the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report:

Ascension Public Schools

Contents

Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Ascension Public Schools (Ascension) contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for the purposes of identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the current communication program and determining strategies for its improvement. These goals are accomplished through an extensive process which includes:

- A review of current communication materials;

- Quantitative research through the surveying of district staff, parents/families and community members; and

- Qualitative research through conducting focus groups with these same groups, as well as interviews with the superintendent and communications staff.

Details of this process can be found in the Introduction of this report.

The results of this process are shared in three main sections:

- The Key Findings section provides details about what was learned through the review of materials and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

- The Observations section provides the auditor's insights, given the data collected.

- The Recommendation sections detail NSPRA's suggested strategies and tactics for addressing identified communication gaps and enhancing effective strategies already in place.

Report Synopsis

Following is an overview of this report. For a full understanding of what was learned, the rationale behind the resulting recommendations and what will be required to implement those steps, it is recommended that the report be read in its entirety.

- **Auditor's Summation**. The findings of this NSPRA Communication Audit provide strong evidence that stakeholders hold Ascension in high regard and have high levels of satisfaction with the communication efforts of the district. Without exception, every focus group—parents, teachers, business leaders, even students—noted that the district is known for excellence and spoke of the quantity and quality of communication in glowing terms.

  While every school district has room for improvement in communication, by all accounts Ascension is a model school district that enjoys enviable levels of trust and support from all stakeholders as a result of providing a steady flow of accurate, understandable and timely communication. The consistently positive feedback heard by the auditor is especially noteworthy in a time when many school districts throughout the country are struggling to find consensus and maintain trust in a polarized climate.

- **Strengths of the Current Communication Program**

  - Ascension has a highly qualified public information officer who is widely liked and respected.

  - Ascension has a robust communications infrastructure that allows for sending information through a wide variety of channels, including email, phone calls, text messages and mobile apps. It also has an attractive, well-functioning website and a strong social media presence.

- Stakeholders expressed high levels of satisfaction with district communication. Overall, they find information easy to understand, accurate, timely, transparent and trustworthy.

- Stakeholder preferences for how they like to receive information generally align with how the district is sending information.

- Stakeholders show high levels of being informed in key areas, particularly in regard to safety, district and student successes and achievements, and events.

- **Areas for Improvement**

  - The capacity of the Office of Public Information to take communication efforts to the next level is limited by the small number of staff in the department.

  - Two-way communication, where stakeholders have the opportunity to share input, was one of the few areas where survey and focus group findings indicate a need for improvement.

  - Parents and employees are experiencing information overload as a result of the amount of information being sent on multiple platforms.

  - Social media and the ubiquitousness of mobile devices creates a constant threat of misinformation or disinformation creating controversy and misunderstanding.

- **Recommendations.** Based on analysis of the research, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing Ascension's communication program. For each of these recommendations, a series of practical action steps based on current best practices are included in the report.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in Ascension, not just the Office of Public Information. It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three each year. Action steps that represent opportunities to rethink existing practices are noted with the icon to the right.

Opportunities to make quick improvements without a significant investment of resources are noted with the icons shown to the left.

1. Develop a strategic communication plan that sets measurable objectives based on the findings of this audit.

2. Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's communications capacity and infrastructure.

3. Address information overload by streamlining, targeting and reducing communication outflow.

4. Strategically engage the community through enhanced social media strategies.

5. Combat misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, easy-to-find information through a variety of communication channels.

6. Adopt cutting-edge strategies that make Ascension a model for school communication best practices.

Introduction

The Environmental Setting for Communications

About the District

When assessing the communication program of an organization, it is important to first have a thorough understanding of the organization itself as well as the environment in which it operates. That background is provided here.

Ascension, located in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, serves approximately 24,000 students at 31 schools in Ascension Parish, which is located in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area. The district encompasses a total community population of approximately 125,000 residents.

The mission of the district is "to provide every child the high-quality education necessary to succeed in an ever-changing world," and its vision is, "A world in which every child is prepared to pursue postsecondary opportunities of their choice successfully." The district's core values are: teamwork, leadership, service and learning. In its marketing materials the district uses the tagline "Excellence. Ascending Together. "

Ascension is one of the largest school districts in Louisiana and is rated "A" by the Louisiana Department of Education, which ranks school districts on an A-F scale according to a 100-point School System Performance Score. According to the district's website, Ascension is the largest district to consistently maintain an "A" rating in the state's accountability system. The district has a graduation rate of 91.1 percent, and 59 percent of its graduates enroll directly in college from high school.

According to the Louisiana Department of Education website, 55 percent of Ascension students are white, 31 percent are Black, 11 percent are Hispanic, four percent are non-Hispanic multiple races and one percent are Asian. About 55 percent are economically disadvantaged, compared to 71 percent of students statewide. Information on the National Center for Education Statistics website shows that 35 percent of parents of Ascension students have a bachelor's degree or higher and 35 percent have attended some college or have an associate's degree.

The district is the largest employer in the parish, with approximately 3,100 employees, including 2,000 teachers.

The district has enjoyed stable leadership by Superintendent David Alexander, who is retiring at the end of the 2022-23 school year. Mr. Alexander assumed the district's top leadership position in 2016 after 25 years of service to Ascension, including serving as the principal of Dutchtown High School and the director of secondary education. Mr. Alexander officially began his superintendency in the midst of the historic flood of 2016 and led flood recovery efforts, including the relocation of five schools and 5,000 students in under two weeks. Mr. Alexander's achievements also include district reaccreditation by Cognia (formerly known as AdvancED), the launch of a five-year strategic planning process, implementation of $120 million in capital outlay improvement projects (including four new schools) and the passage of a $140 million construction millage.

On April 4, 2023, the board voted unanimously to appoint Dr. Edith Walker, a 21-year veteran of Ascension, as the new superintendent. Dr. Walker has served as the district's chief instructional director since 2020. Dr. Walker began her career with Ascension as an English teacher before serving as a counselor, assistant principal, associate principal, principal and director.

Ascension Parish is booming economically, with the number of people employed in the parish steadily rising from about 25,000 in 1990 to more than 67,000 in 2023. The population increased by nearly 20,000 residents between the 2010 and 2020 U.S. Censuses. District enrollment has increased from approximately 19,600 students in 2009 to its current enrollment of approximately 24,000 students.

The Ascension Parish Chamber of Commerce website notes Ascension Parish has been the fastest growing parish in Louisiana for the last 20 years, with high-paying jobs in the chemical and petro-chemical manufacturing industries attracting many new residents. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that Ascension Parish has the highest median income in the state of Louisiana, and numerous district leaders noted during the audit process that the strong local economy has benefited Ascension.

About the Office of Public Information

School districts approach the management of communications in many different ways based on how the department and personnel have evolved over time, the intentionality with which the communication program is incorporated into district leadership overall and the resources available for funding the department. Communication in Ascension is primarily managed by a public information officer, who was hired in 2015. The public information officer previously reported directly to the superintendent, but after a reorganization in which the district was divided into three divisions, the reporting structure was changed and the public information officer now reports to an assistant superintendent who reports to the superintendent.

As stated in the position descriptions included in Ascension Parish School Board archive, the purpose of the public information officer is to provide "effective communication of information to school system stakeholders, including parents, students, employees, the news media, policy makers, the business community, and members of the general public." In addition, as in most highly effective

districts, one of the primary roles of the public information officer is to advise the superintendent, board and senior staff on the probable public relations consequences relating to shifts in existing programs and policies. These activities are described in more detail in Recommendation 2.

The public information officer is supported by a digital media coordinator, who is primarily responsible for the district and school websites as well as graphic design. There is also a position available for a part-time college intern, which was unfilled at the time of the audit.

Public Information Officer Jackie Tisdell has been active in the National School Public Relations Association and was instrumental in recently forming a new NSPRA chapter, the Louisiana School Public Relations Association (LASPRA). Under her leadership, the district has earned seven national awards in the past six years including NSPRA's Gold Medallion in 2017 and the Golden Achievement Award in 2021.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Process

Since 1935, NSPRA has been providing school communication training and services to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

- An important foundation for developing and implementing an effective strategic communication plan.

- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

The development of any effective communication program begins with research. Therefore, the first step of the process is to seek data, opinion and perceptions, as detailed in the following section. The results of this research can be found in the Key Findings section of this report. The auditor then analyzes the gathered data to identify common themes and form

general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the communication program. The results of this analysis can be found in the Observations section of this report.

Based on these findings, the auditor develops recommendations designed to help the district address identified communication challenges and enhance areas of strength. Each of these customized recommendations are accompanied by practical, realistic action steps grounded in today's public relations and communications best practices, as reflected within NSPRA's 2020 edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* benchmarking publication.

It is important to note that the primary goal of any communication program is to help the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, the auditor developed each recommendation in light of the district's vision, mission, beliefs and goals.

The result is a report that will provide Ascension with a launching point for improving and enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

The NSPRA auditor for this communication audit was Naomi Hunter, APR. Her vita is included in the Appendix of this report. The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR, and Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR.

Research Components

The NSPRA Communication Audit process incorporates three primary types of research.

- **Materials Review.** The first step in the communication audit involved the Office of Public Information submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., board policies related to communication, copies of district materials—such as superintendent messages, press releases, district surveys and research—and brand guidelines). The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district

and school websites and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor's review of websites and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content. In addition, the auditor reviewed the district's demographic data, strategic plan, news clips and digital communication analytics.

- **SCoPE Survey.** NSPRA conducted online School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (both instructional staff and support staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey was conducted for Ascension from March 6 - March 29, 2023. It included questions regarding the following:

  - How people are currently getting information and how they prefer to receive it.

  - How informed they are in key areas such as leader decisions, district plans and district finances.

  - Perceptions around their opportunities to seek information, provide input and become involved.

  - Whether they perceive the communications to be understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

There was also an opportunity for participants to comment on any aspect of school or school/department communications.

Responses to the SCoPE Survey resulted in attaining the following confidence interval for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the

district and using the industry standard equation for reliability.

- Parent Survey:

  - 633 surveys completed

  - ±3.9 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)

- Faculty/Staff Survey:

  - 447 surveys completed

  - ± 4.4 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)

- Community survey:

  - 17 surveys completed

  - ± 24 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met)

Due to low participation among community members, no significant findings are included in this report based on SCoPE Survey responses by community members.

This same survey has been administered to school districts across the United States, and the Key Findings section concludes with the SCoPE Scorecard, which compares Ascension's SCoPE Survey results with the results of other districts who have implemented the survey.

NSPRA Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR, who also served as the auditor, reviewed the data and open-ended comment results for each survey group in detail in preparation for writing the report.

- **Focus Groups and Interviews**. The core of the communication audit is the virtual focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent and communications staff April 18-21, 2023.

For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Each group met for an hour and was guided through a similar set of discussion questions on a variety of communication issues. Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to individuals if used in the report.

The stakeholder groups represented in the focus group sessions and interviews included the following:

- Principals K-5
- Principals 6-12
- Teachers
- Support personnel
- Students
- Parent Advisory Council members
- Community business leaders (ACCESS)
- Community public information officers
- Ascension Parish School Board members
- District public information officer
- Chief administrators
- District organization team (directors)
- Superintendent

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Ascension Parish School Board (APSB), the superintendent and the public information officer, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. When reviewing the report, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Office of Public Information** by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. The recommendations included here are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking Ascension's communication program to the next level.

- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.

- **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 therefore assumed that Ascension would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the school district and its work through the perceptions of others.

- **Perceptions are just that.** Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.

- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditor's analysis**, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

Next Steps

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Implementation of the recommendations should be approached

strategically, using this report as a road map and taking the following into consideration:

Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.

- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority**, but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.

- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Office of Public Information.** NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the Office of Public Information, others may apply to additional departments or all staff.

- **Look for opportunities for immediate improvement and to rethink existing practices.** Action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the school or the Office of Public Information and still pay quick dividends are noted as "quick wins" with the symbol shown to the right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task or process that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders' feedback and auditors' analysis. These are noted with the symbol shown to the left.

- **Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources** to undertake while maintaining existing programs.

Sharing the Report

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during 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 the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that Ascension share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward.

Be sure to also share this information with key stakeholders such as employees and parents/families. This kind of transparency will demonstrate that district leaders prioritize two-way communication with stakeholders.

NSPRA's staff auditing team can provide suggestions and examples for how this report could be effectively shared with various constituencies as well as the public.

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the SCoPE Survey, focus group discussions, interviews with district leaders and review of district materials.

This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district's image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders, while the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals.

The auditor's thoughts on what the key findings suggest are summarized in the Observations section.

As a reminder, only 17 surveys were completed by community members, resulting in a 24 percent confidence interval. Therefore, results shown for the community should be considered as general indicators of topics worth investigating further and not as reflective of the entire population.

