

NSPRA's

Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the
Croton-Harmon Union Free School District
Croton-on-Harmon, New York

March 2014

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Introduction

The Croton-Harmon Union Free School District (CHUFSD) Board of Education and Superintendent Edward Fuhrman, Ed.D., recognize the importance of effective communication and are committed to enhancing and improving the relationship between the schools and the community it serves. This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the Board and administration. It clearly demonstrates a willingness to evaluate the effectiveness of current communication efforts and address communication challenges related to the changing education landscape nationally, as well as in the state of New York, in order to ensure continued outstanding educational opportunities for CHUFSD students.

Maintaining public confidence in a difficult economic climate and era of accountability, meeting the needs of a changing and increasingly diverse constituency, preparing students for success in a global work environment, and communicating effectively with all stakeholders – parents, citizens and staff – about their education investment are challenges that are impacting school systems across the nation. CHUFSD leaders are to be commended for taking a proactive approach to ensuring that communication is a vital component in this effort.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of community members and district employees, it was obvious to the auditor that CHUFSD is an integral part of the community, from the location of the schools in the heart of the village to the culture of personal attention and involved families. Many focus group participants noted that families move to the area specifically for the schools, citing the small size, dedicated staff, and “close-knit” atmosphere.

CHUFSD is fortunate to have in place the strong foundation of support necessary to sustain, improve and expand the quality programs in place and establish a reputation as a leading school system in the state.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to assess current communication efforts and offer recommendations to improve and enhance the planning and management of communications, build “brand” recognition, and expand engagement and outreach efforts to all CHUFSD stakeholders.

The findings and recommendations included in this *Communication Audit Report* should be reviewed carefully. They are intended to improve communication in a school district that is committed to excellence and offering world-class schools capable of meeting the challenges of educating students in the 21st Century.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of CHUFSD provides an important foundation for developing a strategic communication plan for the district. The audit informs district leaders about community and staff perceptions and the effectiveness of current communication efforts and offers recommendations to expand, enhance, and improve the communication program. The audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of 10 focus groups representing a variety of CHUFSD’s internal and external audiences as well as individual interviews with key district leaders. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The sessions were approximately one hour in length and were held December 11-12, 2013 with the following groups:

- Parents/Community Members
- Parent Leaders
- Village and Rotary Club Representatives
- Teachers
- School/Central Office Secretaries
- Guidance/Health/Technology Services Representatives
- Support Staff
- Principals/Assistant Principals
- Administrators
- Board of Education

Processes and procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school district to view its communications from an “outside” perspective. The audit was performed by NSPRA Associate Director Karen H. Kleinz, APR. Her vita is included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in an NSPRA Communication Audit occurs when the district submits samples of materials used to communicate with various audiences (i.e., publications, reports, surveys, etc.). The auditor also reviews the district and school websites. These materials and websites are all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditor reviews available data such as strategic plans, communication budget information, marketing materials, news clippings, etc.

The core of the communication audit is the on-site focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the school district’s internal and external audiences. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions.

This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of current communication efforts in CHUFSD;
- Solicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of district and school communications; and
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and improving the management of public relations, branding, communications and engagement activities in CHUFSD.

Following the review of materials and focus group comments, the auditor prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies CHUFSD can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve its overall communication program. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations, and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication and engagement practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a

comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization.

Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support.

Assumptions

It is assumed that school systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations and communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view the system and its work through the perceptions of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable in doing so.

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist CHUFSD leaders in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this *Communication Audit Report* contains recommendations for improving communication with CHUFSD's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around North America.

Sharing with participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, we recommend that this report be shared with each focus group participant.

Key Findings and Observations

The auditor identified several common themes and perceptions that emerged from the questions asked during the focus group discussions. These related to the following topic areas:

General Perceptions of Key External and Internal Audiences

- Overall, CHUFSD is well regarded as an excellent school system committed to improvement. The small size, strong relationships, and close knit nature of the community are viewed as a plus that helps to facilitate the culture of personal attention valued in the district. CHUFSD staff are universally seen as dedicated, caring, and student-focused, striving to meet children and families' needs on an individual level. Parents and community members find district leaders and staff to be supportive and approachable. Employees appreciate the high level of parent involvement and education orientation of the community.
- Focus group participants consistently described CHUFSD as "different" and "unique," and praised the pro-arts environment in the community, as well as the creativity within the schools. They also noted that others less-connected to the schools sometimes describe CHUFSD as "wealthy," "privileged" and the "public private-school."
- Open communication, responsiveness, and accessibility are all seen as strengths of the communication effort in CHUFSD. Both internal and external focus group participants felt that district staff are committed to being responsive to parents within 24 hours. The K12Alerts system was praised across the groups as a valuable communication tool.
- Focus group participants' feelings about the use of social media were decidedly mixed. There is a great deal of concern in CHUFSD over privacy issues. While many of the participants felt the district needs to have a presence on social media given its use and reach today, they are hesitant to embrace it for a number of reasons that include: privacy concerns, fear of loss of control, staff capacity to manage, limited demand, and lack of local infrastructure to support mobile communication tools.
- Major sources of information for most of the focus groups were Board meetings, agendas and minutes, faculty meetings, email and K12Alerts, *Reflections*, local blogs and "word-of-mouth."
- The focus groups in general felt the website could be more user-friendly and easier to navigate. Although it contains a great deal of information, the website did not emerge as a primary source of information for any of the focus groups.
- Both internal and external focus group participants cited the need for more consistent protocols, procedures and communication across the district's schools and buildings.

- All groups were interested in knowing the rationale behind decisions made by the Board and administration. There was interest in the district pushing timely information out in a streamlined format via an e-newsletter or update.
- Internal focus groups stressed the importance of communicating with staff first on important issues to keep them informed and ensure accurate, consistent messaging.
- Across the focus groups, it was clear that many people do not understand Board meeting and open meeting law procedures, which feeds perceptions that the Board doesn't value input when they are unable to respond to items not on the agenda.

Some Future Communication Challenges

As part of our focus group process, we asked participants what they felt were the communication challenges facing CHUFSD in the near future. Their responses touched on the following:

- Addressing Common Core State Standards and APPR.
- Funding.
- Report cards, testing and grading.
- Communicating with the growing ELL population.
- Local cell phone infrastructure and related security issues.

Observations and Comments

- **The Board of Education, administration, staff and community have much to be proud of in CHUFSD:** dedicated, quality staff members who care deeply about students; varied and innovative academic programs; outstanding school facilities; stakeholders who appreciate the value of the arts and a creative environment; responsible fiscal management; and a supportive community that is invested in its schools. The challenge will be to meet stakeholders' expectations for communication – from teachers to parents, district to community, administrators to staff, and schools to students – in an era where communication technology and social networks continue to change and evolve at lightning speed. At the same time CHUFSD must continue to expand, improve and advocate for the quality

education program the community is fortunate to enjoy, while managing a challenging economic environment and era of competition for public schools.

- **The Board and superintendent are to be commended for recognizing the need to place more emphasis on communication, but much remains to be done.** Given the size of CHUFSD and the nature of the village community, the district has been able to take advantage of the well-established local “grapevine” and personal relationships it nurtures with families to keep lines of communication open. From the auditor’s perspective, one challenge facing district leaders is that most CHUFSD staff do not have a frame of reference for what a good communication program is and what it could do for the district. Another challenge, given limited communication staff and budget resources, is to become more comprehensive and proactive while keeping communication efforts strategic and manageable.
- **A well-planned, strategic communications program can help maintain the strong foundation of support CHUFSD enjoys in the community.** In this very challenging economic time, effective communication is more important than ever to building public trust and confidence in district leaders as good stewards of taxpayers’ investment in their schools and the future of the community’s children.
- **Internal communication must become a priority.** As is the case in most school systems in which NSPRA has conducted communication audits, internal communication is the weakest component in CHUFSD. There is a need to develop processes and set clear expectations to address confusion about internal lines of communication and responsibilities, and build understanding of employee’s roles as key communicators and ambassadors.
- **More strategic communication is needed to support the District Goals.** CHUFSD has a well-articulated Long Range Plan and District Goals, and a more strategic approach to communication is needed to support this effort. Some keys to success that are included in this report are: focusing the vision and expectations for communication; standardizing communication protocols and processes for consistency; closing the loop on communications; and expanding communication through a multi-layered effort.
- **District leaders are to be commended for their willingness to evaluate the existing communications effort.** We believe CHUFSD is a district that recognizes and understands the value of effective communication and has the right components in place to move the schools and community forward as education leaders in New York – a committed and caring Board and staff, community support, and strong leadership dedicated to excellence. It will take a focused and sustained approach, but we believe that the commitment to effective communication and the positive, collaborative relationship with the community that exists in CHUFSD will provide the foundation for success as you move forward.

Benchmarking CHUFSD's Communication Program

Over the past three years, NSPRA has been working to develop our School Communication Benchmarking Project, which seeks to standardize the quantifiable value of school public relations. The work of our School Communication Benchmarking Project Team was organized into three initial Critical Function Areas – Comprehensive Professional Communication Program, Internal Communications, and Parent/Family Communications. Top performers in education communication were asked to share best practices and the team developed rubrics of practice and suggested measures to serve as a guide for members and educators to assess their school systems' communication programs.

The following reflect the auditor's assessment of where CHUFSD falls within the rubrics that have been developed by NSPRA. The purpose of the communication audit was to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for CHUFSD to advance its program to the next level. The recommendations in this report are designed to support the district in moving from Emerging to Established and ultimately to Exemplary as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

If CHUFSD would like to compare its program in detail, the complete *School Communication Benchmarking: Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website (www.nspira.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking). This would be an excellent tool to help the district align its communication strategies for maximum effectiveness.

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging

At this point in time, the overall CHUFSD communication effort falls squarely in the Emerging category. While the district uses a number of communication tools, such as *Reflections*, K12Alerts, the website, the eSchoolData Parent Portal, and school-level newsletters, for the most part they are deployed independently of each other and are not coordinated as part of a planned strategic communication effort or aligned with the District Goals.

One key area that can be considered as Established however, is the category of Effective Finance Communications. The district provides a wealth of budget information that is presented in a stakeholder-friendly style and using multiple vehicles, from workshops and meetings, PowerPoint presentations, newsletters and documents, to the website. As CHUFSD moves forward in developing its comprehensive communication program, it should easily be able to move the Finance Communications component to the Exemplary level.

Internal Communications – Emerging

In the area of Internal Communications, CHUFSD can also be considered in the Emerging category based on the rubrics. However, there are some individual component areas where it can be seen as falling into

the Established category, such as frequent communication via email and K12Alerts, accessibility of administrators to staff, a common, centralized calendar, and a commitment to customer service.

As the district begins to prioritize internal communication and implement the related recommendations, we anticipate that this is an area that will show rapid improvement and quickly progress to Established and beyond.

Parent/Family Communications – Emerging to Established

CHUFSD has many components of Established Parent/Family Communications firmly in place, but there are a number of areas that need more attention and development to solidify communication efforts.

Researching and Understanding Parent/Family Needs, Expectations, Opinion, Attitudes and Knowledge Levels – CHUFSD falls into the Established category in this area for the most part. Implementing more engagement opportunities and listening/feedback mechanisms and surveys will quickly move communications forward.

Deploying Multiple, Varied and Targeted Communication Strategies, Including Accommodations for Diversity – CHUFSD employs a number of Established strategies, but needs to work on improving support for cultural awareness and diversity communications.

Communicating with Parents/Families on Student Progress/Success – The district is in the process of Emerging and evolving here as it fully implements the Parent Portal. If done effectively, CHUFSD should see a significant increase in its use and impact in connecting with parents.

Communicating with Parents/Families About Academic Programs and Expectations; and Communication with Parents/Families About Extra-and Co-Curricular Offerings and Requirements – In large part, the district falls into the Established category with these components. and with the addition of planned and integrated communication strategies can easily move into the Exemplary category.

Communicating with Parents/Families About School and District Goals, Plans, Programs, Finances and Issues – When it comes to communicating about finances, CHUFSD does an excellent job and can be considered Established in its strategies. In the other areas, it falls more consistently into the Emerging category, so more work is needed to elevate communications in this area.

Supporting Parent-Teacher and Parent-Building Communications – Principals are doing a good job at the building-level, but need more support from the district in order to move this area to Established and then Exemplary. Areas to support include: developing building-level communication plans, communication with ELL parents, effective use of the Parent Portal, professional development in effective communication, providing talking points and presentation templates on key issues/incidents, and evaluation of the effectiveness of current communication vehicles, such as newsletters and websites.

Fostering Parent/Family Involvement and Engagement to Support Student Learning – For the most part, CHUFSD is in the Established category for this component and is touching on Exemplary in some areas. As recommendations in the report are implemented, attention to communication around student learning should move the district strongly to Exemplary.

Involving Parents/Families in Decision-making to Support Shared Responsibility – CHUFSD has been emphasizing this area and is moving steadily forward in expanding opportunities for parent engagement. From Building Planning Councils to parent involvement in various audits, to the Board's new Grassroots Community Advocacy effort, the district has moved to the Established category and is well-positioned to add components that will take it to Exemplary.

Supporting PTA/PTO Activity; and Success and Fostering Parent/Family Involvement in Community Collaboration – Several aspects of these are in place but are not robust, such as the Alumni Association and forums, and stronger connections between administrative staff and PTA leaders. These components are Emerging and will benefit from increased attention.

