



A Chester County
Intermediate Unit

REPORT



Downingtown Area School District: Communications Audit

Presented to
Executive Leadership

March 30, 2022



DOWNINGTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT: COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Downingtown Area School District (DASD), one of the largest school districts in Chester County and in the state of Pennsylvania, offers some of the top schools, not only in the state but in the nation as well. Much of the district's success has come from a strong focus on academic excellence and an ongoing commitment to the district's mission: The mission of the Downingtown Area School District, proud of our tradition of excellence, is to educate all students to meet the challenges of a global society by providing an individually responsive learning environment characterized by outstanding academic and personal achievements in partnership with family, students, and community.

In the past decade, DASD has seen substantial growth in the district and an ever evolving diverse population. This in turn, has created increased parent and community expectations when it comes to district communication. A communication audit and review of the DASD brand seeks to identify the gaps that may exist and identify steps to re-establish the tight-knit culture of the district.

Toward this goal, DASD approached the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) to facilitate a communications audit with a focus on the next step's in DASD's strategic communication plan.

AUDIT OBJECTIVES

The Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) is uniquely qualified to assist Downingtown Area School District (DASD) in the development and operational implementation of a branded communication plan. As a leader in school communications, and as a shared member of the Pennsylvania Public School System, the Chester County Intermediate Unit staff is innately aware of the challenges facing our public school districts and communication strategies that are needed to build trust and relationships within our community, to inform our stakeholders of the increasing challenges facing public education, and to celebrate the success and achievements of our programs, our students and our educators.

The CCIU's approach to assisting DASD centers on completion of a comprehensive communications audit. Through the audit and this associated audit report, CCIU aims to meet the following objectives:

1. Provide a comprehensive assessment of current communication efforts and the effectiveness of the overall program;



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2. Create a snapshot of current perceptions about DASD schools and the district;
3. Identify gaps in the DASD communication strategy; and,
4. Provide baseline research to evaluate progress and develop a framework for creating a strategic communication plan.

OVERALL INSIGHTS

Throughout the audit, it became clear that Downingtown Area School District is doing the work necessary to lay the groundwork to achieving knowledge, attitude, behavior and outcome ideals established by Cabinet at the beginning of the process (see Appendix). A key contributor to this is its commitment to communication.

The past two years have been exceptionally challenging, as COVID-19 tested even the most seasoned communication professionals. It is a testament to the District's commitment to transparent communication that it undertook an audit during the pandemic. As with any communication audit, the findings must be analyzed with consideration for internal and external factors affecting outcomes. The changing nature of the pandemic made it difficult at times for school and communication officials nationwide to provide clear and concise information in a timely fashion. Therefore, it cannot be underestimated the impact of the external factors on the perception of District communications.

With that said, the impact of the pandemic, and the social and political unrest, have altered stakeholder expectations of district communications for the foreseeable future. There is an even stronger desire for transparency, responsiveness, engagement and overall community as heard in not only DASD focus groups, but also seen in published articles and research. DASD has been able to navigate the changing landscape with outstanding outcomes. Overall satisfaction with communication among families and the community, as measured by the School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCoPE) survey, meets the national average and overall perception of the district based on communication also meets or exceeds the national average. Keeping in mind that the majority of the national average was defined through surveys taken place prior to the pandemic, this is a noteworthy result.

The District overall has done an excellent job managing a multi-faceted program that must continually balance rapid crisis response needs with substantive, informational and timely ongoing communication with a very wide and diverse audience. DASD has a well-developed and strong communication program that is based in sound communication principles and carries through from the superintendent and director of communications to staff across the district, each playing an integral role in the District's communication efforts.



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Overall, DASD desires an active, collaborative environment that brings together internal and external stakeholders in a trusting, respectful, positive manner to best serve the diverse needs of all students and collectively celebrate in the successes of each individual. The ability to achieve this ideal begins with the District's clear and compelling mission statement, a centralized message that all stakeholder groups were found to agree with and strongly support.

Add in the willingness and desire of district stakeholders to partner with the District, a great deal of pride in the District and a staff that is recognized by students and families as truly invested, caring professionals, and DASD has a foundation it can truly continue to build upon.

DASD, like many school districts and organizations, needs to continue to evolve its communications to an even higher strategic level to leverage communication goals that achieve the District's overall vision. DASD communications will need to take a leadership position in actively driving messaging and engagement, both internally and externally, that can unify the community and continue to prioritize the success of its students.

Clarity in direction will serve as the backbone for the development of an associated strategic communication plan that articulates communication strategies and tactics, centered around measurable outcomes, that will guide DASD closer to all its communication ideals.

KEY FINDINGS

Communication Strengths

1. Overwhelming support of and agreement with the District's mission statement;
2. Strong sense of pride in the District among internal and external stakeholders;
3. Willingness and desire among stakeholders to partner with DASD in order to keep families and the community informed;
4. Strong, compassionate staff that genuinely care about students and consistently put their needs first;
5. Students feel administrators and teachers are reliable, approachable, trustworthy and student focused;
6. Strong levels of trust by family and staff in the communication they receive from their school buildings;
7. High satisfaction among staff with communication in regards to supporting student achievement;



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8. High family satisfaction on how well informed they are on student progress and district crises;
9. Community's overall perception of the district based on communication exceeds the national average;
10. Consistent visual branding across all District communications;
11. All stakeholders indicated that District communications are easy to understand;
12. Familiarity and utilization of multiple communication channels and tactics to reach a diverse set of stakeholder groups.