District Image

Quantitative Data: SCoPE Survey Findings

- On the SCoPE Survey, when participants were asked to rate their overall perception of the district, 75 percent of employees, 69 percent of parents and 65 percent of community members rated the district as excellent or above average.
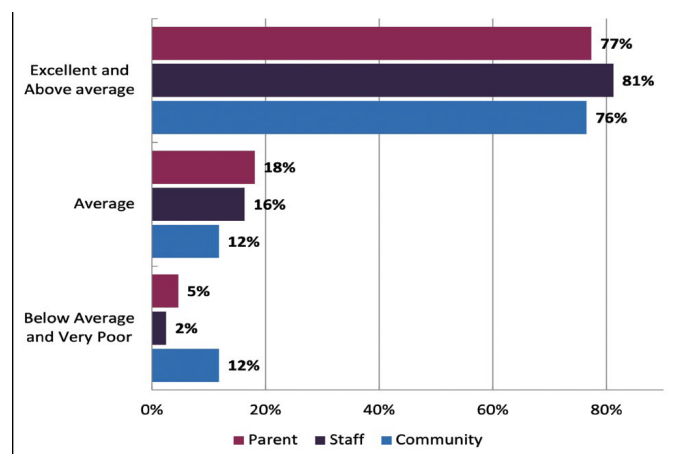
- When these responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCoPE Survey results of 80+ districts nationwide (see SCoPE Scorecard), it can be seen that Ascension's ratings are well above the national average, with all three groups approaching or tying with the highest ratings of all school districts who have participated in the SCoPE Survey.

Overall Perception of the District	Ascension	Nat'l Avg.	Nat'l Low	Nat'l High
Staff	4.1	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	4.1	3.8	2.6	4.2
Community	4.3	3.3	2.1	4.2

5=Excellent 4=Above Average 3=Average
2=Below Average 1=Very Poor

- When asked to provide two words to describe the district, SCoPE Survey participants' most frequent responses were "excellence," "organized," "great" and "caring." Graphics illustrating the most frequently occurring words can be found on page 30.

Qualitative Data: Focus Groups, Interviews and Open-ended SCoPE Survey Comments

Strengths

- **Comments from participants in all focus groups, as well as SCoPE Survey comments, reflect that Ascension is perceived as a well-resourced and exceptionally high-performing district of excellence in which parents, staff and the community feel extraordinary pride.** Many focus group participants noted that it is one of the top-performing districts in Louisiana and that families move to the area so that their children can attend Ascension.

Following are comments typical of what the auditor heard repeatedly during focus groups:

- "We are financially sound. We have a high credit rating. (District leader/administrator)

- "Our school system is the number one thing that drives [the growth in] our parish. People move here from surrounding parishes because of our system." (Business leader)

- "We're a magnet. People in the community, even before they move here, understand that they might want to move here because of the school system...We get some complaints, but for the most part, we're the anchor that brings people here and also that keeps people here." (District leader/administrator)

- "I've only been in Ascension Parish for a few years now, but it's definitely the place where you want to be and want to work." (Teacher)

- "We get a tremendous amount of support from the business sector. A lot of our staff is involved in the community so [the community] receives very good information [through word of mouth]." (Principal)

- **When asked for specific qualities that make the schools great, parents, staff and community members mentioned a wide range of specific strength areas.**

  - "The diversity within the district is a plus. You don't see diversity like that in many places." (Parent)

  - "For our school district, our number one draw is the quality of education that we offer our students. We [help] students to do well when they graduate. We are really moving our special education population, and there's less of a gap between minority students and their counterparts within our school district." (District leader/administrator)

  - "I went to school here. I felt comfortable. I felt like everyone cared. So I wanted that same outcome for my children." (Parent/Support staff)

- "People view Ascension as a safe place for your children to be educated in the best way possible. And we are thought of to be a school with high test scores that teaches children really well." (Student)

- "There have been so many new facilities built and investment in facilities. That makes our schools attractive from the outside." (Teacher)

- "The leadership is doing the right thing and leading us in the right direction and has been for many years now. Also, the standardized test scores speak for themselves." (Business leader)

- "Even though our district is a high-performing district, we don't get complacent. We are always looking for areas that we can improve" (Principal)

- "The biggest thing for me is the trust that I feel as a teacher working in this school district. I don't feel micromanaged. I feel valued as a teacher in Ascension Parish. (Teacher)

- "The school system continues to grow and to keep up with demand from population. They have strong leadership. We have good public servants involved on the school board and running the school system." (Business leader)

- **Numerous focus group participants mentioned the symbiotic relationship between the business community and Ascension as a strength of the district.** Business representatives conveyed appreciation for the skills that are being taught to prepare students for the workplace, and parents and staff commented on the good jobs available in the area.

  - "When we have companies looking to relocate to this area, our schools are a big, big plus. We get to sell that." (Business leader)

▪ "Businesses recognize our students will be their future employees." (Principal)

Challenges

The auditor heard very few negative comments about the district's image during the focus groups, but the quotes below reflect the few areas of challenge that emerged:

- **The strong academic focus of the district can be a challenge, as well as a strength.**

  ▪ "[Some people] think that we put academics above students sometimes, like when there's storms or things like that, we are a little too academically focused." (Teacher)

  ▪ "We can become so academically focused and driven [by] our ratings, like our school performance score, that there can sometimes be concern that we're losing sight of the things that can't be quantified, that aren't going to necessarily appear in a score in the newspaper." (Teacher)

- **Schools on the west side of the Mississippi River are not viewed as positively as schools on the east side.**

  ▪ "For me personally, I think [the reputation] depends on where the schools are located. [Some people think] yeah, it's a good parish, but I don't want to live near that school. So there is a divide to me." (Support staff)

  ▪ "The river is a barrier. It creates a separation that prevents mingling of students. (District leader/administrator)

  ▪ "Perceptions vary by school. Schools on the other (west) side of the river feel forgotten about." (Principal)

- **Several employees shared that the competitive labor market has created challenges** in hiring some workers, including bus drivers and staff to manage extracurricular programming.

Materials Review: Findings from Other Sources

- **Ascension Parish has an overall A rating by the Louisiana Department of Education, with an overall School System Performance Score of 92.** The district is ranked first in Louisiana for its Progress Index (one of the five areas of assessment included in the score), ranked second for growth of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and ranked fourth for District Performance Scores.

- **While the two school rating systems used most by Realtors—GreatSchools. org and Niche.com—have elements of subjectivity to them, it is a positive that both rate Ascension highly**, with GreatSchools providing ratings of 7-10 on a scale of 1-10 for 13 of 16 elementary schools, ratings of 7-9 for 5 of 8 middle schools, and ratings of 7-9 for three of four high schools. Niche provides an overall rating of A to Ascension Public Schools.

- **The district enjoys strong partnerships with local businesses, and residents have consistently supported property tax measures.** On March 25, 2023, voters approved three property tax renewals with more than 80 percent support for each measure, including the following:

  ▪ $36 million dedicated to pay salaries

  ▪ $13 million to provide students at all grade levels with laptops

  ▪ $6 million for day-to-day maintenance and building improvement needs

Information Sources and Preferences for All Stakeholders

### Quantitative Data: SCoPE Survey Findings

How Stakeholders Currently Find/Learn Information about the District

- In the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to share how often they rely on

various sources for information about Ascension. As shown below, the results vary between stakeholder groups, with parents relying most heavily (on a daily or weekly basis) on email, apps (e.g., the district/school mobile platforms, Here Comes the Bus, PowerSchool, Remind) and social media, and staff relying most heavily on email, calendars and word-of-mouth.

Source Ranking	Parents/Families	Staff
First	Email (82%)	Email (94%)
Second	Apps (65%)	Calendars (58%)
Third	Social Media (63%)	What Others Tell Me (56%)
Fourth	Calendars (59%)	Social Media (56%)
Fifth	Text Messages (52%)	Newsletter (52%)

- Drilling into the data provides additional details.

  - Automated emails from the district are the most frequently-used type of email by parents and staff.

Sources of Emails Used Daily/Weekly
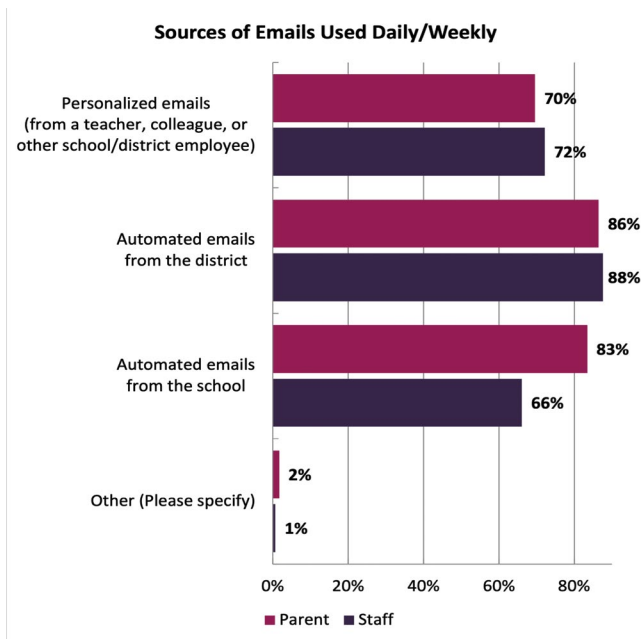
- Staff are more likely to read the district newsletter (83 percent) than parents (62 percent), but parents are more likely to read the school newsletter (80 percent) than staff (60 percent).

Types of Newsletters Used Daily/Weekly
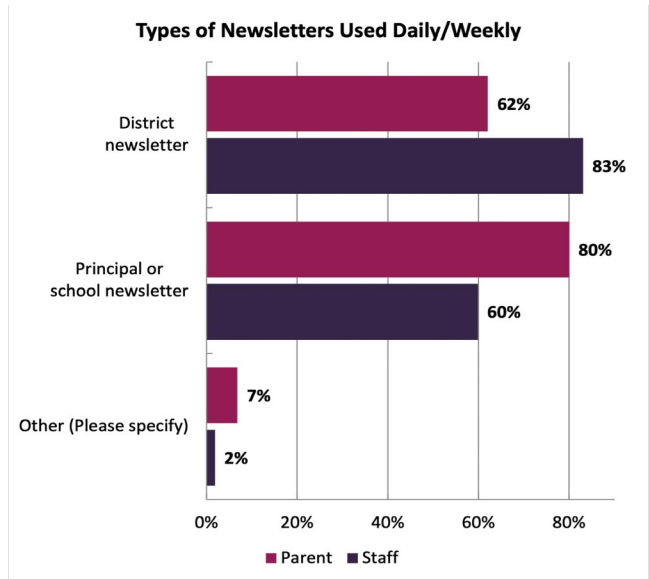
- Hearing news from other people is a powerful source of information in Ascension. When staff and parents were asked about their specific sources of word-of mouth information, the results were as follows.

Source of Word-of-Mouth Information
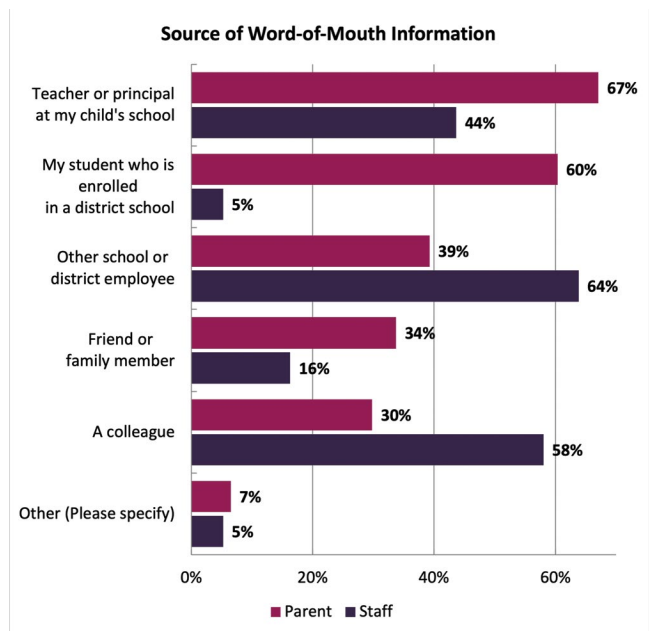
- Of the parents who responded on the SCoPE Survey that they use apps to get information, PowerSchool and Remind are used most heavily.

Apps Used by Parents

App	%
PowerSchool	75%
Remind	68%
District/School	57%
Here Comes the Bus	34%
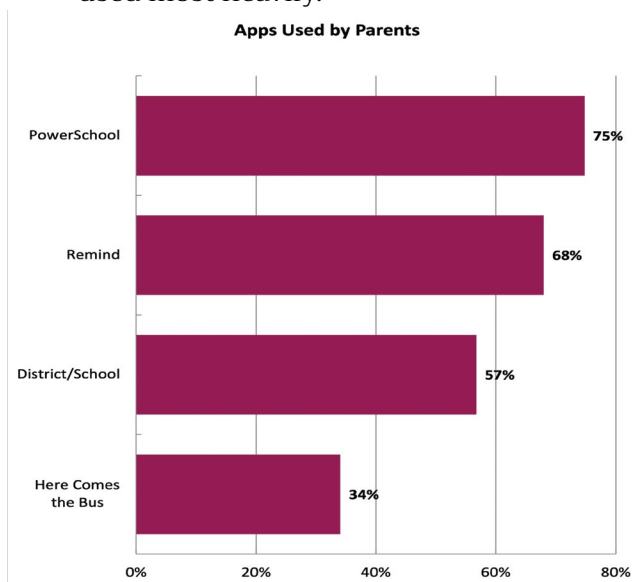
- Of the SCoPE Survey participants who use local media to get information about the district, TV news is the predominant source.