Communicating with Parents/Families About Student Conduct Expectations and Discipline Policies; Communicating with Parents/Families During a Crisis; and Fostering Problem-Solving and Resolving Complaints – These require more evaluation, but a surface level review based on audit focus group feedback indicates these components are primarily Emerging.

Evaluating Communication Effectiveness to Inform Strategy – In order to move all aspects of the comprehensive communication program to Exemplary, this component is necessary and must be incorporated throughout the plan. At this time CHUFSD is in the Emerging category for communication evaluation.

Recommendations

The challenges facing CHUFSD are those facing most school systems across the country today: managing the impact of tightening budgets on programs and facilities; supporting talented teachers, support staff and administrators; improving student achievement levels; meeting state and federal mandates; explaining the impact of changes such as the Common Core State Standards and APPR; anticipating and meeting the needs of a community with high expectations; and strengthening relationships with parents as well as “empty nesters” and other citizens who have a vested interest in the schools.

In response to the findings from the communication audit, this report contains recommendations for enhancing and expanding communication with internal and external stakeholders in CHUFSD. Many of the recommendations address ways that CHUFSD can develop a communications program that is strategic in supporting the district’s mission and goals. Others offer direction on how the district can resolve internal communication issues as well as build on successes, maximize already strong relationships with parents and community, and “brand” itself as a world class school district. The recommendations are derived from strategies and techniques that have proven effective in similar school systems around the country. The recommendations included in this *Communication Audit Report* are designed to build on the existing communication effort, use available resources effectively and take advantage of existing technology.

Ultimately, successful school systems in today’s rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for supporting student achievement and success. School districts seeking to implement change find it occurs most quickly and efficiently when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. With effective communication, staff members better understand their value to the district and community members understand how they can support the educational program in ways that ensure success for all students.

The recommendations in this report are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather, to serve as a road map for improving communication, marketing, and engagement strategies, developing a strategic communication program, and expanding stakeholder support. We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs, and it would be unrealistic to expect that all of these recommendations can be initiated at once. We advise the Board and administration to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations can be implemented immediately given the staff and resources available, and which should be included in the *Long Range Plan*. We suggest CHUFSD focus on Recommendations 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8 to begin in order to establish a solid foundation for the communication program.

Major

Recommendation – 1

Focus on strategic, proactive communication.

In today's 24/7, mobile information environment, our publics have become much more sophisticated about the type and quality of communication they desire. And they are demanding "real time" answers and updates on issues and actions that touch their children, their schools or their wallets, along with a voice in decision-making. Today's successful communication programs, be they for school systems or for large corporations, seek to engage stakeholders in two-way communication targeted to their needs. No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community and it is unrealistic to assume that we can drive our stakeholders to one source for information given the options that exist today. The challenge we face is ensuring that information is relevant, multi-layered, readily available, and offered in appealing, easily accessible formats.

This technology-driven communication environment also puts pressure on school districts – particularly on small systems like CHUFSD that do not have a staff position dedicated to the communication effort – to move beyond basic "react and respond" communications to a more proactive approach. In order to raise the level of communication – both internally and externally – the district must balance its response communication with a strategic, targeted communication effort that has specific goals in mind. CHUFSD is engaged in a number of high-level initiatives designed to provide cutting-edge instruction and raise student achievement. It is important that district leaders keep all stakeholders engaged and supporting this work by regularly communicating about new programs and changes.

In order for CHUFSD to become more strategic and systematic with its communication efforts, we recommend the following:

Action Step

Develop a comprehensive communication plan.

Good internal and external communication does not occur unless communication efforts are well-planned. Without a written communication plan that reflects the mission and goals of the district, supports strategic outcomes, and delivers key messages to stakeholders, it will be difficult to keep functions and activities on track and ensure that communication efforts are effective and on target.

A common theme across the focus groups was that communication in CHUFSD needs to be more consistent, both internally and externally, with clearly outlined protocols and responsibilities to ensure

messaging is disseminated in an effective and accurate manner across the district. It is not enough to simply say that the district will communicate about important decisions, programs and activities; it is important to define the communication strategies that will be used to help CHUFSD achieve its strategic goals. There also is a need to improve the overall communication process by ensuring that it is multi-layered, interactive and timely.

The development of a formal communication plan is needed in order to align the communication effort with the Long Range Plan and District Goals. This is particularly important as components are implemented and changes made so that the vision and direction of CHUFSD leadership is communicated clearly and consistently.

A comprehensive communication plan should include the four-step public relations process of Research, Assessment and planning, Communication, and Evaluation (RACE), and address the following questions for every initiative or program CHUFSD undertakes:

- ✓ Who needs to know?
- ✓ What do they need to know?
- ✓ Why do they need to know?
- ✓ When do they need to know?
- ✓ How are we going to tell them?
- ✓ What do we want them to do with the information they receive (actionable behavior)?
- ✓ How will we evaluate and measure the outcomes?

A communication plan can then be developed that outlines action steps designed to meet the identified goals. First, align the communication plan with the goals and objectives outlined in CHUFSD's Long Range Plan. List the specific goal then define the communication action steps and strategies that will be used to help implement it. All employees must assume some responsibility for the communication effort. Typically it is the function of the communications position to ensure that a communication component is embedded into all district goals, initiatives and programs so that employees understand their roles as key communicators. In lieu of this, it is important that this responsibility be assigned to someone on the administrative team or it will be easily overlooked.

The second step is to include ongoing communication efforts, such as the production of various regular publications including *Reflections* and the *Calendar*, updates on Board actions, management of website content and K12Alerts system notifications, "rumor mill" and issues management, media relations, crisis communications, etc. Incorporating all ongoing communication activities into the communication plan along with priority goals for the year will create a more accurate picture of how communication is integrated into district and school operations. It will also provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communications function. This kind of solid communication planning will help CHUFSD become more proactive in telling its story and strengthening the base of support in the community.

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective plan nor does it guarantee improved information flow. A strategic approach will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of CHUFSD's communication dollar. It should also focus on engaging people as well as informing them. The plan should include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, responsible staff, desired outcomes, and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative. Without a plan, it is difficult to create an open dialogue, deliver the messages that are important to stakeholders, and build support for programs and initiatives. The recommendations included in this *Communication Audit Report* offer some proven strategies that can be incorporated into a strategic communication plan.

A strategic communication plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication efforts because all projects are considered in terms of whether they support the district's mission and goals. It also helps ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm school systems and builds understanding and staff involvement in district communication efforts, encouraging them to tell CHUFSD's story in "one clear voice." A comprehensive communication plan also provides a vehicle to report on progress and demonstrate accountability through evaluation criteria built into it.

However, it must be remembered that a plan is just that – it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in concrete. It will need to be revised and adapted as objectives are accomplished and as new communication challenges arise. NSPRA can provide samples of strategic communication plans upon request.

In addition to the overall communication plan, specific communication plans for any major district initiatives, projects or future campaigns (i.e., the annual budget, APPR and EngageNY, Tri-State Consortium, Classroom to Community, etc.). This communication strategy also applies to any unexpected developments or crises that might arise.

A strategic communication plan also will help ensure the development and dissemination of key messages critical to the district's mission and goals. One finding of this communication audit was that information does not always work its way down through all levels of the school system, and there are no consistent protocols to ensure that all staff receive the same information in a timely manner. A written communication plan clarifies the role of administrators at all levels in "closing the loop" on communication and ensures that key information is shared throughout CHUFSD.

In addition, a communication plan provides for transparency and accountability for implementation. It is a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability across the system through established evaluative criteria.

This plan should be the guideline for CHUFSD's communication activities; however, it is important to remember that school systems exist in an ever-changing environment, impacted by community, state, and federal influences. Creating a flexible and dynamic plan that can be adapted for changes will benefit CHUFSD and the families it serves.

Action Step

Use the “SMART” objectives strategy for communications.

CHUFSD has had a long-standing practice of using SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Ambitious but attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) objectives for monitoring the work on all its identified goals. This practice should also be applied to each communication goal. This will allow CHUFSD to determine whether a communication activity is successful, needs additional resources, or should be eliminated.

Measurable objectives increase the accountability of the communication effort and will enable CHUFSD to demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of funds spent on communication.

Action Step

Communicate key messages internally first.

It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Some suggestions for disseminating key messages internally include:

- **Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority.** Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media.
- **Regularly communicate key messages to staff** via meetings, email updates, K12Alerts notifications (for critical or time-sensitive communications), and consider developing a specific employee intranet as a go-to resource (see Recommendation 8).
- **Increase opportunities for face-to-face meetings at the building-level** that allow school staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. While regular meetings are held with teaching faculty, support staff have limited opportunities to attend these meetings, so alternative options should be explored to provide them with valuable face time with school and district leaders. Unless all staff understand the rationale and process being used to address an issue or problem, it is difficult for them to become advocates and ambassadors for the district.
- **Continue to share key messages with employee groups and teacher union leaders.**

Additional Considerations

- **Focus communication strategies and tactics on outreach, engagement and dialogue.** Strive to expand outreach beyond the simple dissemination of information through interactive activities and opportunities.
- **Include a proactive media relations component and communication protocols related to the Emergency Response Plan.**
- **The plan also should address diversity and inclusion strategies** for proactive outreach and communication with ELL families (see Recommendation 11).
- **Evaluate outcomes as well as outputs.** At the culmination of any major communication initiative, campaign or project, evaluate success in terms of outcomes, as well as outputs. For example, preparing support materials, media releases, etc., for the CHHS Spring Musical is an “output.” An increase in the number of attendees is an “outcome.” Evaluation should also determine which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which can be improved in the future. This evaluation step is critical in demonstrating the impact strategic communication has on district goals.

Major Recommendation – 2

Focus the vision for the communication program.

Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. When “urgent communication” becomes the focus, proactive communication opportunities that support the district’s overall mission and goals are often missed. A clear indicator that the communication vision is focused and understood is when staff members are able to articulate the essence of the district’s mission and vision statement for quality schools. In order for staff to internalize and embrace that vision, district leaders must continually talk about it and model actions that support it.

It can be difficult for the general public to understand the function of the various central office departments, hence the often heard criticism that school districts are “top heavy” with administrators. Explaining the mission and function of each department and clearly articulating how each supports

students, teaching and learning, can help build greater understanding of the scope of work involved in educating students, both for employees and for the public.

As part of focusing the vision for the communication effort, CHUFSD leaders can use this *Communication Audit Report*, in conjunction with the District Goals, to determine critical communication, branding, and engagement priorities. A thorough review may also indicate areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that need more support (i.e., Parent Portal implementation, Common Core, Classroom to Community, etc.). This will help in focusing the communication effort and priority information areas for each department and school. Once priorities are determined, staff can begin to develop the communication plan and identify the timelines and resources needed to implement the plan.

CHUFSD staff pride themselves on being responsive to students, families and community members and make serving their needs a priority. Day-to-day communication demands can easily consume staff time, often at the expense of the strategic communication effort. In order to ensure that general and reactive communication is coordinated with, rather than replacing, the delivery of key messages and important information, we suggest CHUFSD conduct some research into the questions most frequently asked of staff and the types of information they most often provide to parents and others. A simple survey of staff to gather this data can provide valuable insight into the information needs of families and how the district can help facilitate quick answers. For example, there may be a number of commonly asked questions that could be developed into an “FAQ for Parents” posted prominently on the district website homepage.

Once the most common topic areas are identified, CHUFSD can also develop key messages for each that staff can use as additional talking points when responding to specific requests.

Action Step

Establish communication guidelines and expectations for administrators.

A notable finding from the internal focus groups is the need to improve the communication infrastructure to ensure timely and consistent information delivery across the system. There does not appear to be a clear process for internal communications, so that instead of important information cascading throughout CHUFSD, bottlenecks are sometimes created when administrators don’t know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered.

We recommend establishing communication guidelines that outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared, and who has primary responsibility (depending on the topic or issue). Provide tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department to school communication, along with forms for reporting the outcomes of meetings (see Recommendation 4). The chain of command for problem-solving should be clearly outlined and shared with staff and parents. By clarifying

the communication expectations and responsibilities of district administrators, CHUFSD can broaden its reach and create more capacity to focus on overarching strategic communication priorities.

Set expectations for administrators to meet regularly with staff they directly supervise. Regular staff meetings within departments should be an expectation. Similar to staff meetings at schools, they should include all staff and cover both department-specific updates, as well as district and school news.

In addition, providing regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans as well as new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, diversity, and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their communication role.

**Major
Recommendation – 3**

Develop a process for identifying and framing issues so that information is clear and consistent.

A key trait of schools systems with strong communication programs is a consistency of message that is evident throughout all levels of operation and in all employee groups. The focus group findings indicated that information is not always being pushed down through the school system, and participants across the groups cited the need for improving both message consistency and delivery protocols. Maintaining a high level of awareness and information-sharing becomes more challenging as a district grows more complex. A commitment to and expectation of ongoing, clear, open communications must continue to be expressed from top leadership on down.

Proactive communication can be fostered by implementing an issues-framing process that breaks down the communication elements to provide a clear framework for articulating and targeting key messages about issues impacting the district as well as projected solutions. This involves:

- Identifying key issues facing CHUSD and its schools;
- Determining what stakeholders need and want to know about each issue as well as the best vehicle for delivering the information;
- Framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and
- Engaging stakeholders in helping to determine outcomes.

Identifying and framing key issues, developing key messages and talking points, and ensuring that administrators and staff are able to articulate the district's position will help foster understanding and

more transparency around leadership decisions. Preparing leaders at all levels of the school system with background information, rationale, key messages, and strategies for inviting input from staff, parents and others and engaging them in dialogue about outcomes will help to “close the loop” on critical communications.