Opportunities for Growth

1. There exists among all audiences very encouraging levels of pride in the district and agreement on the strength of the district's mission; however, the path forward of the district, based on its size and growth, may not always be clear, unified and mission-focused across all district communicators.
2. The community is experiencing ongoing growth of population and diversity, which means a continued growth in the number of voices and perspectives. It appears that the community itself is challenged with this and is looking to the district to help serve as a model for bringing the community together, allowing everyone to feel recognized and heard.
3. While stakeholders acknowledged relying on multiple channels of communication from the district, there was a common feeling among all stakeholders of being overwhelmed, confused and frustrated about navigating all these channels. Stakeholders expressed the desire to create clear expectations about how various channels would be utilized to convey information in a simple and timely manner.

OUTLINE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the overall findings from the strategic review (page 22) and functional review (page 27) of current DASD communications, six core areas of recommendation are proposed for consideration to strengthen DASD communications and to better support the District's mission and vision. Each of the six recommendations focuses on a specific area of communication that will strengthen the overall strategic foundation of DASD's community. **The steps and associated timelines for completion of some actions may require multiple years, additional resources, and a concerted ongoing effort.**



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Foundational Recommendations:

1. Align district communications with the district's mission statement.
2. Engage in strategic internal communication efforts.
3. Strengthen DASD brand.
4. Engage stakeholders through a focus on collaborative communities.
5. Expand strategic community engagement efforts.
6. Streamline and target communication.

Detailed tactics for each recommendation are contained in the next section (Page 8).



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STRATEGIC REVIEW

Good communication strategy looks at all tiers of the target audience continuum – what they know about the organization (Knowledge), how they feel about the organization (Attitude), how they interact with the organization (Behavior), and ultimately what outcomes develop as a result of their engagement with the organization (Outcomes) – and identifies the best strategies for moving audiences further along the continuum in the desired direction from not existing to ideal.

Through initial interviews with DASD Cabinet, ideals (i.e. where DASD desires its audiences to be) in the areas of knowledge, attitude, behavior and outcomes were defined and, through the process of the audit, the current position of stakeholders in relation to the ideals became clearer. The following strategic review presents the communication ideals as identified by central administration along with the findings of the audit regarding how closely to the ideal current communication efforts are perceived by stakeholders.

KNOWLEDGE OVERALL

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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Ideals:

1. All Downtown Area School District (DASD) stakeholders are well versed on the initiatives, experiences and events happening in the district.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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2. DASD parents and students understand the expectations that exist for them as members of the DASD community and know where to go to get information about the district.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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3. DASD parents, students and community members understand the unique geography, history and diversity that make Downtown such a desirable place to live and learn.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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4. All DASD stakeholders are familiar with and participate in redefining how the district approaches individualized excellence for each student throughout their entire education in the district.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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5. DASD is comprised of caring, dedicated educators who seek the best outcomes for each student and are invested in their individualized success.

Not Existing			X	Ideal
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Current:

From both the focus groups and surveys, it was apparent that all stakeholder groups have a deep routed pride in Downingtown and believe strongly in the mission of the district. Some of the top descriptors of the district as indicated in the survey, were “excellent,” “caring” and “inclusive” from the families and “community” and “excellent/excellence” from the community. Families spoke to the dedication of the teachers, and students communicated a strong feeling of support from their administrators, counselors and teachers. Families and the community feel communication is open and transparent as seen in scores of 3.0 and above in the survey; however, knowing where to go when a question arises is significantly less at the district level than at the teacher or building level. This tends to speak to the sheer size of the district, which all stakeholders, including staff, identified as “large.” Communication across all buildings and stakeholders in the district becomes stretched leading to scores indicating needed improvement in communicating district and school events, district successes and achievements, leadership decisions and district goals and plans. Overall, there is a strong desire to be a part of DASD, but ongoing partnerships with and across stakeholders are needed to deliver upon the collaborative ideal as informed by the mission.

ATTITUDE OVERALL

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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Ideals:

1. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) is transparent, timely in its communications and parents, staff and the community trust the district as a source of valid information.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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2. DASD promotes rigor, engagement and agency for each student in a manner that is best suited towards their individual needs and promotes their holistic well-being.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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3. DASD parents and students have a positive experience and feel a sense of pride during their time in the district.

Not Existing			X	Ideal
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4. DASD is an inclusive, empathetic community that works with families to promote holistic safety for all students and families in the community.

