vision and in its goal to serve "*all* stakeholders" (emphasis added).

The district's leaders are focused on taking the district from being "extremely good" to "truly great." These ongoing improvement efforts reflect the commitment to continually raise the bar for both the academic success of its students and other facets of the district, including its communications and engagement efforts. Moreover, in keeping with the district's engagement goal, the Sun Prairie Area School District is committed to improving communication with its diverse stakeholders.

Toward this end, the district has engaged the assistance of the Donovan Group, a communications firm that works with schools and school districts to conduct district communications audits and to create communications plans. Joe Donovan, the firm's founder, wrote this draft.

The goal of the communications audit, for which this is the report, is two-fold: to evaluate stakeholder data via a review of existing survey data and new data; and to assess the effectiveness and management of district communication and engagement efforts.

The Sun Prairie Area School District has a solid communication program in place, which is based on good public relations practice and employs a variety of communication tools to reach stakeholders. Moreover, as detailed later in this report, the Sun Prairie Area School District is the rare district that

does not have obvious communications deficits or challenges, or areas where notable corrections in processes, professional development, or communications culture need to be made.

Therefore, the recommendations included in this report largely focus on continuing what is already working and on making some tweaks to improve communications in accordance with the district's vision, mission, and engagement goal.

SCOPE AND NATURE OF THE STUDY

This report has been created through analysis of best practices and of data collected via a series of surveys. Central to the work in developing this audit is the author's focus on the district's communications efforts beyond those stakeholders who are most engaged with the district.

Finally, while we are interested in all facets of district communications, the focus of this audit report is primarily the district-level communications and high-level communications that take place at the school level. However, if there were school- or classroom-level opportunities or challenges that were observed, they are noted and acknowledged in this report.

PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

The audit process began with a meeting with people at the district level who are mostly responsible for district-level communications: the superintendent, and the district's communications director. Over the course of several meetings and follow-up phone calls and emails, the district's communications practices and tools were reviewed.

Beyond that, the author experienced the district's communications efforts in real-time as staff worked to inform and engage stakeholders about day-to-day items in the district, about various change efforts under way, and about some minor crisis situations in the district.

The author used two sources of survey data for this audit. The main source was data that had been collected via previous surveys using a methodologically appropriate approach. The second source of data was a survey that was done in which members of the district's communication planning committee were asked a series of district-level communication questions. The results of this survey is provided in the addendum.

As a result, this communications audit can serve as the foundation of a revised strategic communications plan. The facts and perceptions outlined here will form the basis of strategies for improving communications management and for enhancing two-way communication between the school district and its internal and external stakeholders. The audit's findings will inform staff and the board about community attitudes and the effectiveness of current communications efforts, providing a framework for the district's future communications. It also offers benchmarks against which to measure future progress.

ASSUMPTIONS

Due to the nature of soliciting opinions from a group at large, caution should be taken in reviewing this report. In particular, the reader is advised that respondents tend to focus on areas of concern they perceive as detrimental, rather than recognizing areas of improvement. Therefore, audits can often seem negative in tone, as respondents look to the survey as an outlet for discussing concerns.

It is assumed that the school district aims to improve its public relations and communications programs through assessing its work from the eye of the community and is comfortable in being informed about the community's perceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report contains recommendations for improving communications with the district's internal and external stakeholders. The aim of the recommendations is to provide leaders of Sun Prairie Area School District with intentions of continuing the district's efforts to maintain and improve communications. Recommendations are based on strategies and techniques that have proven to be effective in similar school systems around the country.

ANONYMITY

Responses from survey respondents were collected anonymously, which was noted in invitations urging stakeholders to participate in the survey. As such, results from each group's survey are reported in aggregate form. This was particularly important for smaller populations, such as district staff, where the identity of specific respondents could be more easily determined.

LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

The district attempted to maximize the number of responses. However, in all surveys, data was not gathered using scientific sampling methods; nor were any community or staff members required to participate. Given the natural limitations of survey data, it is assumed that individuals did not take the survey more than once, though this cannot be confirmed. Moreover, as the survey data is based on a convenience sample, no statistical analysis has been carried out that requires a scientific sample. The descriptive analysis provides insight to assist in clarifying data.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

It should be noted here that communications audits tend to focus on areas of deficit and where improvements should be made. Therefore, as the authors of many communications audits, we find it is usually the case that despite deficits, there are areas where the district excels. Our concern is often that the challenges laid bare in the audit process leave the reader to believe that the district's communications efforts are inadequate.