Local Media Sources Used for Information

Source	Parent	Staff	Community
TV news	66%	69%	75%
Newspaper	26%	31%	50%
Community newsletter or blog	32%	24%	42%
Radio news	12%	7%	17%
Other (Please specify)	11%	12%	17%

Legend: ■ Parent ■ Staff ■ Community

How Parents and Staff Prefer to Receive Information

- For communications about school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises, parents prefer text messages, while staff prefer email. For all other types of information listed below, email is the preferred form of communication for both staff and parents:
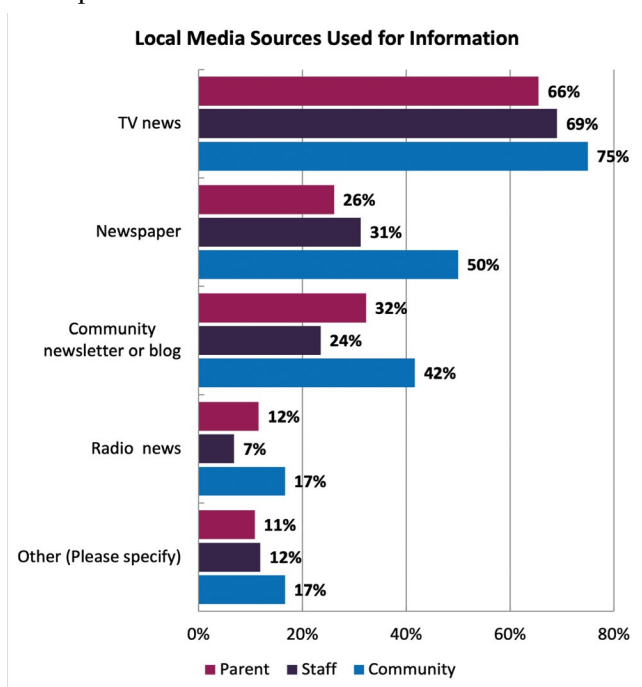 - General district news and information
  - School and district events, programs and calendar updates
  - School and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues

- Email and the parent portal are parents' preferred methods of receiving information about student progress and how to best support their learning.

Parents' Preferred Methods of Receiving Information Regarding Student Progress and How to Support Learning

Method	%
Email	60%
Parent Portal	45%
Report card	39%
One-on-one meetings with teacher	28%
Phone call	19%
Other (Please specify)	5%
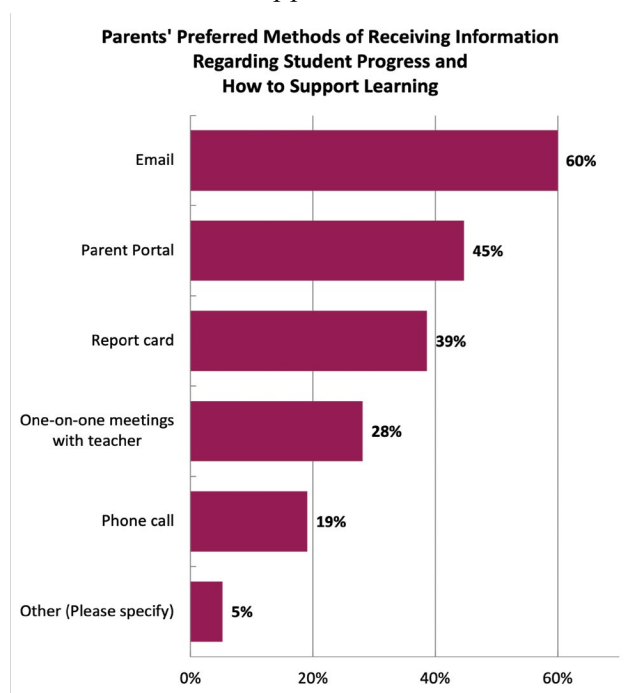
- Employees strongly prefer email for information about how to perform their duties and support student learning.

Staff's Preferred Method of Receiving Information Regarding How to Perform Duties and Support Student Learning

Method	Percentage
Email	91%
Faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings	26%
Text messages	26%
Individual meetings with your supervisor	23%
Printed memos, letters and notices	14%
Staff Portal (Class Link)	6%
Phone calls	6%
Staff intranet	1%
Other (Please specify)	1%
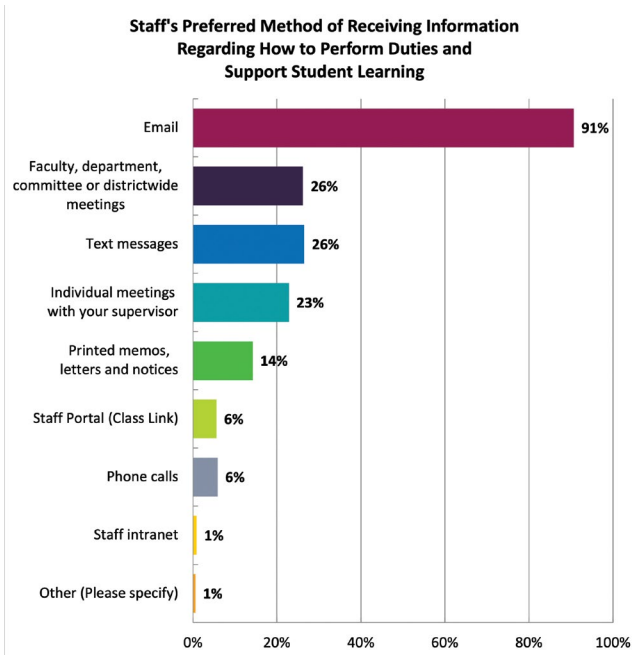
Qualitative Data: Focus Groups, Interviews and Open-ended SCoPE Survey Comments

- **Numerous parents noted that while the district currently typically uses email and robo calls, they are less likely to miss important information if it is sent via text.**

  - "We all get the emails, but sometimes those emails do fall through the cracks. Because [you think it is] just another email and you don't realize the urgency of it. So a text message would work and maybe even an Instagram page. If information is not on social media, it might not be hitting a lot of parents, especially the younger parents."

  - "I receive most of the things via email and sometimes we get an automated message to the house because we still have a landline. But if I'm not home or I don't think to check my email, I may not know about it until I read something on social media. So text blasts would be a really great way to get information out quickly."

  - "I fill out a million pieces of paperwork every year about my kids, so I know somebody's got my cell phone number,

but that's not a way I get contacted with like text updates and I would appreciate that."

- **The public information officer cited challenges with the current automated messaging service.** When the system was originally adopted in 2011, parents had to opt in to receive text messages. As a result, many parents are not signed up to receive text messages, so the district must use email and phone calls to ensure that a message reaches all parents.

- **Some parents suggested it would be helpful to be able to choose which type of communication they prefer** and set opt-in or opt-out settings at the beginning of each school year.

- **Several district leaders noted that technology access can be a barrier for some families.**

  - "Another thing that kind of came out during the pandemic for us is access for every community member that we serve. Even though we're an affluent district, there are still some grandparents who are out there that are rearing kindergartners and first graders. Do we have access to communicate with them? Do they have a smartphone? Do they have internet access? Are we reaching every one that we need to reach?"

  - "Face to face communication is important. If somebody doesn't have internet, it's hard for them to get that information. I think we need to find a way to get more information at the ground level [to] the individual person."

- **Information overload was a recurring theme in the focus groups with parents, teachers and principals as well as in comments on the SCoPE Survey.**

  - "When we send robocalls, I'm not sure they are listened to because

they contain too much information." (Principal)

- "[For] blended families, and families with kids in multiple schools throughout the district, it is nearly impossible to keep up or find things in a timely manner." (Parent)

- "My parents get so many messages 24/7 to the point where it gets kind of annoying. So I guess in a way, they are overwhelmed by the amount of stuff they have to look at every day." (Student)

- **A common theme from parents was a desire to have information consolidated.**

  - Parents said they need to wade through too many sources to be fully informed and expressed a desire for messages to be grouped and sent on a weekly basis, rather than scattered throughout the week.

  - School administrators noted that messages are sometimes repeated by the school and the district and questioned whether that is necessary.

- **Parents, teachers and principals frequently brought up the use of multiple classroom-based apps.**

  - Many parents suggested they would prefer a district-wide version of something like Remind or Class Dojo that is used by all teachers and all schools. Other parents commented that they would prefer a consolidation of all apps.

    - "The convenience and benefits of the various apps are great, but it can be cumbersome to juggle all the apps at times."

    - "There are too many required electronic sources. Please look into a source that can consolidate these separate entities."

- "My school relies too heavily on Class Dojo to send out school information. This doesn't work for all parties since the app does not load or update, causing many important memos, posts, to go unseen. It's also very difficult to find things that were previously sent out since everything is in one continuous stream and not divided into classes or groups like Remind."

- Principals and teachers brought up the lack of direction about which system to use. On the one hand, they like having the freedom to choose the app that works best for their school or their grade level, but they acknowledge this causes confusion among parents and contributes to information overload. Following is a typical comment on this theme:

  - "As a school, we don't make teachers use one [app] versus the other. We do try to keep it consistent on a grade level. I noticed that the lower grades tend to use Dojo because they give out points and use it as a reward system, but the third, fourth and fifth grade teachers prefer Remind because it's used to get families newsletters or guides or [other information]. We have parents that have kids in multiple grades, so then they have multiple apps to manage."

## Materials Review: Findings from Other Sources

- Ascension uses a wide range of electronic sources to keep parents informed, including School Messenger (an automated messaging system that is used to send emails, phone calls and text messages), social media (described in more detail on), websites and mobile apps.

- The district adopted a new mobile app in April 2022, and according to a survey

provided to the auditor, 94 percent of respondents find the new app useful.

- Ascension's public information officer works closely with local media, and the district is covered frequently by local media outlets, including local TV news stations. According to a media analytics report created by Meltwater and reviewed by the auditor, media coverage of Ascension is overwhelmingly positive or neutral, with only 19 out of 742 stories in 2022 deemed as negative.

News Sentiment

The Sentiment widget provides insight into how media coverage is broken down by positive and negative sentiment over time.

● Positive	86
● Negative	19
● Neutral	637
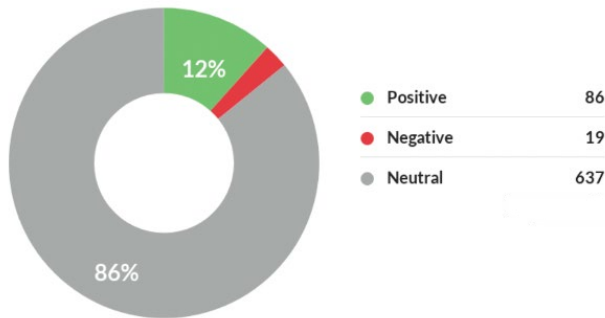
Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- Ascension included a goal in its strategic plan to assess district communications for long-term strategic improvement and identified a communication audit as an action step toward achieving that goal.

Quantitative Data: SCoPE Survey Findings

- On the SCoPE Survey, when asked to give an overall rating for satisfaction with communication from the school, teachers, and/or the school district, 81 percent of staff, 77 percent of parents and 79 percent of community members rated Ascension as excellent or above average.

Overall Perception of Communication
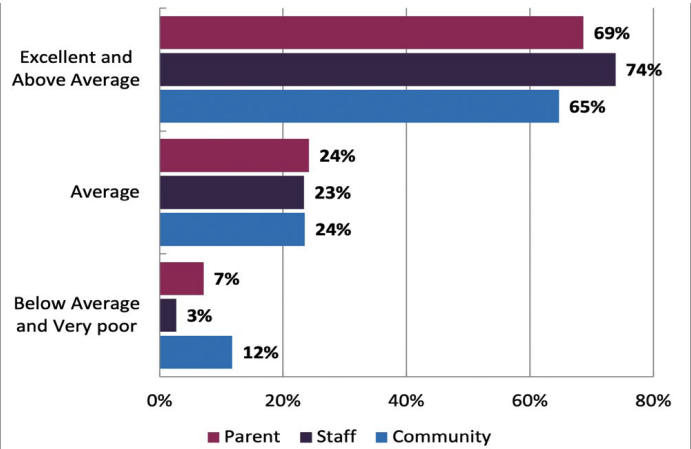
- When these responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCoPE Survey results of 80+ districts nationwide (see SCoPE Scorecard), it can be seen that Ascension's ratings are above the national average for all stakeholder groups surveyed.

Overall Perception of Communication	Ascension	Nat'l Avg.	Nat'l Low	Nat'l High
Staff	4.0	3.6	2.6	4.2
Parents/Families	3.9	3.8	3.1	4.2
Community	3.8	3.2	2.0	4.0

5=Excellent 4=Above Average 3=Average
2=Below Average 1=Very Poor

- In the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas, with the following results.

How Informed Stakeholders Feel in Key Areas

Area	Extremely Informed+Very Informed	Moderately Informed	Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises (N=1,082)	71%	18%	11%
About district successes and achievements (N=1,086)	67%	24%	9%
About student successes and achievement (N=1,086)	67%	23%	10%
About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.) (N=1,085)	51%	33%	16%
About district goals and plans (N=1,086)	45%	31%	23%
About leader decisions (N=1,088)	41%	33%	27%
About district facilities (N=1,084)	34%	33%	33%
About district finances (N=1,086)	24%	28%	47%

■ Extremely Informed+Very Informed   ■ Moderately Informed
■ Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed

- In all areas surveyed, staff feel more informed than parents.