Action Step

Continue to use communication planning questions to inform decision-making.

Communication – how, when and what to share with others – is often an afterthought in the decision-making process of many organizations. CHUFSD administrators have incorporated the use of planning questions into meetings to ensure that the impact of decisions on stakeholders is understood and the communication of important information is not overlooked or forgotten. Incorporating planning questions into discussions of major decisions is a smart and efficient way to ensure that communication is integrated into all major initiatives. Questions can help to generate discussion, raise awareness about important communication issues, highlight the importance of “closing the communication loop,” and help in shaping decisions. Some additional planning and assessment questions designed to help frame issues include:

- ✓ **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- ✓ **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how to outline the issue or problem from the district’s perspective, and how to present it to stakeholders.
- ✓ **How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district and community.
- ✓ **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the internal and external stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue.
- ✓ **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key statements or “talking points.”
- ✓ **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.

- ✓ **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.
- ✓ **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson on the issue with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.
- ✓ **What “talking points” need to be shared with CHUFSD employees?** Identify critical information items that all staff should have in order to speak in “one clear voice” and be positive ambassadors for the school system.

Action Step

Consider creating a communications advisory council or an ad hoc issues team to help frame messages.

Educators often frame issues very differently from the public, and in order to connect with and engage stakeholders, CHUFSD needs to understand the public’s perspective and present messages in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences. A communications advisory council or issues team composed of parent, community and staff representatives could provide assistance in assessing and framing messages around specific district issues (i.e., curriculum/program changes, student privacy issues, budget votes, Common Core Standards, etc.) as well as issues that impact the community at large. They may also be used as a sounding board for the Board’s Communication and Advocacy Committees to test ideas and strategies for improving communication between the Board and community.

CHUFSD may be able to tap the expertise of business, community and parent leaders who are interested and willing to assist the district with its strategic communication efforts. These individuals could become strong allies and advocates for the district if they are kept informed about issues impacting the schools.

**Major
Recommendation – 4**

Close the loop on communication.

Many organizations face challenges ensuring that communication from top leadership filters throughout the organization to all levels. The same is true of school systems, large and small. CHUFSD parents and staff noted a pattern of inconsistency in communication, especially across the schools. Each of these

groups recognized that the tone and quality of communication are set by leadership and some principals and administrators are simply better at communicating than others.

Participants in the employee focus groups noted the need to improve internal communication in several areas: increasing transparency and providing rationale behind decisions; allowing for more staff input; including support staff in the information loop and providing email access time for those not on computers; and offering orientation sessions for new hires. Employees also noted the need to create more consistent communication protocols across the district.

When you have a small administrative team with multiple responsibilities and no communication position on staff, inconsistency in communication can easily become an issue. Some recommended action steps to improve communication follow:

Action Step

Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.

Although it is understood that district leaders always strive to make good decisions on behalf of CHUFSD students, negative perceptions and dissatisfaction can emerge if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with the staff and community. Explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale behind decisions that impact specific programs, projects and procedures, and then reporting back to them on results, will help to close the information loop and build trust in leadership. This is a critical communication function that can significantly impact the district's relationship with all stakeholders.

This also extends to any advisory groups and committees. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that group members don't think their time has been wasted or their input wasn't valued. Communication follow-through is critical to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way.

The CHUFSD Board is committed to creating a communication environment based on openness, honesty and trust, and all communication efforts should support and promote this goal. One simple tactic the Board can employ to ensure the communication loop is complete is to incorporate regular updates into meeting agendas. Reporting on the status of decision-making processes and the implementation of actual decisions as the district moves forward on each step is a more effective communication strategy than waiting to announce the final outcomes. It also allows stakeholders to ask questions and offer input throughout the process, rather than just at the beginning and end, leading to more buy-in and a better-informed public.

Action Step

Provide training and add a communication component to the evaluation process for principals and administrators.

To improve communication consistency, some school districts provide additional training for principals and administrators, sometimes making these sessions a component of their individual professional development plans. Training sessions on all areas of communication at the building level, and common traits of effective communication for department administrators and supervisors, can help resolve some inconsistencies.

Providing principals with communication resources and inservice should help them understand that communication is a priority in their role as instructional leaders. Sharing communication tips and reminders that do not overwhelm your administrators can help them practice their skills and develop a culture of open and ongoing communication with their staff members, parents, and students.

The key to eliminating inconsistencies in communication is to tie communication to the evaluative process. If inconsistent communication is ignored, nothing changes. Providing your leadership team with the tools needed to fulfill all aspects of their role strengthens the school system and its image throughout the community. Since most people relate most readily to their neighborhood school, it is critical that leaders at the building-level accept and succeed in the role of chief building communicator.

Action Step

Use a Communication Responsibility Grid.

Another way to address inconsistencies and assist communication follow-through with meetings is to consider using a responsibility management grid for each meeting where decisions are made or responsibilities set. It helps with closing the communication and responsibility loop by managing the ambiguity of “who does what” for each resolved agenda item. The grid should include the agenda item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. It can be designed as an e-template that is sent to all administrators and their assistants so everyone is on the same page. This type of grid can also be used with any teacher work groups or parent committees that need to disseminate information. It is best to rotate the responsibility for completing the grid when possible.

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Who Is Responsible for the Next Step	Deadline

Action Step

Establish policies for email, K12Alerts and Parent Portal communication.

The accepted standard of practice in CHUFSD is for staff to respond to parent requests within 24 hours and staff members pride themselves on their high level of responsiveness. At the same time, they acknowledged that the volume of email they receive can become overwhelming to manage. There are some strategies for addressing this problem that could be helpful in CHUFSD.

One is to establish a system for “triaging” email from administrators and departments. Use the email subject line to tag messages with an agreed upon code, i.e., Urgent or Time Sensitive, Response Needed, By Next Week, etc. This will make it easier for staff to sort email by priority so important messages are not buried due to volume.

It also is important to clarify and communicate timelines for responding to parent and community requests and inquiries. A useful approach is to create a committee of parents and staff to develop a set of guidelines for voice notifications, email, and Parent Portal communication. These guidelines should address response times (for example, all calls will be returned within 24 business hours, with the exception of Friday afternoons and weekends, etc.) and expectations for using these communication tools, such as what constitutes unreasonable demands on a teacher or principal’s time. Once these guidelines are determined, widely distribute them to staff and parents. Also include them in student handbooks and on the website.

K12Alerts has been used advantageously in CHUFSD and was cited by focus group participants as a primary source of information. The caveat is to continue to monitor its management so that it does not become overused and lose its effectiveness. As the Parent Portal is expanded and use grows, it will be important to establish guidelines for its use in terms of expectations for teachers in posting timely information as well as the specific types of information that parents want about their children. The district has made a major financial investment in these communication tools so it is reasonable to expect them to be used effectively and efficiently.

Include school and central office secretaries in regular informational and operational updates.

School and central office secretaries and other office personnel are a critical part of the communication loop in any school system. They come in contact with numerous internal and external stakeholders every day. Each one of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between stakeholders and CHUFSD. For these employees to function effectively in this key role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them on a regular basis. Participants in the focus group commented that “Everything is on a ‘need to know’ basis,” which often hampers their ability to respond to patrons as frontline contacts. Veteran secretaries said they just figure it out as they go and ask questions until they can find an answer. The following steps can be taken by principals and administrators to ensure that key office personnel have the information they need to do their jobs efficiently and well:

- **Provide scripts and Q & A documents for frontline staff on key CHUFSD initiatives** (i.e., content in the Croton-Harmon Schoolhouse, budget vote information, etc.) or breaking news (i.e., school lock-downs, transportation delays, etc.).
- **Review daily and weekly schedules** so that staff are aware of activities going on in their school or department, as well as major events across the district.
- **Review deadlines** for reports and other information required by the central office or New York state.
- **Review the major issues under discussion in CHUFSD** so that they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
- **Ensure they have copies of current materials**, such as the *Calendar*, *Reflections*, agendas for Board meetings, background and information on key programs, and other information so that they can answer questions and share information.
- **Include them in planning meetings and discussions**, when possible.

**Major
Recommendation – 5**

Continue the visibility efforts of the superintendent and CHUFSD leaders in the community and state.

Croton-on-Hudson is a unique community, and its size and proximity to the schools keep education front and center and integral to village life. It is important for the superintendent to serve as the point person for outreach efforts to key community leaders in building support and understanding for CHUFSD initiatives. Ongoing budget challenges will continue to be the norm for public education. Having a trusted leader who can explain these issues in clear, understandable language can make the difference as CHUFSD navigates the fiscal constraints and other challenges that lie ahead while remaining focused on the District Goals and Long Range Plan.

Dr. Fuhrman serves this role well, not just in the local community, but also as a visible and active leader representing CHUFSD on the Lower Hudson Council of Superintendents, the New York State Council of Superintendents, and with other organizations. He has also assumed a higher profile in advocating for public education in New York and nationally.

CHUFSD has a talented and capable administrative team to support Dr. Fuhrman in accomplishing the District Goals, so while outreach and visibility efforts are time consuming and require him to be away from the office, it is important that he continue to do this on behalf of the district and schools. Research shows that strong, stable leadership is a critical component in school systems with high student achievement, and having a superintendent who is able to serve as the “voice” and “face” of the district’s communication efforts will reinforce the foundation of support CHUFSD now enjoys.

The Board of Education has an Advocacy Committee that works to address critical issues at the state level. This two-pronged effort of the Board and superintendent to raise CHUFSD’s profile both locally and with the state will help to solidify its position as a leading school system in New York.

Village officials in the focus groups expressed a clear interest in improving communication between the district and the village and building a stronger connection between the two. We encourage CHUFSD to also investigate the possibility of reinstating regular meetings with village managers to discuss common issues and interests as well as ways to collaborate on local initiatives.

While it is clear that Dr. Fuhrman and Board members cannot be in all places at all times, the strategic communication plan should tie them to the critical communication venues where they can have the most impact. Development of other key leaders throughout CHUFSD as “issue or initiative-specific spokespeople” and representatives to local civic groups also should be advanced. Developing rapport with

key constituencies and creating a personal face for public education should be a key role of every administrator in the system.

Building trust in CHUFSD leadership should continue to be a priority, both internally and externally. By maintaining open communication about decision-making processes, the Board and administration clearly demonstrate their commitment to a “transparent” style of leadership that allows stakeholders to monitor and participate in the educational process. This not only helps to foster trust and credibility in the system, but also encourages all stakeholders to assume responsibility for the success of their schools. Some additional strategies to consider include:

Action Step

CHUFSD leaders should continue to visit schools and attend parent group meetings as often as possible.

One of the communication strengths cited by focus group participants is that CHUFSD leaders are approachable and accessible. The value of this perception should not be underestimated, and senior administrators should continue to incorporate school visits and attendance at parent group meetings into their schedules whenever possible. Employees appreciate any efforts by district leaders to create face time with staff and spend time in classrooms and break rooms, and parents feel that their efforts on behalf of the schools and students are valued and appreciated. These visits should be scheduled in addition to those involving business or problem-solving. Efforts also should be made to visit employees located in separate buildings, such as transportation and maintenance support staff.

We recommend that all visits be reported on as a follow-up. For example, the superintendent, Board members, and senior administrators can report on visits or attendance at special events as part of their regular reports at Board meetings. Other avenues include adding brief updates on the website, sharing impressions at staff meetings, and tweeting about events. Making the effort to publicize where administrators have been helps dispel the perception that district leaders are never seen out in the schools.

Consider including a “Following Dr. Fuhrman” page on the website that shows where the superintendent has been (or will be) during the week. Or use the existing “Superintendent’s Corner” feature as a blog where Dr. Fuhrman chronicles where he has been and what he has seen that week. This would be a great way to recognize staff and students and share highlights of happenings in the schools from a first-hand perspective.

Expand communication through a multi-layered effort.

No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community. The challenge is in making sure interesting and important information is regularly available in a variety of convenient formats, ensuring people know where to find it, and creating opportunities for positive interaction. The focus groups with parents and community members indicated that they get their information from a limited number of sources. Across the groups, email, Board meetings and *Reflections* were cited most frequently. K12Alerts notifications and “word of mouth” were also cited. This suggests that CHUFSD needs to not only expand its outreach to external audiences, it needs to become more strategic and take a multi-layered approach to delivering information and key messages to stakeholders. While the local “grapevine” will continue to function in CHUFSD given the size and nature of the community, the district must become more strategic in delivering its message directly to stakeholders.

Technology has dramatically changed how people access news and information. A distinct advantage this offers school districts is the ability to “push” information directly to stakeholders, without having to rely on the news media or the postal service. Misinformation and inaccurate facts can be immediately corrected with website postings and email/voice notification alerts. This provides the district with an opportunity to maximize available communication technology.

As noted however, CHUFSD must mount a multi-layered communication effort, as one size doesn’t fit all when it comes to how our publics consume news and information. While it is important to recognize that high tech, high touch, mobile communication is how the majority of today’s young parents communicate, there is also a large portion of the community that prefers more traditional vehicles, such as print newsletters. CHUFSD also must take into consideration the limited local infrastructure for cell phone technology.

In order to deliver information to parents and community members more proactively, it is important to balance print and electronic communication and address publications from a reader perspective as well as with an eye to dual use for marketing efforts. We encourage CHUFSD to consider not only how information can be “pushed” to parents and community members more proactively, but how the school system can more effectively “pull” stakeholders in by becoming the go-to source for “what they want, when they want it.” Lack of access to information is not the problem. The key in a world where the public is saturated with communication from multiple entities, both at home and at work, is getting stakeholders to read our materials. The following suggestions offer strategies for addressing external communication efforts:

Action Step

Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.