The fact is that in this district, we did not see significant issues that require wholesale changes to the way that communication is done in the district. The district has a very robust communications plan. It was created as a two-year plan that expires this year, but the plan was not created by the Donovan Group, and the author has no connection to that plan or the process used to create it. So, it is as a neutral third party that we report the plan was done exceptionally well and is an outstanding document. However, what the author finds to be truly exceptional is that the plan has been carried out to the letter despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

We applaud the district for not only its commitment to communication but also for the processes that have been put in place to ensure communication is carried out at a high level.

As noted, the district has a robust and orderly communications plan (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1W4qNT7Ot4TG0FZp-Tsep9KS-lpolody26w1mj9-l3XE/edit>) that is overseen by a competent and knowledgeable senior-level communications professional. In addition, the superintendent and the board president are both highly capable communicators, and there appears to be a great deal of trust between the board and the administrative team, including the communications staff.

There also appears to be a strong culture of communication in the district. To be sure, communication is not an afterthought, but rather is top of mind for district staff, and the communications plan is based on a solid foundation of communication best practices. In crisis situations, the district has focused on ensuring that solid information is provided and, moreover, provided in a timely manner. The district also recognizes that it has an obligation to engage and to be transparent, and when crisis situations have arisen, this obligation has been met.

If the district were not as focused on its equity efforts, we would have noted some pending changes in the district, most notably the opening of a new high school. Both situations require a thoughtful approach.

The opening of a new high school requires a tremendous amount of communication to the students, parents, and staff at the new high school, as well as to the rest of the district community. Furthermore, efforts must be made to ensure that district traditions and norms continue at the new school. Similarly, increasing student enrollment requires more communications to new staff members and parents, as well as the need to navigate often difficult community conversations.

While we have engaged the district on both of these items, it seems the district is already handling them well. Therefore, these items are not central to this audit.

SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION EFFORTS

To paint a more complete image of the district, we would now like to review some specific communications-related efforts.

Image and Branding

The Sun Prairie School District has a simple and elegant logo as its main identity. The image, which includes the sun and three people with their arms in the air (with one person wearing a square mortarboard hat), is used throughout the district and is placed on signage, letterheads, district documents, and the district website. Different versions of the same logo are used to maintain the district's identity. While the district also uses school logos and school-level identity on all of its school sites, the use of the district logo is incarnated on school-related items in a thoughtful and consistent way.

The use of the district's logo, color scheme, and other style-guide items are highly consistent. Indeed, the author is not aware of any districts that use branding better than the Sun Prairie School District.

Staff E-Newsletter (Internal Communication)

The district uses a "staff first philosophy," meaning that in most cases, district-level communications are sent to staff first in an effort to ensure that internal stakeholders such as staff are engaged. This is a good process and one that we applaud.

In terms of specific communication with staff, the district uses a well-formatted staff e-newsletter that is sent out all year long. This newsletter is emailed to every staff member at 2:00 p.m. every Sunday via Constant Contact. The district has a remarkable 77% open rate. Overall, feedback from staff about the newsletter is that it is very good, though some staff say that it can get too long.

It should be noted that the district has a solid process for the creation of this newsletter, asking district directors to submit information via a Google Template. Communications department staff then use this content to create the newsletter.

Emergency Response Communication (Internal and External)

The district uses Blackboard as its emergency response system. The system allows for mass notification via text, email, and recorded voice calls. This tool can be used in a crisis situation. The district maintains up-to-date information so that parents update their student enrollment at the beginning of the year. Parents also indicate how they want to be alerted.

School-Level Newsletters (External)

The district also has a printed newsletter that is sent to the entire community in July and again in fall to correspond with back-to-school communications. In addition, the district mails to the community an annual report that speaks to the district's strategic plan and the corresponding pillars of the plan and shows progress toward meeting those goals. In all cases, the district uses a 16-page full-color magazine format.

The district has 14 schools, and the district's communications director is in regular contact with the school-level staff, including principals, who are responsible for large-scale school-level communications. All of the schools have newsletters and all use Smore for announcements, which has been working well in general.

As part of her work, the district's communications manager conducts an annual audit of school-level communications in every school. She does this by meeting with every principal about the ways in which the school communicates with the community. The schools and district use PeachJar, a tool that allows for the easy sharing of flyers.

School and District Websites (Internal and External)

The cornerstone of the district's communications is its website. The site, which is relatively new to the district, was the result of nine months of work and was created using a robust process. The website, which runs on the FinalSite content management system, is extremely robust and uses the school district's branding throughout.

The author spent more than an hour scanning the site looking for dead links, bad copy, incorrect headers, and misspellings. None was found.

The district's communications manager has a sound process for working with school-level site managers and does regular check-ins to ensure proper updates of the website and social media posts. The district uses the tool SiteImprove to monitor broken lines and misspellings.

The district is making efforts to get some of the most critical items translated into various languages, but there is no specific process for determining what should be translated. As a result, translation can feel random.