How Informed in Key Areas: Staff v. Parents

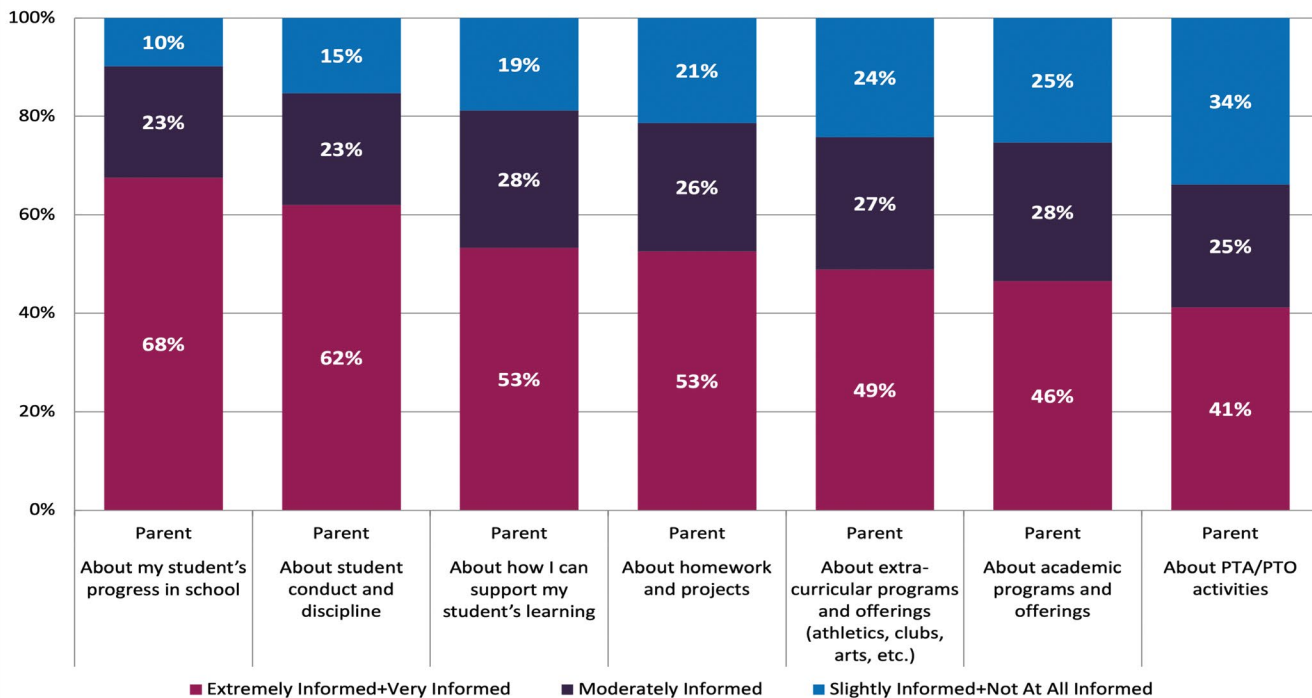| Area	Parent	Staff
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	70%	73%
About district successes and achievements	60%	76%
About student successes and achievement	63%	74%
About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	49%	53%
About district goals and plans	39%	55%
About leader decisions	35%	48%
About district facilities	31%	39%
About district finances	21%	29%

- NSPRA's experience is that it is common for SCoPE Survey ratings to be lower when it comes to district goals and plans, decisions, facilities and finances. When ratings also include those who said they felt moderately informed in these areas, the results were as follows:

How Informed About District Plans, Decision, Facilities and Finances
(Extremely, Very and Moderately Informed)

	Extremely Informed+Very Informed	Moderately Informed	Total
About district goals and plans – Parent	39%	31%	**70%**
About district goals and plans – Staff	55%	32%	**87%**
About leader decisions – Parent	35%	31%	**66%**
About leader decisions – Staff	48%	36%	**84%**
About district facilities – Parent	31%	32%	**63%**
About district facilities – Staff	39%	34%	**73%**
About district finances – Parent	21%	25%	**46%**
About district finances – Staff	29%	33%	**62%**

■ Extremely Informed+Very Informed   ■ Moderately Informed

- When parents were asked to rate how well informed they were in key areas specifically related to their students, they were most informed about their student's progress in school and about student conduct and discipline, and they were least informed about academic programs and offerings and PTA/PTO activities.

How Informed Parents Are in Areas Involving Their Students

	About my student's progress in school	About student conduct and discipline	About how I can support my student's learning	About homework and projects	About extra-curricular programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.)	About academic programs and offerings	About PTA/PTO activities
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	10%	15%	19%	21%	24%	25%	34%
Moderately Informed	23%	23%	28%	26%	27%	28%	25%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	68%	62%	53%	53%	49%	46%	41%
	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent

■ Extremely Informed+Very Informed   ■ Moderately Informed   ■ Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed

- When staff were asked to rate how well informed they were in key areas specifically related to their jobs, the results were as follows.

How Informed Staff Are in Areas Involving Their Role as Employees
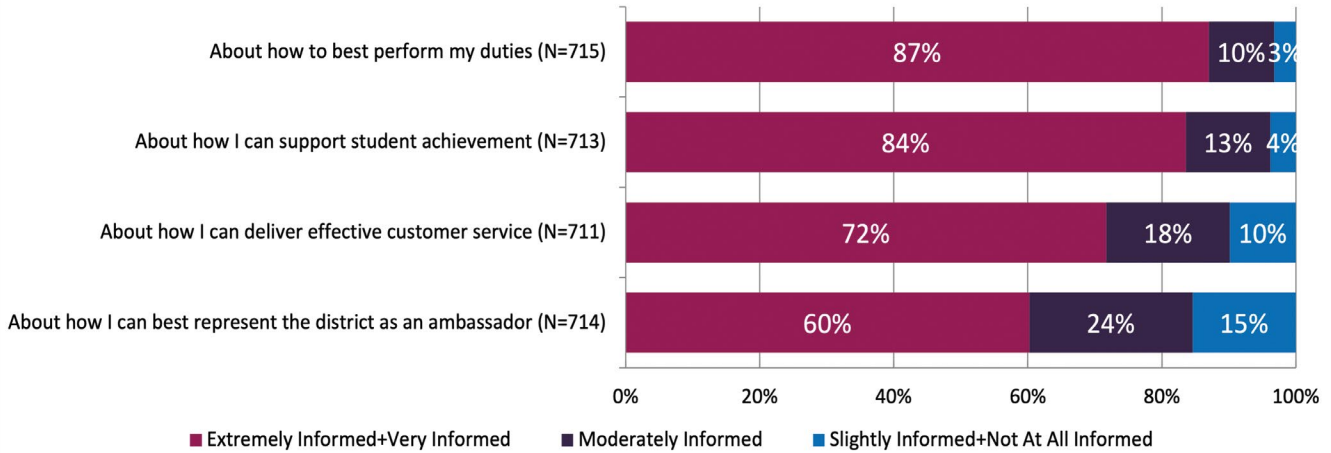
- All survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements regarding the quality of Ascension communications. As shown below, staff ratings had high levels of agreement in all areas. In the chart on page 23, parents had high levels of agreement in all areas except "my input and opinion are welcome and valued" (47 percent).

Quality of Communications - Staff

Quality of Communication - Parents

Legend: ■ Strongly Agree+Agree ■ Undecided ■ Disagree+Strongly Disagree
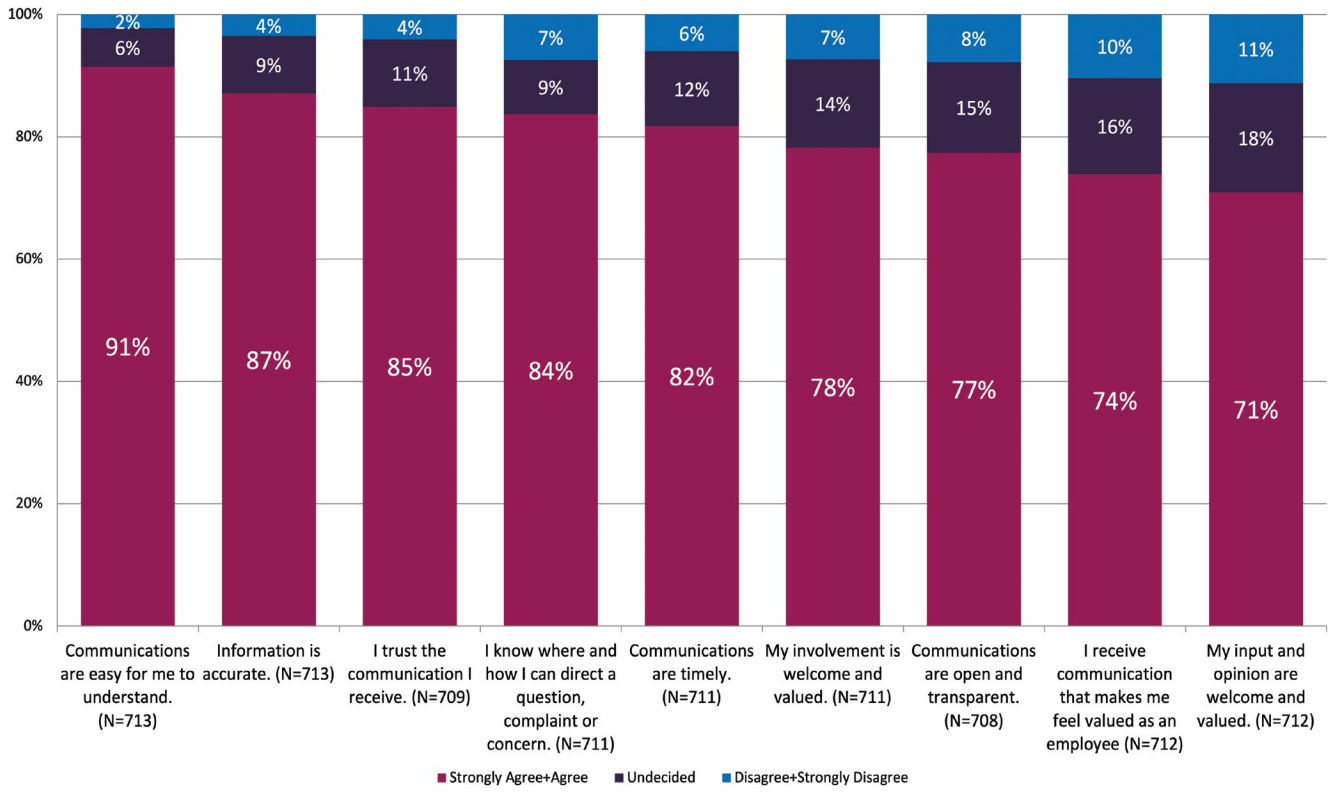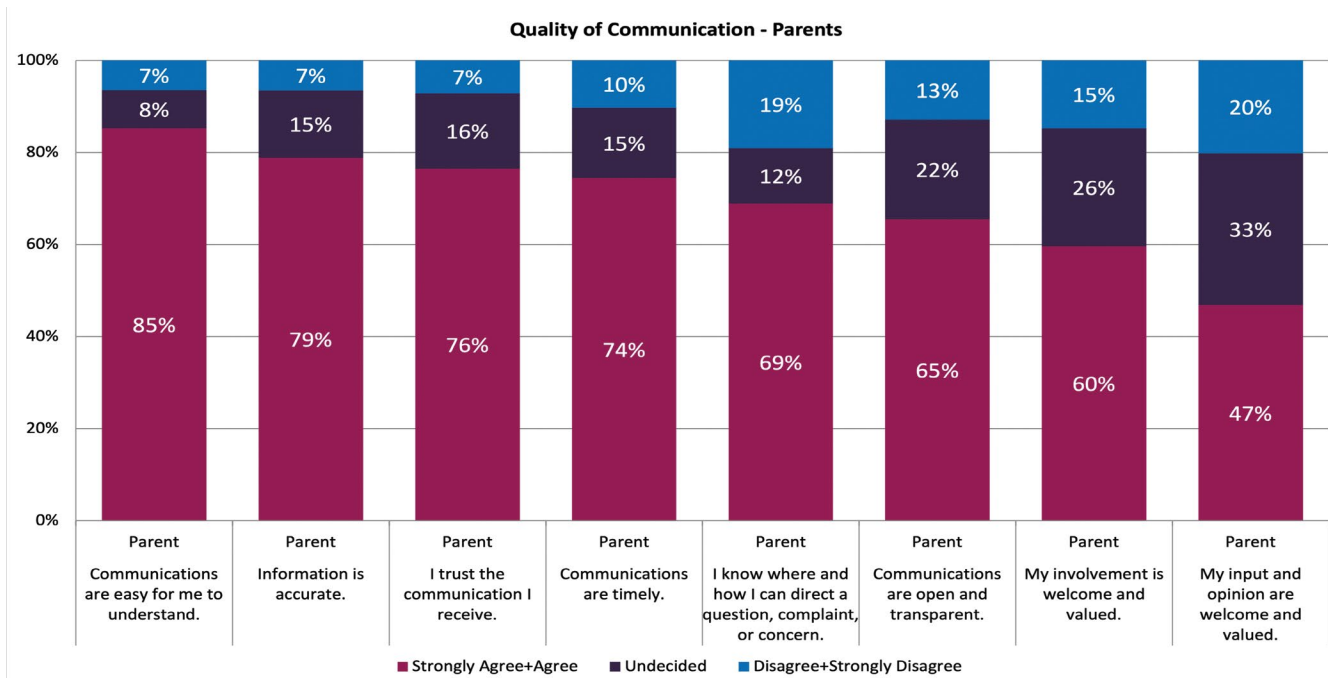
Qualitative Data: Focus Groups, Interviews and Open-ended SCoPE Survey Comments

Overall Communication Efforts

- **Public Information Officer Jackie Tisdell was uniformly praised in every focus group and in the comments on the SCoPE Survey.**

    ▪ Parents, employees, district and school administrators, school board members and Superintendent Alexander all expressed gratitude for the timeliness, quality, accuracy and trustworthiness of communications.