Part of the transition from information delivery to strategic communication is increasing CHUFSD's ability to tell its own story well. As news media outlets, particularly newspapers, find the business climate increasingly challenging and difficult to sustain, their ability to cover education in-depth has significantly diminished. And, in Croton-on-Hudson, the small local newspapers cover a number of Westchester County communities, further reducing opportunities for positive news coverage. This has also fed the growth of a number of local blogs. As a result, it is critical that CHUFSD establish direct lines of communication with stakeholders.

This does not eliminate the need for CHUFSD to be responsive to media needs as it is important to maintain a solid working relationship with reporters and editors. However, this focus needs to be balanced with effective direct communication efforts. A strategic communication program should focus on developing and maintaining transparent two-way communication designed to reach stakeholders directly in a myriad of ways. By continuing to build strong relationships with key stakeholders, CHUFSD will be more successful in delivering its message and communicating in "one clear voice."

Action Step

Update *Reflections* as a Dual-Purpose Publication

The district's quarterly print newsletter, *Reflections*, has a high recognition value in the community. A number of focus groups cited it as a primary source of information about the schools. The challenge in today's world is that print publications have limited value in delivering time-sensitive information, particularly when published only several times a year. However, if planned to work in tandem with an e-news bulletin, CHUFSD can take advantage of *Reflections*' recognition factor by using it more strategically to deliver key messages related to student achievement and progress toward the District Goals, and strengthen brand identity and marketing position in the community. Thoughtful planning of the editorial content of each issue will allow *Reflections* to be dual-purposed for marketing the schools to new families, recruiting teachers and staff, and demonstrating financial accountability to taxpayers.

Action Step

Create a CHUFSD e-news bulletin to deliver updates, key messages, and time-sensitive information.

Participants across the external focus groups expressed a strong interest in receiving a regular electronic news update from the school system. This would bring the district's key messages to people wherever they are – through their computers at home or work, or via their smartphones and other mobile devices. While they want to hear the positive stories about the schools, they were specifically interested in Board meeting updates, the rationale behind decisions, information related to the budget, and how they can support their children.

The most effective use of an e-news bulletin is to “push” time-sensitive news, updates, and important key messages to stakeholders in a short, reader-friendly format – containing no more than five relevant and timely topics – that is published weekly. It should serve as the dynamic news feed for the community and maintain a “real time” and future-focused perspective by addressing current and emerging issues facing CHUFSD. Topic-specific issues based on reader-surveys can also be included. While important news and information can be repurposed for use in various formats, the e-news should not be just a repeat of what has already been distributed in other formats or readers will not continue to open it.

Allow parents and community members to subscribe via links on the district and school websites (this should be heavily publicized in district and school print publications) and a subscription line added to enrollment forms. CHUFSD may also want to place an ad in the newspaper or print postcards to leave in various community venues to promote the e-news bulletin and encourage citizens to subscribe online. Staff should be automatically subscribed. Adding an e-news bulletin to the communication mix also could allow CHUFSD in the future to target communications to different audiences, depending on their specific interests. Information developed for this communication tool can be repurposed for use on social media sites along with school and district websites.

It is also imperative to keep the e-news bulletin short – ideally not more than a page in length. A single paragraph per topic, with links to more detailed information on the website, is recommended. Stakeholders want important information but they tend to want it in “small bites” that can be quickly scanned for critical points. To be most effective, an e-news update should be published often enough that it is not seen as “old news” like a print publication. Consider publishing every week, and supplement with special “alerts” as needed in the event of breaking news or short deadlines.

Graphically, producing the e-news bulletin in an html format would be most effective. When readers click on the email it should open in the bulletin format for immediate access. Create a recognizable banner and style for consistency and to create familiarity for quick reading. Today's tech users want to be able to

reach information in the fewest “clicks” possible, so in order to reach and retain readers the format must be highly accessible and user-friendly.

E-news updates can be generated easily and quickly for major initiatives and sent to key opinion leaders concerning specific emerging issues. Since you cannot communicate one-on-one with all your key opinion leaders when an issue arises, look at this as your opportunity to keep everyone in the loop at the same time.

We recommend that you first investigate the capabilities of the K12Alerts, eChalk and eSchoolData systems for generating an e-news bulletin that is attractive and easy to produce since the district already has the technology in place.

Action Step

Maximize School Board Meetings as a communication tool.

The Board of Education section of the CHUFSD website contains extensive information related to Board functions and governance of the district – including video of meetings – much more comprehensive than we typically see on district websites. There is a great deal of useful and valuable information on the site and CHUFSD leaders are to be commended for their openness and transparency in making the work of the Board accessible to the public.

Board meetings offer another opportunity to expand the public’s knowledge of how public school systems are operated as well as a way to engage stakeholders in the business of the district. Participants across the focus groups indicated that Board meeting agendas and minutes are a key source of information on what is happening in CHUFSD, so ensuring that these documents are published in a timely manner and are easily accessible is an important consideration.

In addition, we recommend that immediately following every regular Board meeting, a brief wrap-up report on actions taken be disseminated to staff and key communicators (see Recommendation 7) and posted to the website. Official board meeting minutes take time to prepare and contain a great deal of information of low interest to the general public. These “Board Briefs” reports are just that – a very short description of only the agenda items most relevant to parents and staff, i.e., program and policy adoptions/changes, calls for elections or budget information, special announcements, etc. The report should be no more than a page and could contain links to reports presented, proposed policies, etc.

The CHUFSD Board and administration do a good job structuring meeting agendas to provide substantive information via reports that highlight programs and items under consideration. However, one of the findings from the focus groups is that many people do not understand the specifics of open meeting law

and the required protocols that the Board must operate under during a regular meeting. This can create a perception that Board members are not responsive or do not value input from parents, public and staff.

Some suggestions to address this include:

- **Explain Board meeting protocols at the start of each meeting.** Parents and community members often find Board meetings intimidating because they are not sure of the meeting format and proper protocols for addressing the Board. The Board has a detailed brochure and information available online that identify the Board members and meeting dates for the year, and that outlines the format, procedures, and speaking protocols for regular Board meetings as well as work sessions or other special meetings. This information should always be available in the Board Room and front desk and at schools.

After welcoming the audience the start of each meeting, the Board president should briefly explain protocols the public may not be aware of, such as restrictions on Board members responding to any questions or items not on the official agenda, or the purpose of closed sessions. This will help dispel perceptions that the Board is not responsive because members of the public are unaware of required rules and regulations for formal meetings.

- **Annually review Board communication protocols with all Board members.** A good practice is for the Board to review its own board member communication protocols on such items as speaking on behalf of the Board, responding to inquiries from reporters, making statements on issues to other government officials, on-camera discussions, creating individual e-communication vehicles, etc.

We also encourage the Board to increase opportunities to engage stakeholders in direct dialogue related to pending decisions.

- **Provide opportunities for the public to have input that do not require attendance at a meeting.** Use technology to allow stakeholders to submit comments on issues via email or the website. Mail-in comment cards are also an option. Consider offering a section on the district website that allows constituents to record their comments or reactions to a specific question, issue, or proposal before the Board.
- **Allow for dialogue time during Board work sessions.** Consider planning some extra time at work sessions for direct discussion with stakeholders related to the item on the agenda. Organize the time to encourage active engagement and allow for questions and responses as part of the discussion. Clearly state at the outset that these are input gathering opportunities only and not recommendations that will be acted on.
- **Evaluate the effectiveness of Saturday morning meeting opportunities at the Black Cow.** The CHUFSD Board has had a long-standing engagement session on Saturday mornings that is open to the public to come and visit over coffee on any topics of interest. We suggest that the Board evaluate

attendance and possibly conduct a survey with recent participants to determine whether this is still a useful and meaningful way to engage citizens in the schools. If the Board determines that it is, we suggest setting some specific topics for discussion that are currently of high interest to the district and/or community and to generate increased attendance or new participants. Post the topics on the website and advertise them in school newsletters.

Action Step

Continue to build the use of video as a communication vehicle as resources allow.

Video is an important component of communicating with today's new technology. It can help to solidify the district's brand in the community and as resource and staff capacity allow, should continue to be integrated into CHUFSD's communication efforts. Videos currently are posted of Board meetings, and of teaching and learning in action in the Croton-Harmon Highlights section of the website. Video is also used in a more limited way to showcase graduation ceremonies, forums, and other activities. While they provide good content, the technical quality of the video currently being produced is only fair.

We strongly encourage CHUFSD to move forward with incorporating more video to tell its story, but this is a component that should be planned for as the district works to develop its communication program and the staff capacity or budget for outside consultants to create a quality product.

Some additional ideas for using video that NSPRA has seen implemented in other school systems include:

- Featuring videos in the revolving photo carousel at the top of the website homepage with a brief description of what it is showcasing.
- Marketing videos for teacher recruitment and attracting new students;
- Looping videos on monitors in the central office or school reception areas;
- Creating information videos for non-English-speaking families; and
- Developing inservice training for staff and parenting skills sessions for families.

These are just a few of the ways video is now being used in school districts. Whether posted on the website, Facebook or YouTube, or offered for check-out in school libraries, there are a myriad creative uses for video using today's technology. We encourage CHUFSD to plan for expanding its video communication efforts in the future to enhance the district's appeal and connection with a new parent generation that views video as an information source in the way that their parents used newspapers.

Continue to develop and expand outreach through engagement efforts.

Public engagement is an important part of any communication program. The CHUFSD Board strives to engage the community in major decisions and remains committed to expanding its engagement efforts.

However, when asked whether they feel the district provides opportunities for stakeholders to express their views and have input into important decisions, focus group participants felt for the most part that opportunities are limited. Outside of Board meetings, most participants seemed unclear as to how to lend their voice to decision-making processes. These perceptions are indicative of the ongoing importance of the communication effort in building trust, confidence and a sense of shared responsibility for the schools among all stakeholders – internal and external.

Timing is critical to all successful engagement initiatives. In order to include opportunities for parents, community members and staff to participate in dialogue with the Board and administration on major initiatives or program and policy changes that impact the schools, district leaders must factor this into decision-making timelines. While it is difficult to put exact start and finish times on any given issue under discussion, one way to begin is by determining the outside deadline for a final decision, and then work backwards from that point. The bottom line for planning is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process, and not just brought in at the approval stage, after the bulk of development work has been done.

The Board has held community forums in past years on the topics of defining a world class school system and building the budget. It is important to evaluate what worked well in these forums and what needed improvement in order to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future. We have found that as engagement efforts evolve and family schedules get overbooked, people are often more interested in participating in smaller venues on topics of specific interest to them.

Consider using a communications advisory council (see Recommendation 3) to help determine which issues, challenges or decisions should involve an engagement process. For example, budget cuts are a challenge for all school systems right now. Addressing this issue in a tight economy may offer an opportunity for an engagement dialogue.

We believe it is important to include a public engagement component as part of the overall communication plan in order to continue to build and strengthen the connection between CHUFSD and the community. Engagement activities, be they forums, informal meetings such as the Board's Saturday

visits to the Black Cow, or school-level Coffees with the Principal, should be incorporated into the comprehensive communication plan to ensure that they remain an important part of outreach efforts.

Some additional strategies to consider include:

Action Step

Develop an opinion leader network that builds on CHUSFD's relationship base.

Often called a “key communicator network,” a formal program designed to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community and staff can be a powerful communication tool. One of CHUSFD’s notable traits is the strength of its relationships with parents and the greater community. District leaders can capitalize on this strength by being more intentional in connecting with supporters and opinion leaders in the greater Croton community.

Although current technology has made it easy and convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of people in a timely fashion, it does not replace the value and effectiveness of face-to-face communication with a small group of influential community and staff opinion leaders. CHUSFD can extend its outreach by developing a formal opinion leader network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with key stakeholders within the community and district. These individuals, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” for the district.

What makes this type of group effective is that they are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents, they are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and they are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. You can use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas, a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents, and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

To maximize an opinion leader network, we recommend the following:

- **Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.** The individuals invited to participate should be credible members of target audiences identified by the district; people that others go to for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size (or divided into groups to be met with separately) to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building.

To organize an opinion leader network, ask each principal, administrator and Board member to recommend two or three people – parents or community members – who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community group, and who have an interest in the schools. Some

names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, ask those individuals who they consider to be Croton's opinion leaders.

CHUFSD has an active PTA network in the schools. These parent leaders play a very important communication role throughout the district and should be engaged as allies and advocates. Automatically include PTA board officers as members in the opinion leader network.

The network should also include veteran and retired teachers and support staff, senior citizens, and key leaders of cultural and ethnic groups in the community. In addition, add the names of elected officials from the village and county, plus local leaders of civic organizations, businesses, and churches within the district. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

- **Hold an orientation meeting with invited leaders.** During this meeting, Dr. Fuhrman should discuss the vision he and the Board have for the district and the participants' role as important conduits for information. Review with them the Long Range Plan, District Goals and other pertinent district initiatives and studies, such as this *Communication Audit Report*. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the opinion leader network – one at the start of the school year to discuss upcoming plans and another at the end to review accomplishments. This can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.
- **Encourage opinion leaders to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about the district or individual schools.** Opinion leaders should be given a "hot line" number or email to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate, and inform the opinion leader network of the district's response.
- **Develop a regular news update specifically for the opinion leader network.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information. A short, e-update sent on a regular schedule (monthly or quarterly) can serve this purpose well. In addition to disseminating information, updates can alert the group to breaking news (i.e., crisis situations) and help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about critical initiatives. Opinion leaders should also receive any regular publications, such as *Reflections*, and be subscribed to K12Alerts and the e-news bulletin (see Recommendation 6).
- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** It's important to ascertain whether the opinion leader network is functioning effectively and meeting the district's needs as well as those of the participants. Each year participants should be asked:
 - ✓ How satisfied are you with the operation of the opinion leader network?
 - ✓ Is the information CHUFSD provides you accurate and timely?