Social Media (External)

The district has a robust social media effort and regularly posts information at the district and school levels.

CAPACITY

The district's communications office includes two communications professionals: a Communications and Engagement Officer and a new position, a Multimedia and Website Strategist. The Communications and Engagement Officer is a manager-level position and participates as a member of the cabinet. Now in her sixth year in the role, most of the district's communications procedures and processes have been created with her guidance. The communications officer and superintendent have weekly check-in meetings.

SURVEY REVIEW

In reviewing the district's communications efforts, we reviewed some recent and historical survey data to get a sense of key stakeholders' opinions on the district's communications efforts. Since 2018, the district has conducted staff and parent surveys that have included some communications questions.

Of particular note, the parent surveys have included this question: *How effective is the District's website in providing timely and meaningful information?*

Over the years, the data has shifted very little over the years.

Starting in 2018, the mean weighted score was measured, with "4" being "Very effective"; "3" being "Somewhat effective"; "2" being "Not very effective"; "1" being "Very ineffective"; and "0" being "No opinion."

The following are the weighted average by years and each year's standard deviation:

2018	Average Response: 3.48 (s=1.13)
2019	Average Response: 3.72 (s=1.06)
2020	Average Response: 3.98 (s=0.93)

2021 Average Response: 3.63 (s=1.13)

Similarly, since 2018, the district has conducted a parent survey that included communications-focused questions. Of note here, the district has presented the following statement to parents since 2018: *The District clearly communicates with me about important issues.*

Responses were weighted on a five-point scale, with “4” being “Very effective”; “3” being “Somewhat effective”; “2” being “Not very effective”; “1” being “Very ineffective”; and “0” being “No opinion.”

2018 Average Response: 3.55 (s=1.14)

2019 Average Response: 3.62 (s=1.09)

2020 Average Response: 3.97 (s=0.91)

2021 Average Response: 3.38 (s=1.2)

In both sets of longitudinal data, we find the averages and standard deviations highly static over time. While both sets of data trended down in 2021, the turbulence of the pandemic would likely have an influence, and additional data will determine whether the 2021 data is therefore an anomaly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reviewing survey data and the district’s day-to-day communication work, we view the Sun Prairie Area School District as not having the kind of significant communications deficits we tend to see in many districts. In nearly every case, even districts with exceedingly high-functioning communications tend to have one or two facets of their communications efforts that can be improved. These deficits are generally made clear in the communications survey, and corresponding gaps are generally seen in the district’s communications approach.

The simple fact is that we did not see these challenges in the district. By and large, stakeholders are very pleased with the district and, in some cases, extremely pleased. However, we are quick to note that the Sun Prairie Area School District holds itself to a higher standard than other districts, so recommendations are appropriate within this context.

While the district performs well on all traditional measures of communications success, the district is focused on its equity efforts and in ensuring that the needs of every child are met. The same “all means all” ethos applies to the district’s communications, and this ethos is reflected in our recommendations below.

1) Engage the entire school community

In keeping with the district’s strategic plan and its efforts to fully engage the entire district community, the district is obligated to increase its communications efforts to better meet the needs of all of its students. With that in mind, we suggest the following.

Upwardly revise expectations: First, the communications team and the district must change the expectations they have for the types of communications that are being employed by the district. From this point forward, effective communication is defined as only that which reaches the *entire*

district community, including those families that may be the most difficult to reach due to barriers created through language challenges and financial insecurity.

In this way, the district has decided not to rest on its laurels of having excellent school communications and will double down on making further improvements.

Upwardly revise the communications plan: Part of changing expectations involves revising the district's communications plan by building on what is working. It is important to note here that as part of the communications planning effort, the committee will map the district's stakeholders. Based on this stakeholder list, specific efforts will be outlined.

2) Use more data

The Sun Prairie Area School District uses data for improvement efforts, including for communication. However, to align with the district's new communications plan, new longitudinal data should be collected and used to measure improvement.

3) Cement and scale

We must not forget that the district already has an extremely good communication effort, and the goal to continuously improve should not shroud that success. This is especially relevant, as the district will be opening a new high school. Therefore, it is very important for the communications staff to "cement and scale." By this, we mean that the current communications process should be cemented by committing staff to a set of processes and procedures. In addition, current working processes should be scaled up to account both for the increases in student enrollment and the opening of the new high school.

4) Create a communications "users guide"

As the district increases its equity-focused communications, we suggest the creation of a communications user guide for both staff and parents. This guide simply notes what will be communicated and when and how. It can be posted on the communications page of the district website and can be updated annually and translated into multiple languages.

5) Recognize the quality of the district's communications efforts and "do no harm"

By every measure of this audit, the district does an outstanding job of engaging its stakeholders. However, change can happen quickly in districts. Therefore, it is important to take stock of all the district does well in relation to communications and ensure the tenets of the district's current communications efforts continue.