Not Existing		X		Ideal
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Current:

DASD, as noted in its mission statement, is proud of its “tradition of excellence” and has placed a lot of time and attention on what that means for its students and families. This focus is a main point of pride for DASD students, families and community and has helped drive the overall perception of the district at or above the national averages among these audiences. District leadership has recognized the need for continuing to expand the definition of “excellence” to include a more holistic, individualized view incorporating wellness, safety and belonging. Staff, student and parent focus groups indicate seeing a clear movement toward a more individually focused approach but agree that the district is not there yet. Tools and resources are being put in place and a more collaborative approach has been initiated. Families and staff are feeling very well informed on student progress and how best to support student learning as indicated in scores at or well above the national averages in these areas. To continue moving forward toward the ideal, it will require ongoing communication and outreach with a strong effort to maintain and further grow the positive perceptions of the district in transparency, timeliness and trust.

BEHAVIOR

Not Existing		X		Ideal
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Ideals:

1. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) parents and staff serve as positive brand ambassadors of DASD and can respond to community dissent by calling attention to the good things happening in the district.

Not Existing		X		Ideal
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2. The community trusts the district as a core source of information and is willing to wait for the district to respond to situations before raising grievances across social media.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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3. DASD families are engaged, invested and proactive in making the district a better place to live and learn.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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4. The community and DASD engage in active, respectful and kind interactions as all parties seek to steer a course in the best interest of students.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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5. DASD families and staff respect organizational policies and procedures and are empowered to work together to solve problems before these issues escalate.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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Current:

Downingtown has always been a strong community, but the district continues to grow and has seen an increase in divisiveness over the past couple years that is challenging the tight-knit community culture. Focus group participants indicated the divisiveness has raised some concerns around trust; however, one participant stated, "Downingtown did a great job with what they could do in handling social media through contentious times. They stepped in while staying true to their morals and what they stand for." The outcomes of district actions have led to retention of a strong level of trust in communication from the schools and the district across all stakeholder groups as seen in survey scores close to or matching national averages. The desire to reach many of the ideals stated will need to continue to center around the students and the successes of the district as a whole. While there appears to be a desire by parents and staff to partner with the district in this capacity, they do not appear to be as equipped as they could be at this time. All stakeholder groups indicated not being well informed about district successes and achievements, and staff, in particular, felt they are not informed enough to serve as an ambassador for the district. Staff are core members of the community and the survey indicated that with the 251 staff members who completed the survey that they collectively have the ability to have close to 3,000 interactions with parents and community each week. The district will need to work with the staff to build upon the strong relationships staff have with families in order to continue to move toward the desired ideals.



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OUTCOMES OVERALL

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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Ideals:

1. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) families are informed and engaged with the district and one another to proactively address issues or share positive experiences.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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2. The community culture surrounding DASD is one of inclusion, positivity, respect, trust and shared success.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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3. DASD achieves improved student outcomes by working with parents and staff to redefine success in terms of individualized goals and accomplishments tailored for each student.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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4. DASD is recognized by outside groups and people as being committed to positive student outcomes and an outstanding place to live and learn.

Not Existing		X	Ideal
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Current:

As previously mentioned, there was strong evidence expressed in the focus groups around the pride held by all audiences in the strength of DASD and the opportunities it provides to its students. There is an appreciation for the efforts the district is making surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, and the student focus group mentioned they feel the district cares about its students and tries to do what is best for them. Families feel well informed in areas directly impacting their students (learning, progress, crisis); however, they do not feel as well informed in areas pertaining to the broader district such as events, achievements, goals and plans, leadership decisions and finances. Similarly, families are significantly more confident in knowing who to go to at the school building level than at the district with any questions, complaints or concerns they may have. This gap in awareness and knowledge can lead to a more siloed and disjointed district community. Focus groups, specifically among staff and families, indicated a desire for increased two-way communication across the district and survey results indicated a desire for the district to more readily communicate the value of input and opinions received by these same audiences. Overall, outcomes can be further improved with more intentional partnerships with staff, families and the community.



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FUNCTIONAL REVIEW

For a more functional review of Downingtown Area School District's (DASD) current communication materials and practices, the National School Public Relations Association's (NSPRA) Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures were utilized to provide a standardized, benchmarked approach to assessment. NSPRA's tool was developed specifically for school communication and is quite extensive, but as a focus for this audit, specific areas in alignment with the Ideals and with the SCoPE survey results have been pulled from within four of the designated Critical Function Areas. Each of these areas have been deemed by NSPRA as necessary areas of focus for any educational communications program.

Critical Function Area 1: Comprehensive Professional Communication Program

This critical function area focuses on the core of the communication function within an organization; assessing how well it aligns with organizational goals and whether communications are positioned as systematic, transparent, two-way and comprehensive.

Best Practices	Emerging	Established	Exemplary
1. Maximizing Communication with Trained Leadership at the Executive Level			X
2. Managing Communication through RACE – Research, Analyze, Communicate, Evaluate		X	
3. Communication Effectiveness Embedded Across District & Building Operations		X	
4. Effectively Engaging Target Audiences Through Social Media			X
5. Effective Finance Communications	X		
6. Supporting Constituent Involvement/Engagement Through Communication		X	
7. Advancing Identity/Brand of School District			X

Summary: The strength of district communications comes from its position within the district, and DASD has recognized its importance and has positioned communications as an essential role within the district leadership team. This has allowed for centralized oversight of messaging and branding which creates consistency as information flows from central office to the buildings and to the end consumers. However, to more proactively align communications with district goals and help drive messages and initiatives within the district, the development of a formal



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communication plan and communication framework for dissemination of information is needed. Doing so will ensure more consistency in messaging across DASD communicators and increase awareness in multiple areas, including, most distinctly, finances. DASD needs to continue to engage audiences via multiple platforms but incorporate more two-way opportunities and structural mechanisms for community input and feedback in order to further improve overall effectiveness and feeling of transparency.