    ▪ The superintendent specifically commented that Tisdell's communication efforts and strong leadership have guided parents, staff and community through several periods of tremendous turmoil in the recent past, including floods, a major bridge closure, the COVID-19 pandemic, local bridges washing out and other crises.

    ▪ A parent commented that district communication improved markedly after Tisdell was hired. "She created a common language we all speak,

branding not only who we are as a school system, but who we are as a community."

- **Employees praised the district for its comprehensive communication efforts and noted a few areas for improvement.**

    ▪ Communication Strengths

        ▫ "I am very appreciative of the weekly e-newsletters and the weekly CORE value recognitions... Please express our gratitude to all the employees that our school does not get to see on a daily basis that their work does not go unnoticed." (Employee)

        ▫ "I've always been appreciative of the district. Turnaround is very quick. The PIO is quick to respond and an excellent support." (Principal)

        ▫ "The [election] information was rolled out early on, teachers were made aware and informational meetings were held all over the

district. The district does a really good job of making sure they are making a connection point." (Principal)

- Communication Areas for Improvement

  ▫ "Sometimes communication comes out right in the moment and we can't let staff know before we know. Sometimes we hear information from other people." (Principal)

  ▫ "Sometimes things happen quickly. Maybe an initiative where we are charged with communicating. We'd like to send something out that is very consistent, and sometimes we wish we had a blanket communication to increase consistency." (Principal)

  ▫ "Sometimes I'm confused about whether I need to communicate or if the district is doing it." (Principal)

  ▫ "It's hard to know which communication tools to use. What is most effective?" (District leader/administrator)

  ▫ "[It's hard to know] how to tell the district's story when so many people influence the narrative." (District leader/administrator)

- **Parents who participated in the focus group serve on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and noted that they have access to information that parents-at-large do not have.** They praised the district for having the PAC, and all of them commented that they enjoy serving on the PAC, but they also noted a few areas of potential improvement:

  ▪ "Parents serve on the PAC for a long time; more turnover would give more parents the opportunity."

  ▪ "Parents on the PAC are representing the school, but other parents at the

school don't necessarily know who their PAC representative is, nor do they realize they can bring questions or concerns to them to raise at a PAC committee meeting."

  ▪ "The process of being selected to serve on the PAC is not transparent. Principals approach a parent to ask them to serve, but they are not sure why they are selected. Other parents may wish to serve, but don't get the opportunity."

Crisis Communications

- **The district was generally lauded by parents, staff and community members for the quality and timeliness of its communication during crisis situations. Typical comments included:**

  ▪ "With COVID, I remember the superintendent sending us videos and emails constantly updating us with all the changes during that time. It was great." (Parent)

  ▪ "They have a very standardized protocol for a crisis of any sort. So, if our school has to be on lockdown because of a dangerous situation, we automatically get notified. And that's very helpful because you don't want to hear from your high school kid, 'My campus is on lockdown' and not understand why. They're very forward thinking, and usually by the time it's hit the press, we've already gotten an automated phone call or an automated email." (Parent)

  ▪ "We had two lockdowns in one week. Within 30 seconds [the Office of Public Information] reached out and within five minutes the PIO had contacted the police and put out messages. Our PIO is excellent and uses wording that works." (Principal)

- **Areas where crisis communication could be improved were also noted, including:**

- "Sometimes I'm confused about whether I need to communicate or if the district is doing it." (Principal)

- Sometimes an event occurs near our campus and law enforcement doesn't notify us if it is resolved quickly, but our parents know and it would help if we also had the information." (Principal)

- "The only complaint I've ever heard is that a parent with three kids in three schools had to go to three places to get information." (District leader/administrator)

Two-way Communication

- **Parents in the focus groups and on surveys noted that district leaders work at building relationships with parents and demonstrate a willingness to hear feedback. Following are two illustrative comments**

  - "I had a question and the superintendent invited me to communicate with him directly about it."

  - "The school board has always been very responsive and timely. We have always felt heard the times we have reached out to the school board."

- **As noted on page 23, the SCoPE Survey data showed particular room for improvement in the area of parents feeling their input/opinion are welcome and valued.** The auditor explored this finding with parents in the focus groups and learned that the concern arises predominantly from parents not feeling like they are in the loop and able to participate in discussions about important district matters.

  - "If I have any complaint or concern [about communication], it is that the district doesn't advertise when things are up for a decision. Documents are not always attached to the board agenda items. I have the right as a

member of the public to see [what] you're going to discuss tonight."

  - "Could board meetings be attended virtually? Or live streamed?"

  - "I would love to have meetings, aside from school board meetings, on district level topics regarding safety, buses, special education, curriculum, nutrition, etc."

  - "I know nothing about school board members. I'd like them to come to PTA meetings and interact with parents."

  - "We need to find more ways to interact with busy families. Most families have two working parents and are juggling many activities with their children. We need to find ways to involve parents that fit into current social structures—maybe offer two meeting times for parents, one during the daytime and one in the evening."

- **While staff ratings were fairly high in regard to employees feeling that their input and involvement are valued (see page 22), areas for improvement also centered around the desire for more two-way communication and involvement in decision-making.**

  - "I've never had a visit from my school board member since I've been here."

  - "Surveys don't get a lot of response. We have opportunities for parents to attend meetings, for example about the recent election, but few parents take advantage of those opportunities."

  - "I find that the majority of the decisions made are based on high school and middle school, and that primary decisions are not really considered as much. What works at the high school and middle school doesn't necessarily work at a primary school."

  - "[We would like to know about] anything that impacts our campus before the decision is made so that we can give our input. We know some

things are beyond us, but it would be nice to have that discussion with them beforehand, because at the end of the day we're the ones who have to [implement it]."

▪ "There are definitely times when decisions are made quickly and it wasn't considered to get certain input, but I don't feel like it's done maliciously."

Materials Review: Findings from Other Sources

- **The district produces a wide range of professional-quality, four-color printed materials that keep parents and community members informed** about key information, topics and events. The auditor commends the district for reinforcing district branding and values in all publications, from its "Portrait of a Graduate" poster defining the key attributes of a successful graduate, its 2-page district calendar, its preschool enrollment information, or its 40-page feature magazine, *Ascend*, an annual glossy magazine.

Every printed publication produced by the district invites readers in with attractive photos featuring students and staff, eye-catching graphics and easy-to-read copy. A recent edition of *Ascend*, for example, celebrated honors such as students, principals, teachers and support employees of the year along with a wide variety of comprehensive articles of broad interest to the community, such as "A Day in the Life," an inside look at the work completed by employees behind the scenes, and a profile of a local health care provider who partners with the district.
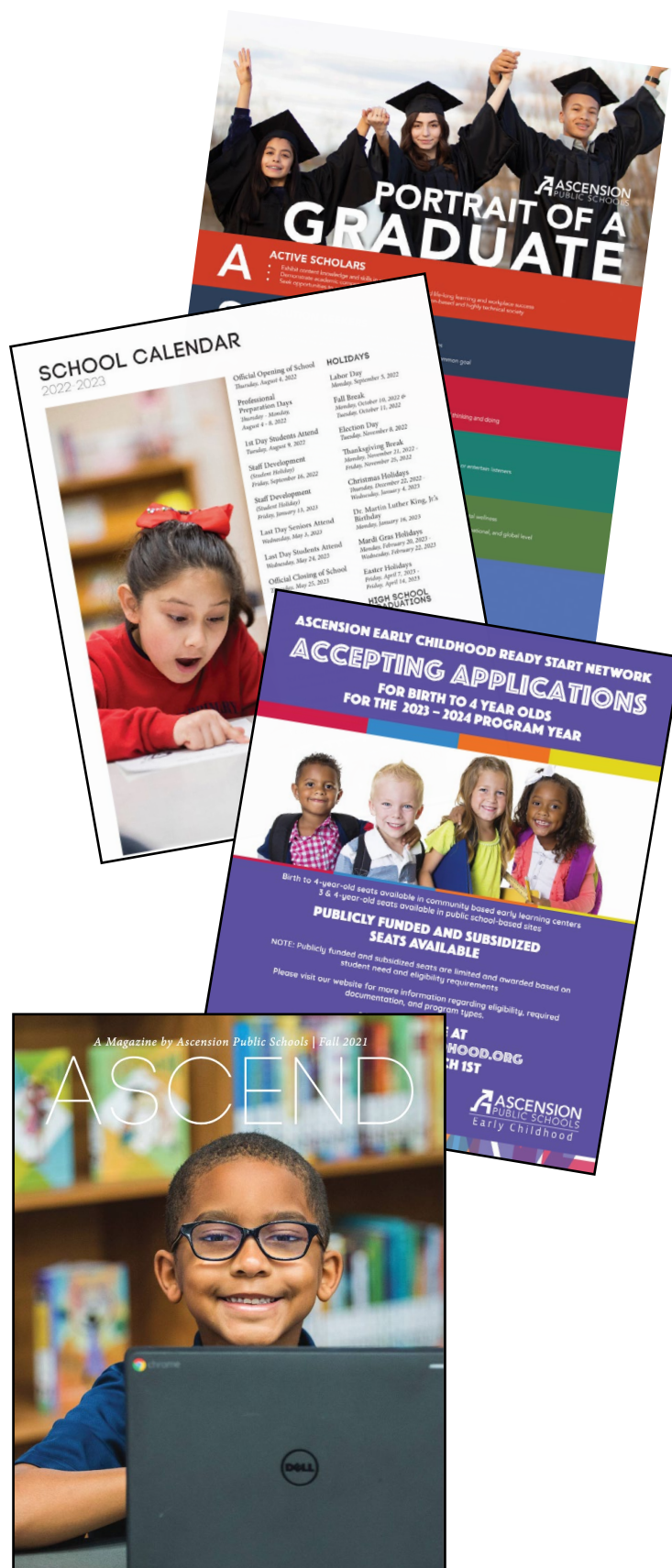
Website

- Ascension launched a new website in March 2022, after conducting internal research and an extensive Request for Proposal process. The new website was designed using the feedback and data collected in a 2020 survey, including open-ended comments. The website redesign project was led by the Office of Public Information in partnership with the Technology Department. The digital media coordinator, who serves as the district webmaster, headed the project under the supervision of the public information officer.

- The auditor found the district website to be very attractive, with a clean layout and beautiful photos of students prominently featured on the home page. The site is well-organized, making it easy to navigate to popular areas of information, including the calendar, lunch menu, bus information, registration forms, and other key information. Pull down menus on the top right point visitors to information about the district and schools as well as information specific to families and employees. A search bar makes it easy to find information, and searches for common terms such as "budget" or "testing" yielded lists of relevant links.

- Student and employee photos and the district logo reinforce the district's brand and motto: "Excellence. Ascending Together."

- The site is mobile friendly, with a clean appearance when viewed on a phone or other portable device.

- News on the website appears to be frequently updated and current, with news stories posted prominently as visitors scroll down the home page.

- School websites use the same platform and mimic the look and branding of the district website. The structure of the school websites is standard, with each school's site providing a similar layout.

- The website did not emerge as an area of concern in any of the stakeholder focus groups conducted by the auditor or in the open-ended comments section of the SCoPE Survey. Out of nearly 300 comments made by parents, employees and community members on the SCoPE Survey, only 11 comments pertained to the website. All but two of these comments were simply references to the website, and only two comments suggested that the website was difficult to navigate.

- Using the WebAIM website accessibility tool to assess the homepage of the district website, the auditor found that there are a small number of accessibility issues to be addressed such as missing alternative text, structural errors (unordered lists and headings), broken links and areas of small text.

- The auditor notes only the following potential areas of weakness in the website:

  - The website has channels for schools, families and employees, but no channel for the general community that contains information specifically targeted to the media, senior citizens, alumni, local businesses and potential residents.

  - Once at a school site, there is not a clear pathway back to the district homepage, other than using the back arrow.

  - There is no prominently displayed feature through which visitors can ask questions or provide feedback.