- ✓ How frequently should we meet?
- ✓ Is the e-update serving your needs?
- ✓ Who else should be invited to join the opinion leader network?
- ✓ How can we improve the opinion leader network?

Action Step

Move forward on recent efforts to establish a legislative advocacy group.

An informed group of parents and community members can support the CHUFSD Board in their efforts to advocate on behalf of the schools and public education. It is often more effective in bringing about change when the call for action comes from citizens and not just the Board and administration. The Board's Advocacy Committee has worked hard to ensure CHUFSD's voice is heard on major issues impacting the schools, and their efforts can be magnified by enlisting a corps of parent and community advocates. CHUFSD is fortunate to have a very educated and informed community that is passionate about its schools and local control, so we believe they are a powerful group to tap for support.

The Board recently convened a Grassroots Community Advocacy meeting to engage stakeholders in this important work. We applaud the Board for this effort and strongly encourage district leaders to work with and support the newly established Croton Advocacy for Public Education (CAPE) group that has been formed as an outgrowth of this meeting.

In addition to providing updates on activities and efforts at Board meetings, we encourage CHUFSD to include regular updates on state legislative programs and proposed laws, as well as the efforts of CAPE, in the e-news bulletin and *Reflections* and on the website. Include complete information about local legislators and how to contact them. During the legislative session, updates on the progress of bills and actions impacting education could be posted to a special section of the website and shared with key communicators. Educating stakeholders about important legislative issues helps to create strong advocates and build ongoing support for the schools.

Other activities to consider include inviting legislators to visit schools or to attend a Legislative Breakfast. These provide an opportunity for elected officials to dialogue with the Board, administrators and parent leaders.

Action Step

Strengthen the working partnership with PTA leaders.

CHUFSD has an active PTA program in place across the district. The PTAs play an important role in serving as a bridge that keeps people connected to the schools. Participation in the individual school PTAs should be nurtured and sustained in a conscious effort by district leaders in order to maximize the value of the PTA as an important component of quality schools.

PTA officers in the focus group said they have been trying to manage their own public relations at each school, but they would prefer to be working in concert with the district and following its lead instead. CHUFSD administrators meet with the PTA presidents three times a year to provide updates, but we encourage the district to become more purposeful in collaborating with the PTAs in order to support their efforts and create a stronger partnership. In addition to keeping them informed about important initiatives, crisis situations, and progress on the District Goals, share talking points about specific issues, provide tips on how they can improve their communication efforts and help with the district's branding effort, and include opportunities for them to offer ideas and suggestions and ask questions of the superintendent, Board members and other district leaders. By helping these parent leaders become effective advocates for CHUFSD, the district can tap into a powerful resource for expanding its message to the broader community.

Action Step

Expand communication with "empty nesters."

"Empty nesters" and senior citizens are a growing and important resource for today's schools. Not only can they provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors, and mentors, as voters they also have a great impact on the school system. School districts can benefit by finding ways to serve this growing population while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students. Some ideas to consider include:

- Create a cadre of "parent mentors," once-active parents whose children are now grown, to assist new parents in navigating the school system and to mentor them in how to work effectively as partners with teachers and the school.
- Promote involvement opportunities in community publications.
- Have students publish a newsletter containing articles on teaching and learning in today's schools. Distribute it to senior and community centers and post it on the website.

- Include “empty nester” representatives on the advisory councils and budget committees.
- Create a “News of Interest for CHUFSD Citizens” button on the homepage of the website that contains articles of specific interest to taxpayers as well as important updates on the budget and important district initiatives.
- Tap influential citizens to mentor student leaders or to design a “Future Croton Leaders” program for high school students.
- Encourage student groups with an interest in technology to teach interested community members new communication skills (i.e., using digital photo and video software or social networking sites).
- Make annual presentations at community and senior centers on what schools are teaching and include students from different grade levels in the presentation.
- Send extra yearbooks and school publications to senior and community centers.
- Contribute school information to senior residence and community center newsletters.
- Provide informational materials for doctor/dental offices or other businesses where people sit and wait for services.
- Continue to promote attendance at school theater, music and athletic programs.

Action Step

Reinvigorate the CHHS Alumni Association

Croton-Harmon High School has an established Alumni Association, but it appears to be fairly dormant at present, with the last update posted to the website in 2011. As part of the effort to strengthen the bridge between the community and the schools, we believe CHUFSD could benefit from putting some energy into reactivating the CHHS Alumni Association to sustain long-term connections with graduates and involve them in activities that build pride and support for the schools as well as advocacy for public education. Expanding connections with successful CHUFSD graduates could be a wonderful resource the school system could reach out to and involve on a regular basis. With increased technology capabilities, it is possible to develop more interactive alumni programs to seek their assistance as volunteers and business partners in developing special programs for the schools.

In some school systems, alumni programs are administered by their foundations and members are involved in student leadership programs and fundraising to provide scholarships or extracurricular programs. It would seem to fit well with the mission of the Croton-Harmon Education Foundation to look

at the possibility of the CHHS Alumni Association falling under the umbrella of the Foundation to assist in coordinating activities and events.

**Major
Recommendation – 8**

Improve internal communication systems and processes.

One of the more critical components of success for every organization is good internal communication. Everyone wants to feel that they are a part of “something bigger” and that they have a mission and a sense of purpose. An intentional communication effort can help inspire employee trust and loyalty. Presently, the internal communication effort in CHUFSD is inconsistent at best and is a contributing factor to some morale issues that surfaced in the focus groups.

Improving internal communication must be a top priority of CHUFSD’s communication planning. The aim of a strong internal communication program should be creating a culture of employee engagement and empowerment, which is associated with highly effective organizations.

In the internal focus groups, staff talked about inconsistency in how information is disseminated across the district and noted that it is not always shared effectively with all buildings and departments. This may be the result of busy administrators assuming that employees already know the outcomes of decisions or they may be simply forgetting to share information. Some staff groups felt that they do not always receive adequate communication about issues parents have, which leaves them feeling unprepared and unsupported when called into a meeting with a principal and parent. Whatever the reason, it is important that CHUFSD leaders become more transparent by “closing the information loop” and explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives and then keeping them informed about progress and results.

Employees are frontline communicators who should receive important information before the media and public. When an issue emerges or when CHUFSD begins to address a problem or concern, it is essential that district leaders incorporate a “staff first” focus into strategic communication efforts.

Make timely employee communication a priority.

When it comes to information about what is going on around the district, staff in the focus groups said that they get much of their information via “word of mouth,” and they expressed some frustration that parents frequently receive information before they do.

When staff members rely on the “grapevine” or other outside sources for information, it hampers CHUFSD’s efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. Employees are well-connected to parents and community members and are considered by external groups to be a trusted source of information. They can serve as ambassadors if they are aware of current issues and the rationale behind the decision-making process and feel prepared to respond to questions.

To communicate effectively and credibly in “one clear voice,” all employees must understand that good communication and public relations are not solely the responsibility of administrators and the Board. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept some of the responsibility for this role, from the Board to part-time employees. They must understand the power and influence that they personally and collectively hold over public perception of, and satisfaction with, CHUFSD schools.

Timeliness and message consistency are critical to developing a strong, effective internal communication program. When employees feel as though they are “the last to know” or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as the news media or parents), they do not feel they are valued members of the team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their roles as ambassadors for the schools.

By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for education and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages, and training when appropriate, CHUFSD can exponentially expand its communication outreach in the community.

- **Investigate how the website can be used more effectively as a staff intranet and communication tool.** While the Staff Resources section of the website contains a great deal of information and tools helpful to staff, it is essentially designed as a resource vault and doesn’t include any current news or updates. Instead of creating a separate news update specifically for employees, we believe it would be more advantageous to redevelop the Staff Resources site into an “employees only” intranet that contains current news and updates that staff should be aware of along with relevant HR and professional development information, forms, meeting calendars and responsibility/action grids and minutes, important announcements, etc. Post time-specific “news to know” and reminders at least weekly, and as the site is developed over time, plan to add interactive components that will allow staff to submit ideas or comments, ask questions, and communicate with each other.

It is also important that staff be aware of information that is being shared with parents and the public and provided with along talking points so that they are prepared to answer questions or clarify issues. Include links and updates on information being distributed to parents and the public along with a short statement explaining that as frontline communicators and “ambassadors” for CHUFSD, the district wants to make sure employees are well-informed in advance.

Action Step

Use orientation sessions to introduce district culture and remind staff of responsibilities.

Participants in the secretaries’ and support staff focus groups noted that at one time the district provided orientation sessions for new hires, but has not done so in recent years. New staff orientation sessions are an effective way to introduce employees to CHUFSD’s culture of care and as well as to provide valuable training related to their job responsibilities. Orientation sessions also should contain a component on communication. Staff members can learn about the sources of information and be reminded that as employees of CHUFSD they have a responsibility to read key communications (i.e., email updates, memos, website posts, *Reflections*, etc.) sent out by the district, their school or department.

They should also be given guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests. A summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” can be prepared to distribute to all employees and refresher inservice sessions can be offered annually. We recommend CHUFSD consider reinstating orientation sessions as they are an excellent tool for ensuring staff have the skills and resources they need to meet job expectations. They also help build camaraderie and a sense of being part of a team. Provide new employees with an orientation package that includes:

- ✓ General information about CHUFSD;
- ✓ Current initiatives, programs and activities;
- ✓ An overview of the history of the school system;
- ✓ A list of all district publications, their purpose and when they are published;
- ✓ Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor; and
- ✓ Tips on being a positive “ambassador” for the schools and the importance of good communication to the district’s success.

Introduce the central office staff in the various departments that they will interact with. Provide time for new employees to ask questions about policies and procedures related to their employment.

Continue to pay attention to staff morale.

Some evidence of concern about low morale surfaced among some of the internal focus groups. A variety of issues may be contributing to this, including a feeling of not being supported by administrators when dealing with parent issues, limited opportunities for authentic input, an “overwhelming” workload, and inconsistency in procedures and communication. CHUFSD staff members expressed a great sense of pride in the schools and the work that they do. If the district wants to retain talented employees given current budget challenges, it must continue to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of staff and allow them to participate more fully in determining the future of CHUFSD.

Some suggestions to address this include:

- **Involve staff in decisions that affect them.** Staff morale can often hinge on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions must be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is a particularly important consideration for district administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of others throughout the district. For example, many participants in the staff focus groups said that they don’t have an opportunity to give input on decisions related to their jobs, or if they do give input they don’t hear back on the outcomes. These scenarios lead them to believe that their expertise and feedback is not valued and that their voice is not heard.

To demonstrate that district leaders value staff input, it is essential to provide sufficient time and advanced notice for staff to give input, offer various ways for providing input, act on the feedback when possible, and explain why it was not implemented if the input was not acted on.

Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. Once again, closing the communication loop is critical to helping improve operations and morale.

- **Continue to express appreciation.** It is unavoidable that the challenging economic and political climate around public education is impacting employee morale. It is important to recognize that it is *not* “business as usual” for the school district, local businesses, and CHUFSD families. It is more important than ever to acknowledge the daily efforts of all staff members – teachers, support staff, and administrators – who are shouldering extra tasks and making do with fewer resources so that the quality of education in the schools is not compromised. CHUFSD holds an annual staff appreciation luncheon and recognizes teachers achieving tenure and those who have 20 years of service. District leaders also seek to recognize employees in other ways throughout the year with special gifts and Dr. Fuhrman makes time to send personal notes to staff to mark special occasions or accomplishments.

We encourage district leaders to continue to seek out these types of opportunities to thank employees, celebrate successes, and create a team focus on the future. Small day-to-day acknowledgments of employee efforts can make the difference between a motivated or stressed-out staff, especially in these challenging times.

Schools and departments should continue to look for ways to regularly celebrate small successes. In an intense work environment, humor and sensitivity to people as individuals helps keep everyone happy and productive. In addition to any formal recognition programs, principals, administrators and supervisors should be encouraged to regularly acknowledge staff members in a more informal way. It may seem overly simple, but small things can make a big difference in an otherwise stressful day. Some suggestions include:

- ✓ Continue to commend employees for their initiative in a public setting such as a staff or Board meeting;
- ✓ Recognize them in the school newsletter or website;
- ✓ Send notes of congratulations for work well done and copy those notes to their personnel files; and
- ✓ Take time to stop by their classroom or worksite to say a personal thank you.

You should also focus on employee wellness, reducing workplace stress and ensuring that staff have a healthy work/life balance. Organizations that have such programs in place tend to be seen as “top” employers, and they realize the benefits of such programs in increased employee morale and productivity.

**Major
Recommendation – 9**

Begin planning to add social media to broaden communication outreach.

More and more emphasis is being placed on the use of social media to communicate in our daily lives. Focus group participants were asked about their interest in receiving information through social media conduits such as Facebook and Twitter and offered a mixed response. Participants clearly recognized that social media needs to be addressed, with one parent noting that it is “conspicuous by its absence” and a community member succinctly stating that, “It’s not a question of yes or no, it’s when or how.”