Critical Function Area 2: Internal Communications

This critical function area recognizes the value of employees in serving as extensions of the organization's brand and focuses heavily on ensuring employees have the information and resources they need to represent the brand in a positive way.

Best Practices	Emerging	Established	Exemplary
1. Researching & Understanding Employee Needs, Expectations, Opinions, Attitudes & Knowledge Levels		X	
2. Employee Engagement		X	
3. Employee Alignment with the School District's Vision, Mission and Goals			X
4. Leadership and Management Communications		X	
5. Managing Information Overload		X	
6. Employee Ambassadors	X		
7. Communicating with Employees During a Crisis		X	

Summary: The survey shows that family relationships with DASD are strongest at the school building level, so it is imperative that staff are prepared to be the strongest ambassadors of the district brand. As a starting point, DASD staff believe strongly in the mission of the district and indicated a desire to serve as partners in communication, but they require clarification of their roles in the communication process and more access to information to help them better serve as district ambassadors. This would include sharing rationale behind district decisions and being more intentional with the timing of communications to enable staff the opportunity to be better positioned to answer parent questions. Understanding that staff relationships are frequently built within the buildings, it is not surprising that staff feel their input, opinions and involvement are more welcomed and valued within their buildings than by the district. Incorporating



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opportunities for feedback and two-way communication can further establish staff as key communication resources for the district moving forward.

Critical Function Area 3: Parent/Family Communications

This critical function area acknowledges the importance of parent/family engagement and relationships in student outcomes and satisfaction with the district.

Best Practices	Emerging	Established	Exemplary
1. Researching and Understanding Parent/Family Needs, Expectations, Opinions, Attitudes, Knowledge Levels			X
2. Deploying Multiple, Varied and Targeted Communication Strategies, Including Accommodations for Diversity			X
3. Communicating with Parents/Families on Student Progress/Success			X
4. Communicating Academic Programs and Expectations with Parents/Families; Communicating Extra- and Co-Curricular Offerings and Requirements with Parents/Families		X	
5. Communicating School and District Goals, Plans, Programs, Finances and Issues with Parents/Families		X	
6. Supporting Parent-Teacher and Parent-Building Communications		X	
7. Involving Parents/Families in Decision-making to Support Shared Responsibility		X	

Summary: DASD values communication with their families as evidenced through the use of multiple communication channels and surveys, consistently scheduled home and school association meetings with leadership and the availability of open commenting on social media. With that said, families feel their input is more valued at the school building level rather than by the district, which indicates a need for a more systematic approach to family feedback and related communication of findings and associated actions. As it relates, families do trust communications from the individual school buildings more, which is not out of the norm as trust is typically built with those you interact more directly with, but the district can build stronger



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relationships with families through increased district-wide communications that share more proactively district goals, plans, decisions and events and activities. Additionally, continuing to build upon the diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging efforts will further connect the district with more families.

Critical Function Area 4: Marketing/Branding Your Schools

This critical function area focuses on the branding and positioning of the organization which helps lead to clearer expectations and positive associations with the direction of the organization.

Best Practices	Emerging	Established	Exemplary
1. Developing Your Brand Position, Attributes, Points of Pride, Promise and Traditions			X
2. Defining Brand Experience for Target Audiences		X	
3. Providing standards and guidelines for consistent use of adopted brand assets through a brand standards guide		X	
4. Fostering Brand Ownership and Loyalty Among Staff and Leadership in Their Roles as Ambassadors	X		
5. Measuring/Evaluating Impact of Communication Plan/Branding Initiatives.		X	

Summary: DASD has a defined mission statement that all stakeholders can relate to and agree on. This serves as a strong foundation, but to continue to drive audience expectations of the district and strategically shift audiences in a desired direction, there is a need to define the brand a step further with its position and promise and then actively implement the message into every communication, across all operations. This will help align experiences and provide opportunities for more story-telling both by the district and its ambassadors. Measurement should then be leveraged to tweak and progress the message even further. Although there are many factors that affect brand identity, in general, it takes an organization five to seven years to firmly establish a brand identity.

METHODOLOGY

The Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) employed a variety of qualitative and quantitative data collection measures and assessments throughout the completion of the Downingtown Area School District (DASD) communication audit as outlined below.

1. Interview with DASD Cabinet Leadership

- a. An interview with DASD Cabinet leadership was conducted on September 8, 2021, where the discussion focused on target audiences and associated ideals in the areas of knowledge, attitude, behavior and outcomes. The ideals summary can be found in the Appendix of this report.
 - i. Please note that the gap in time between the initial interview and the remaining forms of data collection was to ensure appropriate focus and attention was given to the mental health audit which was running on a similar initial timeframe.