  - Community members who do not have children in the district should have a method for signing up to receive district information.
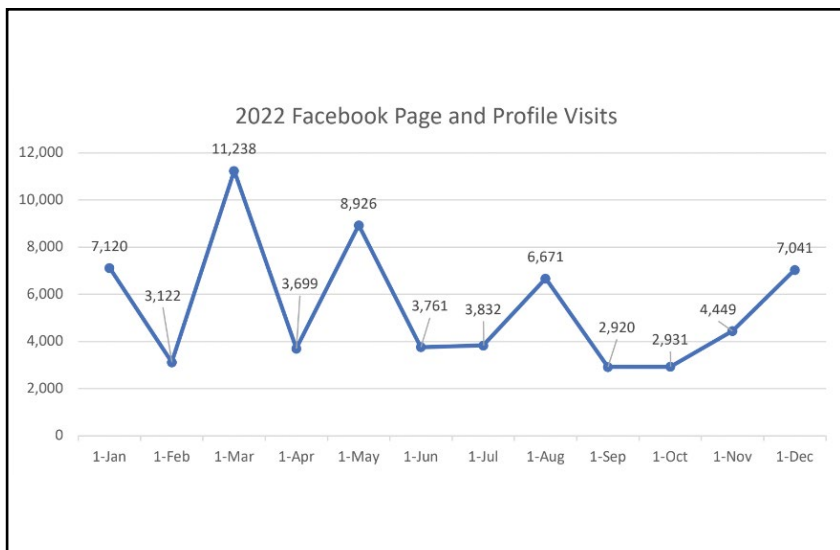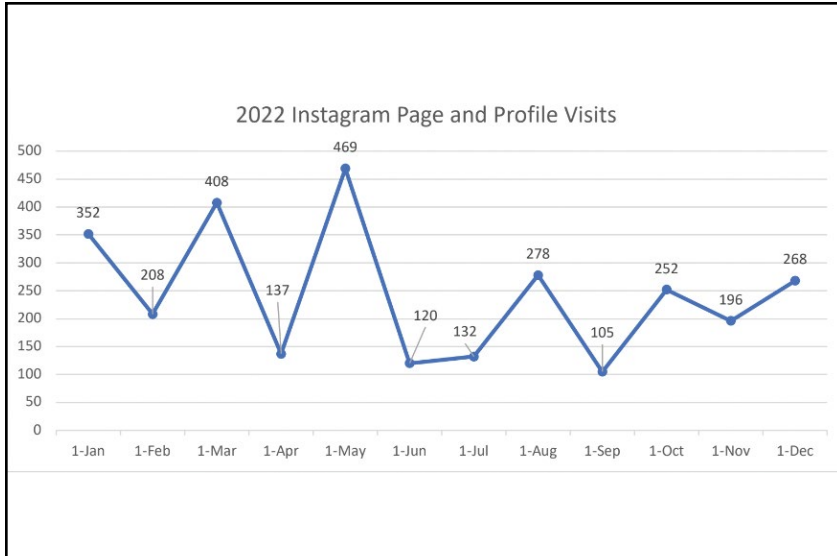
Social Media

- **The Office of Public Information maintains a district presence on the following social media platforms:**
  - Ascension's [Facebook](#) page has 23,000 followers.
    - ▫ The district posts daily with photos and news items about student, staff and district successes and achievements and also uses Facebook to provide information such as attendance boundaries. Analytics provided to the auditor by the district show that the district continued to attract new likes and follows in 2022 and that the average monthly Facebook page and profile visits ranged from 2,931 to 11,238.
    - ▫ In a review of a typical week of posts from May 1-7, the auditor found Ascension's Facebook page had an average engagement rate of 0.53 percent, which is higher than the 0.15 percent average engagement rate for education posts in 2020, but less than what was considered a "good" Facebook engagement rate in general in 2020 (2-5 percent).

  - Ascension's [Twitter](#) account has 2,215 followers.
    - ▫ The district posts daily with photos and news items about student, staff and district successes and achievements and also uses Twitter to provide information such as attendance boundaries. The posts are nearly identical to those on Facebook, with some slight changes in wording.
    - ▫ In a review of a typical week of posts from May 1-7, the auditor found Ascension's Twitter account had an average engagement rate of 0.25 percent, which is higher than the 0.06 percent average engagement rate for education posts in 2020, but less than what was considered a "good" Twitter engagement rate in general in 2020 (0.5-1 percent)

  - Ascension's [Instagram](#) account has 3,068 followers.
    - ▫ Post content is similar to Facebook and Twitter. Monthly average page and profile visits ranged from 105 to 469 in 2022.
    - ▫ In a review of a typical week of posts from May 1-7, the auditor found Ascension's Instagram account had an average engagement rate of 0.67 percent, which is lower than the 1.16 percent average engagement rate for education posts in 2020 and lower than what was considered a "good" Instagram engagement rate in general in 2020 (2-3 percent).

2022 Facebook Page and Profile Visits

2022 Instagram Page and Profile Visits

- Ascension's YouTube channel has 956 subscribers.

  - Content includes superintendent messages, staff recruitment, student and staff honors, welcome back videos and a series of public service videos to discourage unsafe behaviors during prom season.

  - In a review of a typical week of posts from May 1-7, the auditor found Ascension's YouTube account had an average engagement rate of 0.68 percent, which is lower than the 2022 average YouTube engagement rate of 1.64 percent.

- **When staff and parents were asked which social media platforms they use to get information about the district, the results were nearly identical**:
  - 98 percent of both groups indicated that they use Facebook.

  - 15 percent of staff and 16 percent of parents indicated that they use Instagram.

  - 5 percent of staff and 4 percent of parents indicated that they use YouTube.

  - 3 percent of staff and 4 percent of parents indicated that they use Twitter.

• **In focus groups, district leaders noted the following concerns in discussions about social media:**

▪ "Technology is a blessing and a curse because you want to be able to control [student] communication as much as possible. But you don't want to be controlling. Students have an opportunity to communicate outside of the schools [with their devices]. (Principal)

▪ "The biggest challenge is with social media. Some parents post things that are not true, and students may make threats on social media. Knowing when and how to respond is becoming a bigger issue as more and more parents and students have devices." (District leader/administrator)

▪ "Social media is part of our culture and the culture is leaning toward contention." (District leader/administrator)

Word that Best Describes the District: Faculty/Staff

Word that Best Describes the District: Parents/Families

Word that Best Describes the District: Community Members

SCoPE Scorecard

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted online School Communication Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (both instructional staff and support staff) and community members.

The SCoPE Scorecard on the following page provides a summary of scores for the school district on nationally benchmarked questions that measure issues that matter most in school communications. The district's scores are listed in comparison to the scores for all school districts—more than 80 nationally—that have participated in the SCoPE Survey since 2013.

The rating numbers provided for each question, on a 1-5 scale, correlate to the following descriptions as applicable for the type of question to which participants were responding:

1. When participants were asked to rate *how informed they feel* on specific topics, they responded using the following scale:
   - 5 = Highly informed
   - 4 = Very informed
   - 3 = Informed
   - 2 = Somewhat informed
   - 1 = Not informed

2. When participants were asked to rate *their level of agreement with* specific statements, they responded using the following scale:
   - 5 = Strongly Agree
   - 4 = Agree
   - 3 = Neutral
   - 2 = Disagree
   - 1 = Strongly Disagree

3. When participants were asked to provide ratings about their *perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications*, they responded using the following scale:
   - 5 = Excellent
   - 4 = Very Good
   - 3 = Average
   - 2 = Below Average
   - 1 = Poor

For more details on methodology, participation rates and complete SCoPE results, refer to the survey summary and detailed data reports.

SCoPE Scorecard		Ascension	National		
			Avg.	Low	High
Staff	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About how I can support student achievement (1)	**4.2**	3.6	3.0	4.4
	About how I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador (1)	**3.5**	3.2	2.5	3.8
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	**4.0**	3.4	2.8	4.2
	About topics that make me feel valued as an employee (1)	**3.9**	3.1	2.3	3/9
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my school/department (2)	**4.2**	4.0	3.4	4.5
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	**4.1**	3.7	2.7	4.3
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	**4.0**	3.6	2.6	4.2
	Overall perception of the district (3)	**4.1**	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About my child's progress in school (1)	**3.9**	3.8	3.1	4.4
	About how I can support my child's learning (1)	**3.5**	3.4	2.4	4.1
	About school and district events and programs (1)	**3.4**	3.3	2.5	4.1
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	**3.8**	3.5	3.0	4.1
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my child's school (2)	**4.0**	4.1	3.6	4.5
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	**3.9**	3.8	3.1	4.4
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	**3.9**	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Overall perception of the district (3)	**4.1**	3.8	2.6	4.2
Community	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About academic programs and district performance (1)	**3.4**	3.0	2.0	4.2
	About district finances and related issues (1)	**3.0**	2.5	1.7	3.6
	About school safety (1)	**3.2**	2.9	1.7	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	**3.5**	3.3	2.2	4.3
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	**3.8**	3.2	2.0	4.0
	Overall perception of the district (3)	**4.3**	3.3	2.1	4.3

Observations and SWOT Analysis

Following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditor offers this top-line observation: **Ascension generally excels in communicating effectively with all stakeholder groups.** Feedback shared in focus groups and on the SCoPE Survey is among the most positive this auditor has heard when evaluating school district communication programs.

People often move to Ascension Parish for the schools, and the district's excellent branding and strong communication reinforce the district's outstanding reputation. The campus facilities include both state-of-the-art new buildings and modernized historic buildings that are attractive as well as conducive to teaching and learning, based on stakeholder feedback.

The district has enjoyed strong leadership over many years and has built trust with the community by operating with transparency and good stewardship of financial resources. Further, the district and the local business community enjoy a symbiotic relationship. It is widely recognized that the schools provide benefits to local businesses by attracting a high quality workforce and feeding the workforce with well-educated employees. Likewise, local businesses benefit the schools by contributing to a strong tax base and providing attractive career opportunities to graduates.

Among the few significant challenges noted consistently in focus groups is the divide between schools on one side of the Mississippi River and the other. Even then, some noted that improvements have been made in recent years, with the district ensuring equitable access to resources in more impoverished areas where test scores were lower.

While the report that follows includes many recommendations for improvement, the auditor did not uncover any major challenges related to communication. Most of the recommendations that follow are centered around building on current strengths and taking the district's communication program to the next level.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) and external opportunities (O) and threats (T)—known as a SWOT analysis— affecting the ability of Ascension to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

	Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Internal	• Ascension is an academically high-performing district. • Teachers teach and students learn in state-of-the-art, well-maintained facilities. • District leadership is strong and operates transparently. • The communication program is managed by a talented, highly-respected communications professional.	• The capacity of the small communication staff is limited. • Two-way communication, where stakeholders (particularly parents) feel their input is welcome and valued, could be improved. • Parents and employees are experiencing information overload due to the large number of district and school information sources.
	Opportunities	**Threats**
External	• The district enjoys a high level of trust within the local community. • New residents continue to move to the area, creating a growing tax base and a steady stream of new families. • The economy in the region is strong. • A high percentage of Ascension's employees live in the district. • Ascension can serve as a communication model for other districts in the state as well as regionally and nationally.	• There is a geographic divide between schools on the west and east sides of the Mississippi River that contributes to a feeling of inequality. • Social media access has given many more stakeholders a platform to share negative perspectives and misinformation. • A competitive labor environment has led to a shortage of some workers, such as bus drivers and staff to manage extracurricular programming.

Recommendations

A district that is communicating as well as Ascension has the opportunity to build on its many strengths rather than expending time and resources on fixing problems. The auditor heard from the superintendent, public information officer and district leaders a strong desire to communicate accurately, swiftly and effectively and to reinforce the core values expressed in its strategic plan: teamwork, leadership, learning and service. The recommendations that follow are designed to accomplish that and include a mix of practical suggestions for further strengthening existing effective communication practices as well as aspirational ideas to help Ascension rise to the next level of engagement with stakeholders.

As noted in the Introduction, it is important to note that every employee in the district communicates with fellow employees, parents, students and the community every day. While the Office of Public Information plays a fundamental role in ensuring the smooth outflow of accurate information, all other departments and staff members also have key roles to play in ensuring that Ascension communicates and builds relationships with its stakeholders.

The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to implement different recommendations at different times. As noted in the Next Steps section of the Introduction, some recommendations can be implemented immediately, some may take several years and some will require additional staff. NSPRA has generally found that it is not feasible for a communications department to implement more than two or three major recommendations per year while maintaining its existing services, initiatives and staffing levels. This is a long-term effort for which the report should serve as a road map.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a strategic communication plan that sets measurable objectives based on the findings of this audit.

2. Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's communications capacity and infrastructure.

3. Address information overload by streamlining, targeting and reducing communication outflow.

4. Strategically engage the community through enhanced social media strategies.

5. Combat misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, easy-to-find information through a variety of communication channels.

6. Adopt cutting-edge strategies that make Ascension a model for school communication best practices.

Recommendation 1:

Develop a strategic communication plan that sets measurable objectives based on the findings of this audit.

The district's strategic plan includes a communication component, but it is not a detailed strategic communication plan that sets measurable objectives with specific strategies and tactics designed to achieve them.

Feedback about Ascension's communication was overwhelmingly positive, and the Office of Public Information is already highly effective in disseminating clear, accurate information in a timely manner. Expanding those efforts by planning communications even more strategically will allow the district to further strengthen relationships and solidify support for the core values articulated in the district's strategic plan. Developing a formal, strategic communication plan will also help the Office of Public Information save time by grounding its efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, cost-effective and most likely to succeed in Ascension's community.

The primary functions of a strategic communication plan are:

- To articulate and formalize communication goals, objectives and strategies, and the tactics that will be used to fulfill them.

- To provide a means for communications staff to report on progress and demonstrate accountability.

- To ensure key communication priorities are not lost in day-to-day communication tasks.

Investing time on strategic communication planning now can save time in the future as activities become more focused and prioritized. An updated strategic communication plan, based on measurable objectives, a clear

strategic vision and innovative new practices, and aligned with the district strategic plan will result in targeted communication that delivers key messages, engages stakeholders in meaningful relationships and increases the number of participants who feel positively about the district.

The following action steps will assist Ascension in building the overall plan as well as incorporating several key initiatives that are recommended based on the Key Findings of this report.