However, across the focus groups, the overarching concern about the use of social media in CHUFSD relates to student privacy issues. This is something the CHUFSD Board and administration have been

particularly sensitive to in the wake of parent concerns about the handling of student data related to the federal government's Race to the Top grant initiative. In response, the district has withdrawn from participation in the grant. Although the management of student data portals for state and federal accountability and using social media as a communication tool are different, unrelated concerns, CHUFSD leaders must remain diligent in protecting students' privacy and balance that with the need to communicate effectively with all the tools available.

Employee participants in the focus groups were the least interested in using social media tools, and expressed a great deal of discomfort with the idea of shifting to that type of communication. In addition, staff members expressed concern about who will be responsible for managing social media communications. However, CHUFSD must begin to plan for, embrace and incorporate the use of these new communication tools if it wants to be recognized as an innovative educational leader and premier school system. CHUFSD must own its "brand" in all mediums. Non-participation is not an option in today's world, or the district risks someone else co-opting its brand and reputation.

Twitter and Facebook have proven to be invaluable tools in emergency scenarios such as weather events, natural disasters (i.e., tornados, fires, hurricanes, etc.), lock-down situations, or incidents of violence on or near school campuses. With appropriate policies in place and staff training on their use, people will become more comfortable with social media so that it can be effectively incorporated into the district's communication toolbox.

Action Step

Start with research and planning

As with every communication strategy, some research is needed to determine key audiences to target via social media networks, as they will not be effective for all. It is important to recognize that young staff and parents, as well as students, who are "digital natives," are more proficient in the use of social media, so a district presence is required to reach and connect with those audiences since social networks, smartphones, and mobile apps are their communication standard. And within different age groups there are preferences for specific social media networks, so identifying who is using what is key to ensuring messages are delivered.

In deference to the concerns of parents and staff about privacy issues, CHUFSD should move forward thoughtfully in implementing social media. We would recommend that the district focus initially on the use of Facebook and Twitter as tools to share timely information with stakeholders. This could include weather closure announcements, event/meeting reminders (for open houses, parent-teacher conferences, student performances, etc.), sports scores, crisis-related alerts, links to new posts on the website, etc. A Facebook page can be configured to allow only designated employees (or a contracted service provider

such as the BOCES) to post, and protocols set up that do not allow students or staff members to be “tagged” and linked to personal pages.

CHUFSD prides itself on its relationship with students and families, and Twitter offers another way to connect and track concerns that may require a response, as well as being an easy tool to quickly disseminate information to followers.

Consideration must be given to designating staff members who can post, manage the sites and respond to questions or misinformation. Initially, we don’t recommend that Board members engage in active posting to Facebook or Twitter (in their roles as members of the Board) as it is important that open meeting law requirements be strictly adhered to. The Board also should consult district legal counsel to clarify what is acceptable and what is not since this can vary state to state. We suggest that district leaders pay attention to how other local government entities and officials (such as the Village of Croton) are using these communication channels, note what is working, and if certain strategies might be effective for the district to consider in the future.

CHUFSD also will need to set up processes for monitoring major social media channels in the community (i.e., local blogs, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) to identify and analyze any conversations taking place about CHUFSD or its schools. This will help determine what messages the district needs to be pushing out to stakeholders as well as any inaccuracies that need correcting. Positive comments gleaned can also provide marketing points about the school system.

Another important step is to claim the district’s user names (any iteration, i.e., Croton-Harmon School District, Croton-Harmon Schools, CHUFSD, etc.) and accounts for all social media sites, not just Facebook and Twitter, regardless of whether you use them, to ensure that the district can secure and control the sites.

Survey parents to determine which social media networks they currently use and the types of information they would like to receive via Facebook and Twitter. Surveys can be conducted online, or sent home in school newsletters. Or, parents can be asked to fill out a short questionnaire at parent conferences, and questions about social media preferences can be included in enrollment materials.

Action Step

Develop policies and guidelines; train staff

Policies and guidelines are needed to ensure the proper use of social media and the protection of students and staff. The CHUFSD Board recognizes this and is in the process of updating and developing new policies for this purpose. Some examples and resources that may be helpful to the Board in addressing policies and guidelines for social media include:

- IBM's Social Computing Guidelines at www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html.
- Papillion-La Vista School District (Neb.) www.nspra.org/files/Papillion-LaVista%20Social%20Media%20Guidelines.pdf
- Minnetonka (Minn.) Public Schools www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/policies/470.pdf.
- NSPRA: Social School Public Relations blog <http://socialschoolpr.wordpress.com>
- www.edsocialmedia.com
- www.socialmediatoday.com

Before implementing a social media communication strategy, inservice meetings should be held with all staff to explain how the district plans to use specific social media and its benefits as a communication tool, address any concerns they might have, review the site rules and controls set, review policies, and outline the protocols and procedures they are expected to follow. Training staff in the appropriate and professional use of social media will help build confidence in the use of a new communication tool to expand and strengthen connections with families and the community.

Action Step

Hold parent information meetings prior to launch

Once it has been determined which social media networks the district will implement, hold information meetings for parents before launching the sites. Topics to cover at these meetings should include:

- Why the district selected the particular social media;
- How it plans to use these tools to communicate;
- The benefits of using these communication tools;
- The protocols and safeguards in place to protect students and staff;
- Site rules and rules of engagement, guidelines and policies;
- Who can post and how offenders will be handled;
- Q& A to address concerns; and
- Information about how to follow CHUFSD on social media.

The goal should be to facilitate a smooth launch by addressing any questions and concerns of parents and staff in advance to ensure understanding, allay any fears, and educate them on the value of social media as a communication tool.

Once the district begins using social media, information should be included in publications, and links placed on the website for easy sign-up access and to let people know the district has a presence on each.

A conservative, controlled roll-out of social media will help to ease concerns and build the comfort level among stakeholders. If over time the district decides to engage in a more open conversation with

stakeholders on social media, there are controls that can be set to manage that as well. For example, most districts (and even local newspapers) that allow comments to be posted on their sites now require all posts to come from a verifiable source, and retain the right to remove inappropriate posts or block offenders who disregard the stated rules.

**Major
Recommendation – 10**

Continue to improve the effectiveness and usability of the district and school websites.

The Internet, digital communication and social media have dramatically changed the way school systems need to think about providing basic information, as well as how they interact with internal and external stakeholders and the general public. These new media are now critical communication and marketing tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of CHUFSD and its schools.

Today, parents and taxpayers expect to be able to access school information quickly and easily online. The website is a key component of the overall communication effort and CHUFSD must strive to increase interactivity and keep the site dynamic and interesting so users return regularly.

The CHUFSD website contains an extensive and comprehensive amount of information. Although focus group participants felt the district website has been improved since the BOCES has taken over its management, many still find it difficult to find specific information when looking for it for the first time, as did the auditor. Participants in the secretaries' focus group commented that they must "walk" parents through the site to locate information they need, which to a degree defeats the purpose of providing information online. CHUFSD's website is a tremendous and valuable resource that could benefit from some redesign and organization in order to maximize its use as a communication tool.

Some suggestions to improve and expand CHUFSD's website include:

Action Step

Include a "How to Use this Website" section on the homepage.

Many focus group participants said that they had to "dig" to find information on the website, which is time consuming and frustrating. To help address this problem, provide a link with tips and guidelines for

navigating the site and finding specific content areas. In addition to being a helpful tool for site visitors, it will save time for office personnel who often have to guide parents and others through the site by phone.

Action Step

Conduct research and user-testing to determine future enhancements to district and school websites.

Ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the district and school websites is important to ensure that they meet the needs of stakeholders and the district is maximizing their value as communication tools.

Use web analytics to track the number of visitors to each site, how long they spend on the site, which pages they visit most often, how they move through the site, and other useful information. Some districts have successfully gathered user feedback by hosting “hands on” sessions for site users to evaluate first-hand how they navigate the website to find information. This is an excellent way to determine how to improve the user-friendliness of the site and what information to emphasize. We encourage CHUFSD to consider this kind of assessment, as many of the focus group participants noted that the website was not “intuitive” and they often have trouble locating information.

Review award-winning websites and intranets recognized by communication organizations such as IABC, PRSA, *PR News* and other communication entities. Examples of award-winning school system websites are available at www.nspr.org/awards/pubs_media.

Action Step

Carefully examine the content provided and its location on website homepages.

Vitaly Friedman of *Smashing Magazine* says, “Users don’t read, they scan. Analyzing a webpage, users search for some fixed points or anchors which would guide them through the content of the page.” Users scan web pages in an “F” pattern, looking for key information across the top of the screen and then down the left side. Leaving key information at the bottom of the screen for users to access creates a situation where the user 1) may not catch the information through a quick scan, and 2) may never scroll down the homepage far enough to find the information in the first place. Consider moving key information up on the page, even if that means leaving links at the bottom of the screen and creating redundancy through adding more pages to the pull down menus above or the left-hand column. Redundancy in links to website copy can be a plus since users naturally access information in different ways. Some additional suggestions include:

- **Consider adding a “Parent” tab to the banner menu to contain all information and forms relevant to parents and families.** At present, information valuable to parents is spread throughout a number of sections. Pull things like forms, handbooks, registration information, K12Alerts and Parent Portal information and place them under the “Parent” tab so everything is in one place and easy to access.
- **Evaluate the current menu tabs to determine which are used most frequently.** Consider moving those that are not accessed as often under a related tab. For example, “Technology” has its own tab, but most of the menu items are related to staff and instruction, so it is likely it gets much less traffic than other pages. “Technology” could be moved under the “Departments” tab to free up a spot. “Athletics” can be moved under “Schools.”
- **Include a “Welcome to CHUFSD” or “Moving to CHUFSD?” page under the “About Us” tab** that provides basic information about the district and schools that would be of interest to new families and real estate agents. This should include enrollment information, program and services highlights, awards and recognitions, graduation rates – any information that answers questions families have when shopping for schools and that helps to market the district.
- **Include descriptions and contact information on department pages.** With the exception of Transportation, when you click on the various department pages, the page opens with a couple of links, but no description or contact information. When links go to individual schools, contact information may be found there, but this requires an extra “click” to reach it. There is a lot of wasted space on the pages that could be used more advantageously. We recommend that each department prepare a one or two paragraph description of what they do and how they serve students and staff. The page should also include the names, titles and contact information for staff in each department. It is also helpful to include photos of the department administrators.
- **Add short profiles to the Office of the Superintendent and Board of Ed homepages.** In order to raise visibility and strengthen relationships, add a photo and vita information to the Superintendent’s page, and add short profiles on the background of each Board member to the Board’s homepage, in addition to their contact information.
- **Move school-specific information to the top of individual school webpages.** Parents access their school websites for information directly related to that particular school. Therefore school news and announcements should be the first items at the top of the page. District news and information is important to include, but can be moved to the side or lower on the page in order to better facilitate parents’ communication needs.
- **Strive to limit the number of “clicks” needed to reach information.** Whenever possible, provide information on the first link rather than forcing users to go through multiple links to access what they need. For example, clicking on a “Message from the Superintendent” in a school menu opens to a basically empty page that contains another link to the actual message. Place the message directly on

the opening page rather than taking the reader through another step. The more steps it takes to reach information, the more likely you are to lose the reader in the process.

Action Step

Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality along with multi-media to engage users.

The best websites provide more than just static content for users. They provide users with interactive functionality and dynamic content, which brings them back to these websites regularly. Multi-media features such as video, photos and audio also engage users and keep them on the website longer. General web research shows that users want to customize websites to their own interests and needs. Social media elements also increase user engagement. Along with “pulling” users in with engaging content and functionality, the best websites also “push” out information through strategies such as self-select subscriptions, e-newsletters and RSS feeds.

CHUFSD has tried to initiate a few interactive features, such as the Superintendent’s Pictures, Tiger TV and some curriculum videos (which are difficult to locate on the website). However, outside of Board meeting videos, most of these features have languished and haven’t been updated in months. As resources allow, we recommend the district begin planning to refresh these interactive elements and add more. Consider creating a work group of district technology staff, the BOCES consultant overseeing the website, and administrators responsible for communication, such as the principals, to develop a plan, recommendations and a timeline for improving the website. You may also be able to tap the expertise of parents or community members to assist with this effort.

Action Step

Use the website to deliver key messages.

Information placed on the website should be considered in the context of how it delivers key messages. One suggestion is to create a “This Week in CHUFSD Schools” section on the homepage for short informational items and key messages that change weekly and allow for a variety of timely topics to be addressed. Information placed on the website should be considered in the context of how it delivers key messages. To make the website more interactive, site visitors should be asked to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or by emailing responses. Feedback links that let users offer comments could be made available in most sections. Comments collected from these links can offer valuable insights into the information needs of users – and how well the current site is meeting them.

Action Step

Add a “Frequently Asked Questions” section to the homepage.

A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the homepage of the website is a useful resource for the public and staff. Keep it current by asking central office and school secretaries and other staff to track the questions they are most often asked by callers (see Recommendation 2). These can then be compiled and added as updates. There are some FAQs posted under the Board’s page on the website. These pertain primarily to the role of the Board and board meeting procedures, but there are some items that could be moved to a general FAQ.

FAQs can also be used for “myth busting” and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another prominent spot on the homepage for easy access. School and district publications should promote the website as a source of information when people have questions. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be clearly visible near the homepage and not buried deep within the website.

Action Step

Use the Croton-Harmon Schoolhouse page to provide progress reports on the District Goals and other special initiatives.