2. Focus Groups

- a. Sixteen focus groups with eight distinct audiences were scheduled between January 11 – January 27, 2022, with the following stakeholders:
 - i. DASD Board of Directors
 - ii. DASD Administrators/Principals
 - iii. DASD Professional Staff
 - iv. DASD Support Staff
 - v. DASD Parents
 - vi. DASD High School Students
 - vii. DASD Home & School Association Leadership
 - viii. Community Members
- b. In addition, an email address (DASDCommAudit@cciu.org) was provided to all focus group participants as a method to provide follow up communication.
- c. All focus groups revolved around questions pertaining to knowledge, attitude, behavior and outcomes in alignment with the leadership-identified ideals. Results of the focus groups were summarized based on emerging themes and can be found in the Appendix of this report.

3. Surveys

- a. Three distinct surveys were opened on January 31, 2022 – one to all DASD staff, one to current DASD parents/families and one to the DASD community.
- b. All three surveys were facilitated by the School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCoPE) national educational survey organization and again focused within the areas of knowledge, attitude, behavior and outcomes.

- c. Upon closing of the survey on February 14, 2022, the final completed responses collected were as follows:

Group	Total Possible Respondents	# Collected	Margin-of-Error (95% Confidence Interval)
Internal Staff	1,800	205	+/- 6.6%
Parents	13,000	1,390	+/- 2.5%
Community	72,000	126	+/- 8.9%

- d. Summary of final survey responses can be found in the Appendix of this report.

4. Communication Materials Analysis

- a. CCIU communications staff reviewed and assessed a selection of communication materials provided by DASD including: COVID-19 communications, crisis email communications, presentations, brochures, Board updates, campaign materials and videos.
- b. Materials were reviewed based on a rubric that looked at the following criteria:
 - i. Organization – Is the information presented in a logical manner?
 - ii. Content – Is the content clear, understandable and free of proofing errors?
 - iii. Audience – Is it clear who the intended audience is?
 - iv. Call to Action – Is the desired takeaway or call to action clear?
 - v. Engagement – Is there an opportunity provided for two-way communication?
 - vi. Big Picture – Is the content connected to a bigger, overarching message or direction?
 - vii. Medium – Does the chosen medium effectively communicate the content?
 - viii. Visuals – Are the eyes drawn to the most important information first?
 - ix. Brand Identity – Is the DASD brand identity clearly visible and consistent?
 - x. Inclusivity – Do the visuals reflect a culturally inclusive environment?

5. Social Media Analysis

- a. CCIU communications staff reviewed and assessed DASD's existing Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts through a two-part process.
 - i. The first step was reviewing every account identified for number of followers, number of accounts following, number of posts over the past month, date of last post and whether comments were enabled.
 - ii. The second step was drilling down further into a selection of social media accounts to analyze the following criteria:
 1. Branding – How does the account profile represent the DASD brand?
 2. Frequency – What is the frequency and consistency of posting?
 3. Messaging Mix – What is the current range of content topics?
 4. Visual Mix – How much variation exists in types of visuals utilized?

5. Engagement Levels – What is the average level of likes/comments/shares from account followers?
6. Responsiveness – How well are follower comments addressed?

APPENDIX

ABOUT CCIU COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT TEAM

Mary Jeanne Curley, Division Director, CCIU Communications & Learning Solutions

Ms. Mary Jeanne Curley has been employed by the Chester County Intermediate Unit since 1986. As the director of communications and learning solutions, Ms. Curley oversees the division, which includes all communications and legislative-related functions of the CCIU. In addition, she serves as the executive director of the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association (PenSPRA) and is a member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Chapter Leaders. She has a bachelor of arts degree in English literature from St. Joseph's University and a master of arts degree in Communication Studies and Leadership from West Chester University. Ms. Curley has also served as Public Relations Committee Chair on the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, and as such she meets with her counterparts from throughout the state and is able to get a firm understanding of the issues and challenges facing intermediate units throughout the commonwealth.

Melissa J. Smith, Assistant Division Director, CCIU Communications & Learning Solutions

Mrs. Melissa J. Smith is an impactful, creative marketing professional with over 20 years of local, national and global experience spanning industries such as manufacturing, financial services, pharmaceutical and education. She thrives on developing brand positioning and messaging and delivering upon the goals and objectives of those she works with. The perspectives and experience gained from her more than 12 years in the advertising agency environment has transitioned well into driving branding and strategic marketing in the educational space. Mrs. Smith has been with the CCIU since 2015 and has played an active role in the refresh of marketing and communications across the organization. Mrs. Smith has a bachelor's degree in marketing and management from LaSalle University and a master of business administration (MBA) from West Chester University. Mrs. Smith has presented on branding at local and national communication conferences and has led multiple branding workshops within the CCIU and with school districts.