Action Step 1.1

Follow the four-step strategic public relations planning process of research, planning, implementation and evaluation (RPIE).

There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan, but following the four-step RPIE process has proven successful for many school districts and is a best practice of accredited public relations practitioners. The district's public information officer is a strategic practitioner, but with a small staff dedicated to communication, lack of time has been a barrier to strategic planning efforts. The following details on the RPIE process are provided to emphasize its value and importance for the district's communication success, not due to any lack of familiarity with the concepts on the part of the public information officer.

Good communication planning is time-consuming, but making time to create such a plan will provide a road map (see p. 38 "Get on the Road" side note) to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of all district communications.

Research

Research (R) and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize relevant, top-line research findings in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This

NSPRA Communication Audit, including the SCoPE Survey data, will be an excellent starting point, providing deeper understanding of communication sources, preferences and perceptions than the district had prior to conducting its latest audit.

Following are some additional data types you may consider when creating a strategic communication plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: enrollment, student poverty, access to technology, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by news media and specialized websites, etc.

- Local community demographics: National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/), the U.S. Census Bureau (https://data.census.gov/cedsci/) and local county/city/town websites

- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (https://pdkpoll.org/), Gallup polls on education (https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx) and EdChoice Schooling in America Poll (https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/schooling-in-america-polling-dashboard-2/)

- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org/) and Gallup Workplace Insights (https://www.gallup.com/workplace/insights.aspx)

Also as part of the research phase, identify all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in Ascension. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics: managing website content, district and principal newsletters, social media postings, parent and staff emergency notifications, superintendent letters and videos, news releases, annual reports, crisis communication, etc. The materials gathered and

#1

Develop a strategic communications plan that sets measurable objectives based on the findings of this audit..

provided to NSPRA for this audit will provide most of what is needed for this task.

Also include the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, open house programs, advisory groups, business partnerships, news media relations and participation in community organizations.

This compilation will provide a detailed picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations. It also will provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communications and public relations functions.

Plan

Planning (P) is at the heart of the RPIE process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications road map will begin to come to life. This is the heavy-lifting phase of creating a communication plan, but completing the following steps will pay big dividends for the district.

- **Develop Measurable Objectives.** In the planning phase, begin by articulating clear long-term goals and shorter-term measurable objectives for communication, based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Think of objectives as desired outcomes, stated in a way that can be measured later, which builds trust by establishing accountability.

When developing objectives, ensure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). Here is an example of a measurable objective:

- Sample Objective: "By the end of the 2023-24 school year, at least 60 percent of all stakeholder groups will say they are moderately to extremely informed about the district's finances."

- **Determine Strategies.** Strategies are the approaches used to achieve objectives; they are broader in scope than tactics. A strategy states what is going to be done to achieve a desired outcome, while tactics describe how that strategy will be done. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to understand, particularly for district and department leaders in other functional areas. It will also make it easier for communications staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For example, if the measurable objective is to increase the percentage of all stakeholders who say they are moderately to extremely informed about district finances, a strategy and its related tactics might include:

  - Sample Strategy: Make easy-to-understand financial information available in multiple communication channels.

- Tactics:

  - Design an infographic that tells the budget story and post it prominently on the website and in all district publications. Review it at employee and parent meetings.

  - Create a short video explaining the budget and how it is developed.

  - Form a financial advisory committee that provides input on the budget and acts as ambassadors to explain district finances in the community.

- **Create Key Messages.** For each target audience, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the communications, and use that information to build targeted key messages. People's attention span and time is limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategy in the prior bullet, following is an example key message:

  - Key Message: The community is invested in the success of their local schools, and to respect that investment, the district is committed to ensuring that our financial

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

It can be challenging to distinguish between goals, objectives, strategies and tactics in part because some industries use the words interchangeably. For their use within the field of school communications, an analogy that can be helpful is to think of the terms in the context of traveling to a desired destination.

- The **goal** is the final destination of a long journey.

- **Measurable objectives** are stops along the way to reaching that destination. They might outline how many miles to be covered each day, where the driver will stop each night and by what time the driver plans to arrive at each pit stop.

- **Strategies and tactics** get into the nitty-gritty details: Will the driver take the scenic route or highways? If the chosen strategy is to take the scenic route, which songs should be put on the playlist to keep the driver awake?

information is easily accessible and understandable.

- **Identify Stakeholder Groups.** Stakeholder groups, or target audiences, are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district and its initiatives. A strategic communication plan often has a unique set of strategies, tactics and key messages for each stakeholder group. Following are some common stakeholders for schools:

    - Parents broken down by active/involved, non-English-speaking, etc.

    - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals

    - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents

    - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislator

    - Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children

    - Students such as those participating in student government

    - Media representatives from radio and television stations and local newspapers and magazines

- **Establish Tools and Tactics.** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. Consider also any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:

    - Equipment, software and subscriptions

    - Materials and supplies

    - Printing and duplicating

    - Print and digital advertising

    - Professional development

- **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of implementation, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to see if it needs modification.

- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the Office of Public Information; with a small staff dedicated solely to communications, other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. (Communication staffing is further addressed in Recommendation 2.) Further, the SCoPE Survey showed that teachers, principals and employees are a powerful source of information, so it is important that employees understand key issues and initiatives, can answer questions about them and know when they are responsible for disseminating it (see chart on page 53).

As Ascension works through the planning process, ensure the following questions are addressed for every major initiative the district 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?

- How will we track and measure what they have learned and done as a result of our communication efforts? How will we measure success?

Implement

Implementation (I) is often the easiest part of the process because the research and planning phases will have helped to identify what needs to be done, when, by whom and with what tools and resources, along with a timeline.

Evaluate

When creating the strategic communication plan, identify evaluative (E) measures to be used later to determine the success in achieving the stated goals and objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. This data can be the basis of research findings to inform future updates to the strategic communication plan.

NSPRA offers a number of resources that will help Ascension develop a strategic communication plan. First, watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on "Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan" available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at https://www.nspra. org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans. The webpage also contains communication plan templates, including one for use with a communication audit report.

Then review these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:

- Pattonville (Mo.) Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program—https://www.nspra.org/ Portals/0/Awards percent20Section/ Award percent20Winners/School percent20Comms percent20Awards/Gold percent20Medallion/gm-low-pattonville-sd-year-round-communication. pdf?ver=HEgwT3my 8cFJJ0vUwHOAIA percent3d percent3d

- Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan—https://alexandriapubli c.ic-board.com/attachments/dce41d87-af3 a-4c04-8e3a-5a7b8d27d556.pdf

Action Step 1.2

Incorporate two-way communication as a specific component of the strategic communication plan.

As noted on page 23 of the Key Findings, when parents and staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with various statements about the quality of communication in Ascension, the lowest ratings were given to "my input and opinion are welcome and valued." Comments in the focus groups reinforced that perception. While other findings suggest that the district enjoys high levels of trust from its stakeholders, it is important to maintain that by ensuring that parents, employees and the community have adequate opportunity to provide input on decisions.

As Ascension develops the objectives for its strategic communication plan, as well as when it develops communication plans for specific initiatives outside of the overall plan, opportunities for two-way engagement should be considered. To determine whether a future decision may require a community engagement process, consider what Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, calls "Gateway Questions" that lead to engagement:

- **Is this a problem that affects me?** People first must connect the problem or issue to what they deem valuable before they get involved.

- **Can I do anything?** Even if they feel the problem is serious, they must feel there is something they personally can do to make a difference.

- **Who will join me?** People often feel powerless if they see themselves as acting alone but will believe they can make a

difference if others of like mind join them.

Deploying a successful engagement process requires trained facilitators as well as leaders who understand the process. Many organizations offer training and other resources such as books, session guidelines and facilitator manuals. (One such organization that has partnered in the past with NSPRA and member districts is Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and public engagement organization.) The district can also opt to bring in an external facilitator trained in public engagement to lead the initiative.

Regardless of the approach, it is essential that everyone involved, including participants, be informed of the process, understand the goal and collectively agree to the ground rules. A purpose statement should define the role of the group and who has the authority to make the final decision. It should also include what the group does and does not have authority to do. Without these purpose statements, those involved can often perceive their authority to be different than originally intended. It is the responsibility of the leaders of each of these groups to continually reinforce the purpose and authority of the group.

Beyond making it a habit to consider two-way engagement strategies around district initiatives and decisions as they arise, here are a few additional strategies for encouraging input on an ongoing basis:

- **Establish an effective method for stakeholders to submit comments and ideas.** Inviting comments and ideas via an anonymous-optional digital tool or e-form can make providing feedback more convenient and comfortable for busy or self-conscious community members, parents and staff. School systems today can invite input digitally in a variety of ways, including through online feedback apps such as K12 Insight's Let's Talk, the ThoughtExchange crowdsourcing platform and artificial

intelligence-powered customer service chatbots like AlwaysOn.

When soliciting feedback or ideas, have respondents identify a particular topic for their communications so responses are more easily categorized and shared with appropriate administrators for timely responses. The additional benefit of doing this through a digital application designed for gathering feedback is that the data can be more easily analyzed to identify trends and frequency of topics over time to help the district spot communication gaps or customer service issues.

- **Schedule listening opportunities for the superintendent at school and department staff meetings.** An example from Salem-Keizer Public Schools in Oregon may be helpful to consider. Its superintendent began offering "Live with Christy" virtual events that were very popular with employees. Similar "Live with Dr. Walker" events could focus on a particular topic and give employees the opportunity to meet and interact with the superintendent either in person or in a virtual setting.

The live capabilities of the new TV studio could be utilized for this. The format could include taking 5-10 minutes to provide a brief update on district issues and then use the remaining time to solicit staff comments and concerns. There might be a specific topic to focus on, but it is also useful to ask for comments on issues or topics that are top-of-mind for stakeholders. Gathering input in this manner can inform decisions and clarify rumors.

- **Develop and implement listening campaigns with parents and the community.** The advent of a new superintendent presents an excellent opportunity to nurture two-way communication. On a regular basis, provide the superintendent with

opportunities to meet with diverse groups of constituents. Besides schools, these meetings might take place in public libraries, community centers or even local coffee shops so stakeholders can meet with the superintendent off the district's "turf."

▪ Provide a structure for the conversations and increase the appeal for potential attendees by designating specific topics; few people are willing to take time out of their busy schedules for a meeting with no clear purpose. For example, one session might focus on safety issues, another might focus on the district's stance regarding social media.

▪ Make it clear that the purpose of these listening opportunities is to hear from stakeholders, not to make decisions. It is also important to honor the school district's chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

• **Expand opportunities to serve on and access to the Parent Advisory Council.** Parents and principals who participated in the focus groups explained that parents are selected by principals to serve on the Parent Advisory Council. Parents who participate enjoy their service and suggested it would be valuable to give more parents this opportunity. They also noted that they don't know why they were selected, and they are unsure whether other parents in the school know they are serving as a representative for the school. They suggested promoting their role so they can be more effective representatives for other parents in their school.

Following is an additional resource on community engagement for consideration:

• Connecting With the Community: The Purpose and Process of Community Engagement As Part of Effective School Board Governance, Illinois Association of School Boards—https://www. ohioschoolboards.org/sites/default/files/ Community percent20Engagement.pdf

Action Step 1.3

Include a component for building a stronger district-wide sense of community between schools east and west of the Mississippi River.

The auditor heard from multiple focus groups that staff and parents at the schools on the west side of the river sometimes feel marginalized. Targeted communication to the families and partner agencies in these jurisdictions and concerted outreach to involve them in district-level committees and councils will help.

For more ideas, explore the following resources:

• Bridging Community Divides through Authentic Engagement, NSPRA Leaders Learn webinar recording (members only)— https://www.nspra.org/Professional-Development/Webinars/On-Demand/ On-Demand-Professional-Development-Library

• The 2022 Golden Achievement Award-winning "Forney Family" campaign, which centered on building unity in the Forney (Texas) Independent School District community after it was divided between two high schools—https://www.nspra.org/ Awards/ Award-Winners/2022-Golden-Achievement-Award-Winners

Action Step 1.4

Include crisis communications as a component of strategic communication planning.

Crisis communications did not emerge as an area of concern in the focus groups or the

SCoPE Survey, with 87 percent of parents and 92 percent of staff indicating they are moderately, very or extremely informed about school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises. This is likely because Ascension's public information officer has 20 years of experience and a toolkit full of messages and practices at her disposal to handle the small and large emergency situations that school districts encounter every day.

However, it cannot be assumed that the public information officer will always be immediately available in a crisis. These situations often evolve rapidly, and given the speed of smart technology, it is imperative for the district to formalize its practices in a written plan and have several layers of staff who understand crisis communications and have sample messages at their fingertips. This will allow the district to respond with calm and professionalism, even when the public information officer is unavailable.

In addition, school leaders communicated during focus groups that they are not always certain when they are responsible for communicating and when the district is handling it. Protocols for communicating with parents should be included in the plan to ensure that parents understand why information cannot always be released due to privacy or the need for school leaders to be focused on the emergency.

For these reasons, the auditor recommends that the district devote a section of the strategic communication plan to crisis communications, putting in writing the expected sequence and flow of communications. Including crisis communications in the communication plan will ensure that administrators and educators can focus on managing the crisis while the Office of Public Information can focus on keeping internal and external stakeholders informed about the crisis in a timely and accurate manner. Such a plan should take into account the varied communication needs of stakeholders during different types of crises, from urgent but time-limited events (e.g., school shooting, bomb threat) to ongoing crises

with lengthier impacts (e.g., natural disasters, weather events, pandemics).