We believe these provide an exceptionally good communication foundation that was likely created years ago and that serves as the basis for the day-to-day communications the district now uses. The ongoing communications plan being used by the communications director is exceptional.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the district's communications efforts as an asset that should be protected. While the district should seek to improve its communications efforts, just as it does in all other facets of its work, it must do no harm and protect what is currently working well.

6) Avoid "layering" to improve communication

We find that districts with outstanding communications programs experience a ceiling effect when it comes to communications. There is a desire to continue improving, but such improvements often result in less and less discernible progress. As a result, there is often a desire to provide more communication—to continue adding more and more communications to an already robust effort.

This “layering” effort results in doing more with little to show. Over time, adding increasing layers to a good communications plan will result in a weakening of the overall effort. This should be avoided.

7) Continue seeking ways to engage the 80 percent

In most school districts, a full 75 to 80 percent of community members do not have children in the schools and therefore often have very little connection to the schools or the district. However, we continue to remind ourselves that the stakeholder groups that we, as a committee, identified included non-parents. In fact, non-parents are critically important to the schools, and we suggest developing the further engagement of this group.

Based on the number of non-parents who participated in the survey, it would seem the district does a good job of engaging non-parents. However, we suggest seeking to build relationships with this group.

Specifically, the district should continue seeking ways to engage non-parents and those who do not have a natural connection to the schools. This is the one area in which improvements can be made.

ADDENDUM: COMMITTEE SURVEY DATA

As part of the district’s communications planning effort, committee members were asked to take a brief survey about the district’s communications. A total of 8 committee members took the survey. This information from the survey was used in this audit. The following is a review of the survey results.

On a scale of 1 to 10, please rate the Sun Prairie School District’s communications with “1” being the worst possible and “10” being the best possible?

The average response was 8.3, with a high rating of 9 and a low rating of 6.

Next, committee members were asked, “Considering the school district’s communications, what needs to be improved?” The following are all of the responses:

- I think that our district does well in discovering information, but it is rarely dispatched successfully. We need to focus on finding ways to quickly and efficiently communicate with others. Additionally, finding ways to not just hand out the information but make it useful for others.
- Communications out to families and communities where technology isn’t super available.
- Consistency, transparency, more languages utilized.
- I don’t think we need as much sent home in big brochures. Seems excessive. Just send an email.
- We need to engage in some more two-way communication, which should really start at the site level and work its way up. I would love to see some type of base-level expectation for

each site level (down to teachers). There is a lot of inconsistency across sites. The school newsletters are great but are often very passive and include a lot of the same information month to month.

- More advanced notice for meetings, events etc. Communication send in more than one form and consistently consistently. Currently some are Facebook others via email.
- We need more positive, proactive communication. Many times communication is reactive and behind the curve on an already occurring situation. We need messaging that reaches all families, not just the ones already tuned in. I know that's a big ask, but you're asking? If that means more forms of social media, not being afraid to send paper home sometimes, more in person touch points, or more? We need better two-way communication. What are the pathways for the district to receive feedback from the community? Some of the negativity and frustration I hear is from people who don't feel heard or who feel powerless to impact issues they feel strongly about.

Next, committee members were asked: Considering the school district's communications, what does the district do well that should be continued? The following are all of the responses:

- I think that the district does well on discovering and putting out there that they have discovered something. If something bad happens, they can quickly get out that it happened, even if the details are lacking.
- One thing that I think the district does very well is getting news out on time. Every time there is an incident in a school, the communications for that come out relatively fast.
- The referendum and boundary taskforce emails and web content were well done.
- I like the facebook posts.
- The district does a great job getting general information out to the public so that they are informed about major happenings in the district. I also think the positive postings and messages on social media are great.
- They are responsive to questions. Some schools have helpful newsletters that help provide the important info in one place.
- Keep posting positive messages on Facebook, keep having schools send home monthly newsletters, keep holding community task forces when working through big changes, keep improving collaboration with the Parent Leadership Council, keep sending text messages.

Finally, respondents were asked: Please use the space below to leave any additional comments. The following are all of the responses:

- What tools are used for translating our communications?
- As the district continues to grow, I know that communications get harder on the district level and I believe that it is important to utilize all the avenues we can to get information out to people.
- Communication is varied among the sources/topic which at times can be frustrating.
- There are some issues of negativity and lacking trust between the community and the school district, I'm very glad that you are doing this audit and giving us a frank place to give that critique so we can help make improvements. The school district is doing a lot of great things that people aren't hearing about, don't be afraid to pat yourself on the back more publicly

about the things that go well? Link more tightly with your parent organizations and we'll do some of that for you too.