Tonia Farnum, Communications Manager

Ms. Tonia Farnum has nearly 25 years of experience in communications and public relations, serving as the communications manager for the Chester County Intermediate Unit. She has daily oversight of media relations, website management, social media, and duplication and mailroom operations. Her career includes an award-winning design career as well as communications, event planning, project management and public relations experience. Ms. Farnum studied Human Performance Management at Immaculata University, earning a bachelor's degree with highest honors in 2010. She served as Board secretary for CCRES Educational and Behavioral Health Services in Downingtown from 2004-2019 and is a member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association (PenSPRA).

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IDEALS



Knowledge (What we want our audiences to know about DASD)

Ideals:

6. All Downingtown Area School District (DASD) stakeholders are well versed on the initiatives, experiences and events happening in the district.
7. DASD parents and students understand the expectations that exist for them as members of the DASD community and know where to go to get information about the district.
8. DASD parents, students and community members understand the unique geography, history and diversity that make Downingtown such a desirable place to live and learn.
9. All DASD stakeholders are familiar with and participate in redefining how the district approaches individualized excellence for each student throughout their entire education in the district.
10. DASD is comprised of caring, dedicated educators who seek the best outcomes for each student and are invested in their individualized success.



Attitudes (What we want our audiences to think and feel about DASD)

Ideals:

5. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) is transparent, timely in its communications and parents, staff and the community trust the district as a source of valid information.
6. DASD promotes rigor, engagement and agency for each student in a manner that is best suited towards their individual needs and promotes their holistic well-being.
7. DASD parents and students have a positive experience and feel a sense of pride during their time in the district.
8. DASD is an inclusive, empathetic community that works with families to promote holistic safety for all students and families in the community.



Behavior (What we want our audiences to do)

Ideals:

6. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) parents and staff serve as positive brand ambassadors of DASD and can respond to community dissent by calling attention to the good things happening in the district.
7. The community trusts the district as a core source of information and is willing to wait for the district to respond to situations before raising grievances across social media.
8. DASD families are engaged, invested and proactive in making the district a better place to live and learn.
9. The community and DASD engage in active, respectful and kind interactions as all parties seek to steer a course in the best interest of students.
10. DASD families and staff respect organizational policies and procedures and are empowered to work together to solve problems before these issues escalate.



Outcomes (Shifts we want to see based on positive audience interaction)

Ideals:

5. Downingtown Area School District (DASD) families are informed and engaged with the district and one another to proactively address issues or share positive experiences.
6. The community culture surrounding DASD is one of inclusion, positivity, respect, trust and shared success.
7. DASD achieves improved student outcomes by working with parents and staff to redefine success in terms of individualized goals and accomplishments tailored for each student.
8. DASD is recognized by outside groups and people as being committed to positive student outcomes and an outstanding place to live and learn.

FOCUS GROUP THEMES

The following is a report of the major themes that emerged from the focus groups conducted to assess the effectiveness of district communications.

Although the following is a summary of key discussion points (and not a verbatim transcript of the dialogue), key phrases and thoughts have been pulled from each focus group in order to highlight the discussion regarding the individual themes that have been generated.

A total of 16 focus groups were scheduled with internal and external stakeholders.

Focus Groups – 8 Unique Groups

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Board of Directors | 4. Support Staff | 7. Home & School |
| 2. Administrators | 5. High School Students | Association Leadership |
| 3. Professional Staff | 6. Parents/Guardians | 8. Community-at-Large |

Based on participant comments and discussion, themes were identified among groups of stakeholders with similar levels of interaction with the district. Four common themes emerged across all the stakeholder groups:

1. Strong sense of pride in the district
2. Strong identification with DASD mission statement
3. Need to streamline communications to reduce information overload
4. Desire for increased two-way communication and partnership

Focus Group Themes – District and School Leadership

Board of Directors, Principals/Administrators

- 1. Strong sense of pride in the district**
 - a. There was a strong sense of pride among both the Board and Principals/Administrators in the district's history of academic excellence and in the quality of the educational experience that the district currently provides.
- 2. Strong identification with DASD mission statement**
 - a. Both the Board and Principals/Administrators felt a strong belief in the value of DASD's mission statement.
 - i. The Board felt that the district should do more to bring the mission to front and center of life in the district, particularly within communication initiatives to align everything the district does as being based on the mission.
- 3. Openness to partnership in communication and increased two-way communication**
 - a. The Board wanted more of an opportunity to be able to work in partnership with and collaborate around certain communications.
 - b. Principals/Administrators would like to have a clearer understanding of what their role is within the communication process. Principals/Administrators also felt that they could actively contribute to certain communications, especially those concerning their buildings or programs.