Regular updates and status reports on positive progress on the District Goals should be clearly posted on the website to raise the profile and demonstrate accountability, transparency and a commitment to the district’s mission. Use the Croton-Harmon Schoolhouse for these updates as it is the logical site for collecting all relevant information and work. Increase the visibility of the page by giving the logo link a more prominent place on the homepage (near the top so it is visible without scrolling down). Promote it for quick access, as this is important accountability information for the community

Action Step

Add a “subscribe” feature to the homepage.

Give users a variety of choices of types of information to subscribe to – an e-news bulletin (see Recommendation 6), news releases, Board meeting highlights, job postings, lunch menus, etc. User testing will help determine items that visitors wish to receive by email. Alternatively, create an RSS feed on key website features, such as the “Homepage Highlights” and news items, and the e-news bulletin to automatically notify site users when new or updated information is posted to the page. This will allow the website to “push” specific information out to interested audiences.

Action Step

Calendar website content to ensure it is current and accurate.

It is important that information on all of the CHUFSD websites – district and schools – be kept current. In our review of the site, we found that the Tiger TV links on the district’s homepage and in the “About Us” page contain old schedules, although they are current on the individual school webpages. News stories and other features should be archived at least monthly and new information added to keep the site fresh and encourage users to return.

To ensure that website content is current, determine a calendar date for each content area by which items should be removed from the site or reviewed to ensure it remains timely and accurate. At a minimum, review the content annually. This calendar should also identify the title of the staff member responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the content – normally the person responsible for the content in “real life” should also be responsible for the website content review.

**Major
Recommendation – 11**

Increase the focus on diversity and inclusive communication.

As Croton’s population becomes more diverse, it will be important to increase the focus on inclusive communication. Diversity needs to be understood in the broadest sense, creating a welcoming

environment for every child, family member, and community member, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, family structure, religion, differing abilities, or sexual orientation. CHUFSD needs to think carefully about any individuals or groups who may not currently see themselves reflected in the life of the schools or district or those who face barriers, be it physical, mental, emotional, or linguistic. Here are some suggestions for increasing the focus on diversity and inclusion:

- **Ensure that every communication plan has a diversity/inclusion component.** Set clear measurable objectives for increasing diversity communication and measure success on achieving these objectives.
- **Make sure all CHUFSD materials and communication vehicles visually reflect diversity and inclusion.** This means depicting children and adults of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as differing abilities. It also means showing various types of families – single parent, blended and same-sex parent families.
- **Assess whether district and school processes are welcoming for all types of families.** Do school communications go only to the parent with primary custody or are there flexible arrangements for separated/divorced parents who do not have primary custody? Are translated forms or assistance available for those who don't speak English? Do registration forms accommodate same-sex parents and blended families?
- **Conduct formal research with the diverse communities to better understand their communication needs,** increase the extent to which they feel welcome and included, and remove barriers to their full participation.
- **Conduct cultural awareness training with all staff** so that they are comfortable and have a better understanding of the students and families they will be interacting with in the schools.
- **Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families.** Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable, such as church or home. Seek ways to reach out to families and build strong connections to the schools.
- **Plan for a future multilingual component on the website.** As a long-range goal, CHUFSD should investigate ways it can communicate with non-English-speaking constituents through the website. While website tools such as Google Translate and Babblefish help fill the gap, they don't address the need to provide quality translations of critical documents and information. Two districts leading the way in the area of multilingual communication are Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, and Peel School Board in Ontario, Canada. Speakers of languages other than English can now find information about their schools in one click from their website homepages. Webpages have been created in Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish and Vietnamese among others to enable non-English-speaking families to more easily find news, documents and information about services. Visit their

sites at www.fcps.edu and www.peelsb.com for ideas on how to use the websites for multilingual communication.

**Major
Recommendation – 12**

Develop a branding/marketing program to build CHUFSD's reputation as a leading school system.

CHUFSD enjoys a solid level of support from parents and community members. It has a reputation as a high-performing, progressive school system that provides a quality educational program. Focus group participants consistently noted: the excellent, dedicated staff; small class size and individualized attention; accessible leadership; strong community support and involved families; focus on the arts; and culture of care. These are all strengths that can be capitalized on in a branding/marketing program.

In the current economic climate, it is important for CHUFSD to identify and establish a strong brand position for marketing its schools and academic programs to current and potential families, as well as for establishing its position as a premier school system in New York. A strong "brand" identity is beneficial to the village of Croton-on-Hudson as well, because good schools help to attract and sustain the local economy. The branding/marketing effort should focus not only on raising CHUFSD's profile and continuing to attract new families and staff, but also on retaining families who are contemplating enrollment in private/parochial schools or neighboring districts.

More than a name, logo or tagline, strong brands are known for something unique – a promise of value that no other product or organization can claim in quite the same way with as much credibility. The goal of branding is to develop customer loyalty. CHUFSD has a strong, supportive family base and is known for its focus on students and creative environment, two pillars to begin building its brand on. The district has also rolled out the Croton-Harmon Schoolhouse site to capture and organize important elements of the educational program in an easy to access and use location.

Some additional ideas to expand marketing efforts include:

Action Step

Consider creating an annual secondary theme to highlight key focus areas.

In addition to the “Excellence in Education” tagline used in conjunction with the logo, we suggest that CHUFSD create a focused theme each year that is directly tied to a District Goal. A secondary theme can help to focus key messages for the year as well as serve as a rallying point for staff. It can be incorporated into new staff orientation, school publications and student handbooks, websites, and other materials and activities that allow staff to develop their own creative interpretations to celebrate the theme. One possibility to consider is to play off the focus group comments that CHUFSD is “different,” “unique” and “creative” and roll out a secondary theme that proclaims something like, “Croton-Harmon Schools – Different than the Rest,” or “Creativity for Success.”

Action Step

Assess all communication vehicles to ensure a consistent “brand look,” feel and experience.

To enhance marketing efforts and ensure consistent brand identity, it is also important to ensure that there is a consistent “brand look” or recognizable graphic elements in all publications, websites, signage, and other collateral materials. To develop a strong image, this should go beyond simply including the district logo. When materials are laid out side-by-side, there should be a clear visual relationship between them that projects CHUFSD’s brand identity. Stakeholder interactions with district schools and departments should also mirror a consistent experience with how they are served by staff members.

Branding involves more than producing sharp collateral materials, a powerful website or purchasing paid media (advertising). Like Nike, FedEx, Starbucks, and Google, great brands are sustainable over time and make an emotional connection with a targeted group or groups. Simplicity is vital; brands should try to own one thought or position in the mind of the consumer. Education may be complex, but communicating about education doesn’t have to be.

The real key to selling an “invisible” product like public education, however, is creating the right experiences – each and every time a stakeholder comes in contact with the schools and its people. Marketing guidelines help school systems keep a consistent look, feel, tone and manner. The right experiences should convey CHUFSD’s values, attitudes and beliefs.

Some marketing suggestions include:

Action Step

Focus on clear, consistent messages.

The key to effective branding and marketing is the development of key messages delivered in “one clear voice.” Focus group participants noted that information is not always pushed down throughout the school system in a consistent manner. In order to clearly define its brand, CHUFSD needs to close the information loop and stay consistently on message with all stakeholder audiences in order to maximize effectiveness (see Recommendation 4). Focusing communications around a central theme that reflects the district vision will help develop a message that can be delivered consistently in “one clear voice” by all staff. This can also provide a focus for staff in their role as ambassadors of the school system.

Action Step

Develop targeted information materials.

At present, anyone seeking general information about the school system must go to the website. While the site contains a lot of information, it is not particularly easy to intuit where to find specific information, such as how to register for school. Consider creating a more comprehensive page for new families on the website that contains instructions, forms, detailed information and FAQs geared for those new to the community. We also recommend that information pages be developed that focus on real estate agents, business leaders, community development representatives, and potential teacher candidates. Materials should be included that are specific to the audience or purpose.

CHUFSD also may want to consider the development of a QR Code for use in publications to take readers right to a newcomer’s page (as well as other key information pages) on the district website. This adds immediacy to the information wanted by younger parents. Another consideration is the development of a mobile app that would take people to an overview of the district.

Action Step

Develop guidelines for offering school tours.

Research indicates that people who have recently been inside a school building have a better impression of schools than those who have not. Consider developing guidelines for offering school tours to community members, and particularly parents of pre-schoolers and new residents. A school tour and visit

is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighborhood residents and prospective families to promote the benefits of CHUFSD schools. In light of changes and school construction projects, school tours would be an excellent way to showcase the benefits to students and demonstrate fiscal accountability to taxpayers. Along with developing guidelines, training should be provided to key staff and also student leaders to serve as tour guides.

Action Step

Conduct exit/entrance surveys.

Short surveys administered to parents when withdrawing or enrolling students in schools can provide valuable information for marketing and communication planning. Similar surveys can also be administered to staff. These surveys should be designed to find out why they are leaving or what brought them to CHUFSD, what their expectations were or are, how best to communicate with them, etc. This information can help identify specific schools or departments where communication needs to be improved and provide important data for marketing efforts.

Action Step

Implement an outreach campaign to real estate agents.

Many school districts have made a concerted effort to nurture strong relationships with real estate agents, which enables them to promote the merits of the district and accurately respond to questions about the schools. Real estate agents are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community and they play an important role in creating a positive “first impression” of the schools. It is important for them to present accurate information about CHUFSD in their discussions with prospective buyers. In addition, real estate agents have a vested interest in helping to promote the schools as a positive sales commodity in Croton-on-Hudson.

Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year at a school. Offer a bus tour of the district to highlight specific programs. Create a page on the website with information useful to potential homebuyers that agents can reference to clients. Consider providing agents with materials that they can give to clients when showing homes in the district. Real estate agents are key communicators who need to be kept informed and updated on new developments in CHUFSD that give it a marketing edge.

Considerations for implementing recommendations.

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* and it would be unrealistic for CHUFSD to undertake all of them immediately. This report contains recommendations that cover what we consider to be components of a core program that can be implemented in the short term as well as those that may be incorporated into long-range planning. There is certainly more here than can be accomplished in a single year without a designated staff position. It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem overwhelming. CHUFSD is committed to developing an effective communication program and has a number of basic components in place. The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping district leaders to not only improve, expand and enhance current efforts, but to begin incorporating new components that will allow it build a model program emulated by others.

In order to successfully implement a comprehensive communication plan that supports the District Goals and Long Range Plan, it is important that consideration be given annually to the budgetary and personnel resources that will be needed as CHUFSD communication needs grow and change. The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive, and district leaders must prioritize by need and importance how communication resources will be expended and look to adding professional staff when appropriate and feasible.

As we have noted throughout this report, the recommendations presented are a shared responsibility of the entire CHUFSD staff. All departments and schools must be accountable for improving communication and take the lead in some of the areas addressed in the report. We encourage district leaders to review the recommendations in this light and with an eye to how specific communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among central office departments and administrative teams.

However, in the long-term, we believe CHUFSD will need to give consideration to creating a communications position in order to maximize communication, engagement and marketing efforts and develop the strategic communication program that it desires and the community expects.

There is no set formula for staffing a school district communications office. Conducting comparisons to neighboring districts can be helpful as a starting point, but ultimately, staffing should be determined based on what the district is striving to accomplish with its overall communication program. Even districts of similar size may have very different communication needs and priorities that would dictate specific staffing functions, so we do not believe staffing ratios can be evaluated strictly on a comparable number of positions. The communication expectations and needs of the community must also be taken into consideration.

Today's successful school systems recognize that communication is most effective when it is a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. Recognizing that budget limitations are a concern, we have tried to provide recommendations that can be implemented at minimal expense or by reallocating existing funds. However, it is also important that staffing and budget allocations for communications be reviewed annually to determine needs and ensure continued effectiveness.

In any successful communication program, it is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. Today's successful school systems recognize that communication is most effective when it is a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. Recognizing that budget limitations are a concern, we have tried to provide recommendations that can be implemented at minimal expense or by reallocating existing funds.

Action Step

Conduct regular research and evaluation on communication efforts.

One of the challenges in making use of a report like this is how to prioritize and focus communication efforts. As the district's programs have expanded and stakeholder expectations evolved, so have its communication needs. The advent of multiple new communication technologies, along with an increasingly diverse constituency, has increased the complexity of communications and underscored the need to take a multi-layered approach to delivering information and key messages. In addition, today's parents and community stakeholders expect to be actively engaged in the education process and this requires ongoing outreach and opportunities for dialogue and participation in decision-making.

Effective communications, engagement, and marketing programs are based on a solid foundation of research. CHUFSD's strategic communication plan should include a research component designed to identify what stakeholders know or don't know, what information they want to receive, key audiences for specific messages, and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. In today's media-oriented society, information overload is a problem not just in the workplace, but at home as well. Therefore, information must be of interest and value to target audiences in order to catch their attention.

Before expending resources on redesigning or creating new communication vehicles or programs, research should be conducted to determine what is currently working or not working, and identify user preferences and messages that resonate with specific groups. Research will also help to identify tools and strategies that are no longer deemed useful or that demonstrate a low return on investment, be it in staff time or money. These can then be eliminated from the communication plan. Research-based communication will support CHUSFD's efforts to engage and build solid relationships with key

stakeholder groups. This communication audit is a significant start that will guide the district in developing a strategic communication plan, but ongoing research will be needed to ensure that communication remains relevant and effective.

Research does not have to be expensive or require a trained researcher. There are a number of effective strategies that can be implemented with a minimum amount of effort. Some suggestions include:

- **Conduct readership surveys of *Reflections*, school newsletters and websites.** The primary focus of publications – print or electronic – should be to deliver news and information about the schools and district based on what parents, community members and employees say they want to know. We suggest readership surveys or focus groups be conducted yearly in order to determine changing reader interests and evaluate content needs as well as format and method of delivery. Principals should be encouraged to conduct surveys on their individual school newsletters and user-surveys or analytics should also be conducted on the websites.