- i. They sometimes get information in advance but often only a few minutes before it goes out and are unsure if they should provide feedback.
 - ii. Communication varies between buildings based on the relationship between an administrator and central office, their understanding of expectations, etc.
- 4. Streamline communications to reduce information overload**
 - a. The Board felt that, while there was variation in the ways they received communication, they would like to see communication more streamlined to help keep them informed about what is happening in the district.
 - b. Principals/Administrators felt overwhelmed by the number of channels of communication being utilized by the district.
 - i. This group often felt that the large number of channels being used made it difficult for them to be able to answer questions from parents after a communication goes out, especially if they are unsure what channel was used to send it.
- 5. More strategic coordination of communication from central office**
 - a. The Board felt that they wanted to see a more strategic focus around the information they received from central office.
 - i. In particular, the Board was more concerned about receiving information concerning things they felt they should know about in the Board Report rather than just a recap of everything that happened since the last meeting.
 - b. Principals/Administrators noted that, often, they receive multiple communications/requests from various departments in central office that might come in simultaneously, making it hard to meet those requests while also managing their responsibilities.
- 6. Desire for increased visibility and communication between buildings**
 - a. The Board felt there is great communities being built at the building level but would like to see more cross-pollination across the district.
 - i. Increase information sharing between and across schools.
 - b. Principals/Administrators would like to see central office administrators more present within the buildings to help communicate the things happening within the school as well as to foster a stronger sense of community.

Focus Group Themes – Internal Staff

Professional Staff, Support Staff

- 1. Strong sense of pride in the district**
 - a. There was a strong sense of pride among staff in both the district's history of academic excellence and in the quality of the educational experience that the district currently provides.
 - b. Staff indicated that DASD remains a great place to work and expressed their pride in working for the district.
 - c. While staff noted there were areas the district could improve upon (showing more appreciation for staff, continuing to promote the holistic well-being of students, engaging staff more as partners in the communication process) they generally expressed a feeling of satisfaction with their experience as employees of DASD.
- 2. Strong identification with DASD mission statement**

- a. While the strength of affinity to the mission varied among different types of staff (teachers felt a stronger connection than support staff or non-student facing staff), staff overall felt a strong belief in the value of DASD's mission statement.
- b. Staff overwhelming felt that DASD has done a good job of trying to live out its mission
 - i. Staff specifically appreciated and applauded the diversity, equity and inclusion efforts taken by the district as they saw it being alignment with the mission of the district.
 - ii. Staff would like to see more partnership in fulfilling the mission with parents in particular.
 - iii. Some staff members feel that the lack of support staff available has hindered the district's ability to fulfill its mission.

3. Streamline communications to reduce information overload

- a. Staff felt that there was an overabundance of channels of communication with unclear expectations as to what kind of information could be found on specific channels. As a result, staff felt they either had to attempt to monitor all these channels or rely on others (hearsay) to find out information.
- b. Staff feels that the frequency of communication and the lack of control around the flow of information has resulted in staff feeling overwhelmed/fatigued.
- c. Staff, substitutes and those coming from agencies, don't always receive important information about the district or know where to go.

4. Perceived lack of trust and desire for increased visibility

- a. Because the expectation for staff's role in the communication process remains unclear, there is a sense of confusion among staff about if they are seen as partners by the district.
 - i. Staff might not always be aware of what is happening in the district.
 - 1. One staff member reported not hearing about a major accomplishment by one of the other buildings until they saw it on the news.
 - ii. Staff feel they don't always get advanced warning about important policy changes or information before it goes out to parents.
- b. Due to the lack of clarity in the partnership between the district and staff in the communication process, staff reported not always trusting information they were receiving and were increasingly relying on information they received from others in the absence of knowing where to locate certain types of information.
- c. Staff are increasingly feeling pressure from the divisiveness in the community. The divide between those who trust and those who don't trust the district has taken a toll on staff and left them feeling unsure about what is really happening as misinformation, particularly on social media, continues to proliferate.
- d. Staff are increasingly turning to their building leader as the primary source of information about the district, but it is not always consistent between buildings.
- e. Staff feels central office administrators need to be more visible in the school buildings to help increase trust and feelings of belonging and collaboration among staff.

5. Desire for increased two-way communication

- a. Staff indicated feeling an inconsistent level of communication across buildings with limited feedback opportunities provided. They noted being unsure who to go to in central office if they had questions.

- b. Emphasis on email has limited the ability to have conversation.
- c. Staff notes that the district does a nice job in the early stages of initiatives communicating with staff and making them feel involved, however, there tends to be a lack of follow-up/updates about initiatives which has resulted in staff being skeptical of change initiatives within DASD.

Focus Group Themes – High School Students

- 1. Strong sense of pride in the district**
 - a. Students expressed an overall positive perception of DASD based on the communication they have received and their experiences within the district.
- 2. Strong identification with DASD mission statement**
 - a. Students expressed a strong belief in the value of DASD's mission statement and that the district was working to fulfill its mission.
 - i. Students would like to see an increased focus on mental health and overall wellness/wellbeing rather than prioritizing academic success at the expense of wellness.
- 3. Streamline communications to reduce information overload**
 - a. Students appreciated the variety of channels utilized to receive communication from the district but also indicated that it can be hard to keep of track of information at times.
- 4. Desire for increased two-way communication**
 - a. Students indicated the desire for more two-way communication with the district and to be treated as a partner in the communication process
- 5. Appreciation for caring, trusted staff**
 - a. Students felt that administrators and teachers were generally very reliable, accessible and that the students have a strong sense of trust with DASD staff

Focus Group Themes – External Audiences

Parents/Guardians, Home & School Association Leadership, Community-at-Large

- 1. Strong sense of pride in the district**
 - a. There was a strong sense of pride among external stakeholder groups in both the district's history of academic excellence and in the quality of the educational experience that the district currently provides.
- 2. Strong identification with DASD mission statement**
 - a. While the strength of affinity to the mission varied among different types of external groups (parents/guardians and HSA members felt a stronger connection than community members), external groups overall felt a strong belief in the value of DASD's mission statement.
- 3. Streamline communications to reduce information overload**
 - a. External groups, while appreciating the desire to provide multiple ways to access information, felt overwhelmed by the number of communication channels utilized by the district.

- b. Community members felt that they lacked access to information about what is going on in the district in an easy to find way.
 - i. The website was listed as a particular area of frustration
- c. The HSA indicated they also struggled to navigate all of these channels and spend much of their time in the role within the HSA helping other parents navigate all these channels.

4. Desire for increased two-way communication

- a. External groups all indicated the desire for more two way communication with the district.
 - i. Parents/Guardians felt that they were not always heard, received help when they reached out or included in the communication process with the district.
 - 1. This varied by school building.
 - ii. Community members felt that there were no established mechanisms for two-way communication with the district.
 - iii. HSA has felt that, despite their offers to help partner with the district to spread the good word about DASD, the district has not taken them up on that offer.

5. Perceived lack of trust

- a. External groups, in varying levels, felt that trust has been strained between their stakeholder group and the district.
 - i. Parents/Guardians felt that this audit was a step in the right direction towards improving trust with the district but felt that they weren't seen as a partner by the district and remained skeptical about if change was going to happen.
 - ii. Community members were divided on their level of trust
 - 1. The lack of trust stemmed from a feeling that the district was hiding things from the community due to lack of communication and interaction with this group.
 - iii. HSA overall felt a sense of trust in the district; however, the lack of trust in the district from the parents/guardians this group supports has been impacting this group's perception of the district.
- b. External groups indicated that there has been a social, political divide within the district that has had a tremendous impact on the quality of experience and communication efforts over the past five years.

MATERIALS REVIEW SUMMARY

CCIU communications staff reviewed and assessed a selection of communication materials provided by DASD including: COVID-19 communications, crisis email communications, presentations, brochures, Board updates, campaign materials and videos. Below is a summary of findings:

Strengths

1. Good use of visual branding in majority of materials; consistency in presentation could make it even stronger.
2. Good job balancing the many audiences both in the number of total touchpoints with each group and the ability to speak to many audiences within a single communication.
3. Good use of multiple channels for release of content.
4. Strong reliance on email, social media and website for communications provides an opportunity to develop and track metrics for areas of improvement.
5. Photography utilized within materials displays great diversity, a good energy and a very natural, relatable feel.
6. Great consistency in social media posting and recognition of and response to community questions.
7. There is a clear effort being made to present information in a condensed, more digestible format. Be cautious, however, that sometimes all information on one page can be overwhelming, especially for ELLs.

Areas of Opportunity

1. Identify a strong overarching district brand message that gets carried through materials and establishes a strong foundation for sharing more student-focused messages. Doing so creates consistency in the district's brand and provides opportunities for increased engagement through story sharing and the use of central social media hashtags.
2. Materials are often feature-driven rather than benefit-driven which can limit the connection the communication makes with the audiences. Seek to always answer "why should my audience care about this communication?"
3. Desire to be transparent creates a tendency to be too content heavy leading to information overload. Remember the KISS approach to communication: Keep It Super Simple.

SCoPE Survey Summary Data

Synopsis of Downingtown Area School District Survey Scores in Key Performance Indicators Compared to All Districts Participating in the SCoPE Survey Program.

STAFF	District	Avg	Low	High
Communication regarding how I can support student achievement	3.9	3.5	3	4.2
Communication to keep me informed so I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador	2.7	3.2	2.6	4
Communication during a crisis/serious incidents	3	3.4	2.8	4
Communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	2.6	3	2.3	3.6
Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department	3.9	4	3.5	4.5
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.2	3.7	2.7	4.3
Overall satisfaction with communication	3.2	3.6	3	4.2
Overall perception of district based on communication	3.3	3.7	2.9	4.2
PARENTS				
Communication about my child's progress in school	3.8	3.8	3.1	4.4
Communication about how I can support my child's learning	3.3	3.4	2.4	4.1
Communication about school and district events and programs	2.8	3.4	2.5	4.1
Communication during a crisis/serious incidents	3.5	3.6	3	4.1
Trustworthiness of communication from my child's school	4.1	4.1	3.6	4.5
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.6	3.9	3.1	4.4
Overall satisfaction with communication	3.7	3.8	3.1	4.2
Overall perception of district based on communication	3.7	3.8	3.1	4.2
COMMUNITY				
Communication about academic programs and district performance	2.9	3	2	4.2
Communication about district finances and related issues	2.3	2.6	1.8	3.6
Communication about school safety	3.2	2.9	1.7	4
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.4	3.4	2.2	4.2
Overall satisfaction with communication	3.2	3.2	2	4
Overall perception of district based on communication	3.4	3.3	2.2	4.2