The surveys can be simple, but the goal is to determine whether people are reading each publication and if they find it valuable. If not, the publication should be eliminated and the money invested in other communication activities. A readership survey can also provide guidance on the type of information to expand in the publication. We suggest surveys be conducted early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes. Surveys can be conducted online, by including an insert or tear-off page in print publications, or, at the school-level, by distributing to parents at parent-teacher conferences or open houses.

- **Include communication questions in existing surveys.** Take advantage of existing opportunities to evaluate communication effectiveness. Incorporating two or three targeted questions related to communication in regular and ongoing parent and staff climate surveys can help track message effectiveness and build a baseline from which to evaluate communication efforts.
- **Hold focus groups.** Focus groups with parents, staff and community members can be used to gauge readership of publications and websites, as well as to gather input on a variety of other issues. They can be informal (by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions of groups that are already meeting) or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative the district is considering. This also demonstrates that the district values input and is committed to active engagement opportunities.
- **Use intercept surveys.** Another form of research that can be implemented efficiently and quickly is the intercept survey. When there is a district or school event, assign a cadre of staff members armed with two or three questions to question attendees as they are coming in to the event. Use of a digital audio recorder can make it easier to gather the answers quickly. This can be an effective way to gather some input from a specific target audience.

- **Evaluate outcomes.** Following the completion of any major project or initiative, evaluate its success and determine which communication strategies worked well, which can be improved or revised in the future, and which can be eliminated. The evaluation should focus on impact, results and outcomes, not merely outputs. This step is often overlooked, yet its value as a planning tool is critical to strategic communication efforts.

Action Step

Explore options for creating a communications position.

In order for the communications program to be as effective as possible, we believe it may be time for CHUFSD to explore the possibility of creating a communications position. If this is a feasible option, it is important for the communications professional to report directly to the superintendent and serve on the senior leadership team. Unless the communications function is at the table when critical issues and decisions are being discussed, it will be extremely difficult to provide the objective strategic counsel that can ensure CHUFSD is being proactive in delivering key messages and reaching its target audiences.

An important role of the communications professional is to present the public's perspective and potential response to issues and programs being considered by district leaders. The value of this function cannot be overstated in today's 24/7 mobile-communication society. Another key role is to monitor issues and trends that have implications for the district and propose proactive communication strategies that will help build CHUFSD's reputation as a leading school system. Serving on the superintendent's leadership team would allow the communications professional to hear about and present issues first-hand and help frame and implement strategic responses to emerging concerns.

Some districts have been successful in creating a full-time communication position by combining it with responsibility for the Continuing/Adult Education and After-School Programs, or board secretarial duties. This may be an option CHUFSD might explore as a way of budgeting for a position. A contract or part-time position also may be a consideration.

In order to justify the need for a dedicated communications position, it may be helpful to assess the communication projects and tasks that are needed to support the District Goals and Long Range Plan in light of the recommendations in this report. Some questions to ask include:

- Which communication strategies are needed to promote and support the District Goals?
- How critical are the ramifications of implementing a particular communication task or strategy to the District Goals?
- What specific expertise is needed to successfully implement the communication strategies?

- What time commitment is required to successfully accomplish specific communication strategies?
- What other department could take responsibility for specific communication programs, tasks or strategies in lieu of a dedicated communications position? Is this a reasonable and doable expectation?

This assessment of primary communication tasks and responsibilities should help clarify where communication efforts need to be boosted and provide evidence of the need for a dedicated position. Identifying priorities and responsibilities also will focus the needs assessment for a communications position on the critical strategic communication, engagement and marketing activities that are important for building support and raising the profile of CHUFSD in New York.

Key job responsibilities for a communications position should include:

- Developing an annual strategic communication and marketing plan and overseeing its implementation;
- Developing specific communication plans for any major issues, initiatives or projects that the district is planning;
- Managing news media relations;
- Serving as lead spokesperson for strategic critical communication (i.e., crisis response, new initiatives/campaigns, breaking news, etc.);
- Producing internal and external news publications (print and electronic);
- Coordinating the production of communication and marketing materials (i.e., for print, video, websites);
- Producing and managing content on the district website;
- Developing the use of new communication applications for the website, such as webcasts and podcasts, RSS feeds, and social media functions;
- Managing the K12Alerts voice notifications;
- Coordinating the Key Communicator Network;
- Coordinating and updating the crisis communication management plan;
- Serving as liaison to key community/business leaders and civic organizations;

- Serving as liaison to the PTAs;
- Supporting Board Advocacy Committee efforts;
- Developing and implementing public engagement strategies to increase stakeholder involvement;
- Implementing research and evaluation techniques to assess and improve the effectiveness of the communication and marketing program;
- Providing communication advice and support for principals;
- Assisting central office administrators with planning and implementation of communication strategies related to District Goal components;
- Providing communication training inservice for staff;
- Serving as contact and liaison to a PR Cadre (see below);
- Serving as liaison to the Croton-Harmon Education Foundation;
- Assisting the superintendent by providing background information and support for building strategic alliances with local communities and area government organizations and officials;
- Preparing speeches and presentations for the superintendent, Board members and other administrators as needed; and
- Developing and administering the communications budget.

Action Step

Implement a PR Cadre to assist with the communication effort.

Ask each principal and department head to appoint a staff member to serve as representative to a district PR Cadre. This group can assist in gathering news and information about their schools or departments and help to disseminate key messages to staff. They can also assist in reporting rumors and emerging issues. These representatives are responsible for notifying a designated administrator (or the communications professional if a position is created) about important happenings at their schools (i.e., events, awards, student and staff accomplishments, special interest stories, etc.). Create a news tip sheet or referral form that Cadre representatives can complete and submit for consideration. Submissions can be sorted into categories (i.e., for use in internal or external publications, expanded to a news release, or for inclusion in a weekly online media advisory, etc.).

The best PR Cadre representatives in schools are people who know what is going on and have a nose for news – the library media specialist, an enthusiastic teacher, a guidance counselor or school administrative assistant. The most important attribute is that they have a passion for their schools and want to help build a positive reputation. Training should be offered at the beginning of the year that provides guidelines for what constitutes a viable news story and tips for tying stories to district and school objectives and strategies. We also recommend holding an appreciation reception or meeting at the end of the year to celebrate positive communication achievements.

Conclusion

CHUFSD is a school district that is committed to providing students with a high quality education, and together with a supportive community, is moving forward under a strong leadership team and a well-defined Long Range Plan and District Goals to accomplish its mission and establish itself as a premier school system in Westchester County and New York State. It faces the same communication challenges all school systems face in today's complex education environment. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and CHUFSD leaders understand that effective communication is critical if the district is to move forward and position itself as a top district of choice for families.

Making the commitment to improve communication is the first step in creating a successful two-way communication process that builds support for education and understanding of the important role public schools play in our communities and nation. We believe that CHUFSD has the components necessary to continue to improve and excel – visionary leadership, dedicated staff, strong community support, and a commitment to planned, strategic communication.

Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions
- What Is NSPRA?
- Auditor's Vita

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Parents/Community

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the Croton-Harmon School District?
 - What do you like best about the schools here?
 - If you could choose one thing for the district to improve immediately, what would it be?
2. When it comes to communication, what does the district do well?
 - Is information delivered in a timely manner?
 - How can the district and schools become more proactive in communicating with you?
 - What would you consider to be an acceptable response time from teachers or administrators if you call or email with a question?
 - In what areas does the district most need to improve communication?
3. What is your primary source of news and information about the district and schools?
4. What information do you want to receive from the district and schools?
 - If you have a child in school, what information do you need about your child's achievement?
 - Do you use the Parent Portal to see how your child is doing in school?
 - If yes, what would make it more useful for you?
5. What is the best way for the district and schools to get important information to you?
 - Do you read the *Reflections* newsletter?
 - Do you use the print *Calendar* on a regular basis?
 - Do you ever watch Channel 77 for school news?
 - Does your child's school regularly provide the information you need?
6. Would you be interested in receiving district and school news and information via Facebook or Twitter?
 - Would you be interested in a mobile app other web-based tool for communication?
7. What information do you typically go to the district website to find?
 - What other information would you like to have available on the website?
8. Do you feel you have opportunities to provide input and express your views to district leaders on important issues and decisions?
 - Do you feel district leaders listen to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Staff and Administrators

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the district?
 - How do you think parents and others in the community would describe it?
2. What are you most proud of as an employee of Croton-Harmon School District?
 - If you could choose one thing for the district to improve immediately, what would it be?
3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the district do well?
 - How can the district and schools become more proactive with communications?
 - What do you consider to be a reasonable response time for answering calls or emails from parents?
 - In what areas does the district most need to improve communication?
4. As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
 - What (or who) is your primary source of news and information about the district and schools?
 - Do you read the *Reflections* newsletter?
 - Do you use the print *Calendar* on a regular basis?
 - Do you ever watch Channel 77 for school news?
 - What information would you like to receive that you aren't getting now?
 - What is the best way for district leaders to communicate with you?
5. Would you be interested in receiving district and school news and information via Facebook or Twitter?
 - Would you be interested in a mobile app or other web-based tool for communication?
6. The district has invested in an online Parent Portal for parents to track important information about their child's progress in school. How effective is the Parent Portal in serving parents' needs?
 - As a teacher, is it easy for you to use for communicating with parents?
7. What information do you typically go to the district website to find?
 - What other information would you like to have available on the website?
8. *(For administrators)* What assistance do you need to improve communication at your school or department?
9. Do you feel you have opportunities to provide input and express your views to district leaders?
 - How can the district best provide those opportunities?
10. Do you feel district leaders listen to input from the staff and community when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
11. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Board Members

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the district?
 - How do you think parents and others in the community would describe it?
2. What are you most proud of as a board member of Croton-Harmon School District?
 - What one thing do you believe is most in need of improvement?
3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the district do well?
 - How can the district and schools become more proactive with communications?
 - What do you consider to be a reasonable response time for teachers and administrators to answer calls or emails from parents?
 - In what areas does the district most need to improve communication?
4. Which of the district's current communication vehicles (i.e., the website, *Reflections*, Calendar, Channel 77, K12Alerts, etc.) do you think are most effective in delivering the district's message? Why?
5. Social media tools (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) have become an integral component of most organization's communication efforts. What are your concerns about the district using social media to communicate?
 - Would about a mobile app?
6. What other communication challenges do you see facing the district in the future?

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and the U.S. Department of Defense Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

With over 75 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files, and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

NSPRA has 33 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations, along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides school public relations/communication counsel and assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations. For many of these organizations, we have completed comprehensive communication audits to analyze the effectiveness of their overall communication programs and recommend strategies for improving and enhancing their efforts.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each July. This 4-day conference offers more than 70 topics and expert speakers on a wide array of school communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement topics.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter, *eNetwork*, is a communication resource for all school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major communication issue and offers proven strategies educators can use to address it and other concerns. *Principal Communicator* is our monthly building-level print newsletter for school principals that provides practical communication tips to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.

Our e-updates, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor*, and *NSPRA Alert* offer summaries of breaking national education news, indepth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products, and services available to educators. *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

The NSPRA website at www.nspira.org offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public site and more comprehensive, indepth information in our *Members Only* section, including resources and article archives.

The Flag of Learning and Liberty is a national education symbol developed by NSPRA in its 50th Anniversary Year. On July 4, 1985, the Flag of Learning and Liberty flew over the state houses of all 50 states to launch the rededication of America's commitment to education and a democratic, free society.

NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people.

Auditor's Vita

Karen H. Kleinz, APR

Karen Kleinz, APR, associate director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has over 30 years experience in public relations, working in the private sector as well as public education. She is accredited in public relations (APR).

Since joining NSPRA in 1998, Karen has led the Association's public engagement efforts and has represented NSPRA in collaborative partnerships with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Everyday Democracy, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the Kettering Foundation. She also directed NSPRA's learning contract with the Kettering Foundation to develop a community audit process designed to help school systems and communities assess their ability to successfully engage each other in supporting student achievement and building public ownership of schools.

Karen is responsible for coordinating NSPRA's communication audit service for school districts. She serves as lead auditor on numerous communication audits each year in addition to serving as primary editor and contributing auditor on all audits conducted by NSPRA's cadre of consultants. Karen coordinates session programming for the NSPRA National Seminar each year and also oversees chapter and member relations for the Association. In addition, she serves as NSPRA's liaison to the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., and the National School Safety Coalition in Yonkers, N.Y.

Karen has developed and managed school public relations programs for diverse school districts, from small, semi-rural districts with large non-English-speaking minority populations to the largest elementary district in Arizona, serving suburban Phoenix. As director of district public relations she was responsible for internal and external communications, including serving as spokesperson in crisis situations. She also was responsible for media relations, overseeing district publications, training administrators and teachers in effective communications, promoting community involvement and volunteerism in the schools, coordinating bond election campaigns, and engaging the public in deliberative discussions about education through study circles and community forums.

Her district experience includes operating as a one-person office to supervising a communications staff that included a full service print shop. She has created award winning public relations offices in districts that had none, and expanded programs in districts with established departments. Karen also operated a public relations consulting business in Arizona specializing in school communications. As a consultant she assisted schools and districts in developing a positive image and work environment through improved communications. She is the co-author of NSPRA's best selling professional development CD, *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for tapping the people power in your schools*. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication, and it has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States and Canada since 1935.