The following tactics are offered as a guide for updating the district's crisis plans to create a comprehensive crisis communications management tool.

- **Assign specific crisis communication responsibilities.** Clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels, both for formal communications staff members and for other department/building administrators. The organizational structure of an emergency response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should be designated to take charge of specific communication responsibilities, including:

  - Leadership advisement

  - Internal communication

  - External communication

  - News media relations

  - Command center communications

  - Digital communications (website and social media posts and monitoring)

  - Research and media monitoring

  - Special events, donations and volunteer management (e.g., memorial services, clothing drives)

- **Emphasize preparation and training.** Being truly prepared to communicate effectively during a crisis requires preparation, planning and training. Knowing who is supposed to communicate what and how in various types of crises can help the district provide a calm and timely communications response. Schools around the country have stepped-up crisis response training, from table-top scenario discussions to active shooter drills with local law enforcement and fire-safety partners. Since communication is a vital component in managing any crisis, the communications department staff should be included in these training exercises.

Prior to these drills, communications staff and administrators with crisis communication responsibilities should review the likely media holding/press briefing areas for different types of crises and assess their communication go-bags. This go-bag might include Wi-Fi hotspots; a list of administrators' mobile numbers, local media's contact information and the contact information for public information officers of local emergency responders; a printout of login information for all communication platforms; and a backup cell phone charger.

- **Provide crisis communications training for all administrators.** Those who hold responsibility for handling various components of crisis management at the school or district level should be knowledgeable about the overall crisis communication plan and how their supervisory areas are affected by it during crises. At any given time, those responsible for various components may not be immediately available and others may need to take the lead.

  Components of crisis communications information and training provided to all administrators should include the following:

  - **A first-response checklist.** The first hour of a crisis is when the public will form its perception about an organization's ability to respond effectively. To manage that first critical hour, the first-response checklist should include:

    - A reminder to assess the basic facts of a situation: who, what, when, where, why and how;

    - An outline of who is responsible for doing what;

    - Who should be contacted first; and

    - A basic outline for providing responses in terms of actions and statements.

  - **A list of key stakeholders/target audiences and the best way to communicate with each group.** Having a list of audiences and the most effective channels to reach them means not having to brainstorm when a crisis occurs. Remind administrators that those who are most impacted must be contacted first, followed by those who are less involved.

  - **Templates for creating initial public statements.** The Office of Public Information should provide templates for various school crises that include prompts for communicating the following:

    - What can be confirmed;

    - What the district and/or school is/are doing to respond to the situation;

    - How and when updates will be provided; and

    - Messages of concern and sympathy for anyone directly and negatively impacted by the crisis.

  - **Considerations when no template is available.** Crisis situations can be unique, and there may be times when there isn't an appropriate template to use as a starting place. In those situations, the public information officer, if available, will use her skills to create the message by considering the following:

    - Who needs to know?

    - Which, if any, facts can be shared without violating privacy?

    - What channels of communication should be used?

▫ What are parents thinking/worrying about?

▫ What is the risk in providing information? What is the risk in not providing information?

If the public information officer is not available, school and district leaders should think through these same considerations. They should also be given "starter" phrases and sentences to aid in the quick development of messaging. Examples include the following:

▫ Our top priority is your child's safety/education.

▫ We want to get classrooms back to normal as quickly as possibly.

▫ We have made this decision because . . . .

▫ We cannot allow [activity] because it may . . . .

▫ We cannot share this information because the law requires us to protect the privacy of our staff/students.

▫ We are investigating . . . .

▫ This is what we know so far . . .

▫ For more information, please visit our website where we will post regular updates.

▫ We are deeply troubled/saddened by . . . .

- **News media protocols.** With today's smart devices and social sharing, the news media often hear of trouble as fast as—or even before—school/district staff. If reporters cannot get the information from the school, they may (and likely will) report information from whatever sources they can find. This can be students, parents or teachers who text or post; relatives

getting those text messages and posts; or the random passerby on the street. Administrators must understand their role is to respond responsibly and in a timely manner to media requests so that accurate information can be provided. News media protocols should include the following:

▫ When interviews will be given.

▫ Who is authorized to give the interviews.

▫ Who is authorized to approve the release of information.

▫ Where the interviews will be held.

▫ Whether photographers will be allowed on school grounds.

▫ Under what circumstances students can be photographed.

- **Statements for receptionists and secretaries.** Parents will be concerned about their children, even if the crisis occurs in another school. Building staff should be aware of their responsibility to respond to these inquiries and should have a statement available that has been approved by the applicable school building principal and the public information officer.

- **Expectations for staff communications.** Staff members can be important information ambassadors during a crisis. Employees should be updated and, if possible, they should hear what is happening before messages are sent to parents and the community. People will expect that they know what is happening. Uninformed employees will eat away at the community's confidence and trust in the school's response.

- **Expectations for crisis communications with parents and students.** The best time to let students and families know what to do

in an emergency is before it happens. Include information in student and staff handbooks and on the website explaining what parents and staff can expect if a crisis situation occurs. Include the most likely communication methods the district will use in a crisis: automated calls/texts, email, website, Facebook, Twitter, etc. A recent conversation in the NSPRA Connect online community addressed how to communicate emergency protocols to parents and contains some excellent examples.

- **Take advantage of social media capabilities for crisis communications.** Social media is a place for engagement and conversation. In situations where the district is not willing to discuss a particular crisis situation, the best approach might be to have social media posts direct people to a webpage statement. Otherwise, authorities on school safety and crisis management suggest taking the following simple approaches to social media:

  - **Before the crisis … engage and anticipate.** Social media is a tool to engage parents and stakeholders in conversations. By doing so early (before a crisis), schools establish a community of participants and a familiarity as the go-to source for information. In an emergency, people will seek information wherever they can find it.

  - **During the crisis … communicate.** Assigning one staff member (or a volunteer colleague from the school public relations community) to monitor social media posts day and night during a crisis may be necessary to keep accurate information flowing. Remember that the bottom line is less about saying the right things and more about doing the right things. So make sure what is being done about the crisis is being communicated on a regular basis.

  - **After the crisis … communicate.** Re-engaging on social media platforms may be the best opportunity to regain the trust of stakeholders and reconnect the community after a crisis to help in the recovery effort. The more schools engage in social media from the beginning, the better positioned they will be to anticipate and communicate to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

NSPRA offers a wealth of resources for districts developing their crisis communication plans, including a Crisis, Health and Safety Communications section of the Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) area of the NSPRA website at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Crisis-and-Safety-Communications. Following are a few of the resources available on the webpage:

- A 2022 Golden Achievement Award-winning crisis communication plan

- Samples and templates to use during crisis events

- Conference presentations and webinars on crisis communications

- Examples of how safety information can be shared on websites

Action Step 1.5

Consider equity and access to technology as you plan strategies and tactics.

Several focus group participants expressed concerns about how to ensure that parents who cannot afford technology, or grandparents who may be uncomfortable using technology, can access electronically-delivered information. This is a difficult problem to solve in the digital age, but the auditor encourages the district to gather data around the number of parents/guardians in this situation and address it in the strategic communication plan. If the number of stakeholders with limited access to technology

is small, perhaps those parents/guardians could have an opportunity to opt-in to paper communications.

Action Step 1.6

Provide opportunities for administrative leaders and front-line staff to review the plan.

Given that the Office of Public Information is a small department for the size of the district, it is important to engage other leaders in thinking about and engaging in developing communication strategies. On a daily basis, responsibility for the exchange of information extends beyond the official work of the public information officer, so it is important to clarify and delineate communication roles, responsibilities and the expected flow of information for administrative leaders and front-line staff, who informally serve as communicators.

The auditor recommends that the public information officer offer a meeting for administrators and front-line staff where they can review the preliminary strategic communication plan and learn about their roles in its success. The only way to ensure that communication is proactive, creative and flows freely in Ascension is to seek feedback from all who have responsibility for communicating.

This also creates an opportunity to educate colleagues about the mission of the department and the connection between excellent communication and achieving district goals.

Recommendation 2:

Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's communications capacity and infrastructure.

The communication landscape for schools has changed significantly in the last three years. A 2022 NSPRA member survey found that the top tasks for school public relations professionals today are crisis communications (58 percent), external communications (52 percent), social media (48 percent), community relations/public engagement (44 percent), media relations (43 percent), website management (39 percent), internal communications (36 percent), strategic communication planning (31 percent), writing/editing (24 percent) and marketing (23 percent).

To fulfill these and other activities, many school districts are finding it necessary to rethink and reorganize the communication function to ensure that district communications become or remain strategic, consistent, efficient, accessible to all, culturally sensitive and delivered across the wide variety of channels used today by families, staff and community members.

The job description for Ascension's public information officer, last updated in 2007 and provided below, reflects a very different time period in school communications. It was created prior to the widespread use of social media, increasing public demands for involvement in their local schools, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing social and political turmoil in school communities nationwide.

**Public Information Officer
Job Description, 2007**

SUMMARY OF POSITION'S PURPOSE

Provides effective communication of information to school system stakeholders, including parents, students, employees, the news media, policy makers, the business community, and members of the general public.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Develops and updates the comprehensive public relations strategy for the district.

2. Prepares and distributes a professional brochure providing information about the district to business and community partners.

3. Prepares and publishes a quarterly newsletter for district stakeholders.

4. Manages inquiries from the news media when newsworthy events occur.

5. Provides training to administrators in how to handle the news media.

6. Oversees and updates content on the district web site.

7. Prepares PowerPoint presentations for administrators to use with civic and governmental groups.

8. Oversees and coordinates internal communications in the district.

9. Provides courteous and prompt service to all internal and external customers including students, parents, co-workers, etc.

10. Prioritizes and addresses requests and assignments in a professional manner to develop cooperative relationships and to ensure that student and employee records confidentiality is assured.

11. Identifies opportunities and recommends methods to improve service, work processes and financial performance, (e.g. expense management). Assists in the implementation of quality improvement initiatives.

12. Assists co-workers in the completion of tasks and assignments to ensure

continuity of service. Orients new co-workers and actively supports teamwork throughout the school system.

13. Performs other duties as required.

Given the size of Ascension, its high profile in the state of Louisiana, and the amount of media attention it receives, it has been a stretch for the public information officer to plan strategically, while also handling all routine communication (media relations, event planning, etc.), maintaining a strong relationship with the public and responding to the unexpected emergencies and challenges that occur on a regular basis in every school district.

For example, the auditor learned that while neighboring schools have difficulty getting coverage by local media, the Ascension public information officer has to turn down requests for positive stories on the local news because she simply does not have the capacity to get to campuses. The public information officer shared that there are many good stories that are not getting told due to limited capacity.

There is no national standard for staffing levels in communications, but it is worth considering the staffing practices of similar school systems when reflecting on Ascension's communications capacity and infrastructure. According to the 2022 NSPRA member survey, among school systems enrolling 10,000-24,999 students, 61 percent have 2-4 staff members in their communications office and 15 percent have only one. Taking into account the projected growth in enrollment, it is also worth noting that, among school systems enrolling 25,000-49,999 students, 46 percent have 5-7 staff members in their communications office while 24 percent have 8-15.

The following action steps are offered as ideas for evaluating, strengthening and expanding the capacity for strategic communications in Ascension. Doing so will allow Ascension to more fully implement the recommendations of this report as well consider ideas expressed by district leaders during interviews and focus groups. These included the following:

#2

Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's communications capacity and infrastructure.

- Conducting virtual and panel discussions with local community members.

- Sharing alumni testimonials through print and video.

- Telling stories about student and staff achievements and activities.

- Creating a Student Advisory Council supported by the Office of Public Information.

- Identifying more ways to distribute information to marginalized families who do not have easy access to electronics.

Action Step 2.1

Track and evaluate time spent on communication programs, tasks and services.

QUICK WIN

To ensure staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it is important to know how much actual time is spent on each task and service, not just by the Office of Public Information, but by all staff members who have communication responsibilities. It is also important to view these tasks through the lens of how well they serve the district in meeting the goals of its strategic plan.

- **Time tracking.** While tracking time may feel onerous, the data provides useful information and the exercise only needs to happen for a limited period of

time, perhaps one quarter. Evaluation of the tracked data should include which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which can be improved in the future. The data can be compared against the findings of the SCoPE Survey regarding the communication sources used and preferred by Ascension stakeholders. This evaluation step is critical in determining whether the current infrastructure and capacity meets the district's communication needs.

- **Strategic plan alignment.** Create a list of all the current communication programs, tasks and services handled by the public information officer and other district leaders, and consider how well each task and service aligns with the district's strategic plan. For each item, ask these questions:

  - What strategic plan goal does the program, task or service support?

  - How critical is the program, task or service to meeting that goal?

  - If the program, task or service is eliminated:

    - How would district strategic goals be impacted?

    - How much staff time or resources would be freed up?

Once time resources and strategic plan alignment have been articulated, a productive discussion can then be had about the value of each program, which can be labeled as "high priority" (do first), "low priority" (do next), "save for later" (when staff time allows) or "eliminate."

Action Step 2.2

Identify duties that could be handled by someone other than the public information officer.

One way to increase the public information officer's ability to address more strategic communication efforts is to identify routine tasks that could be shifted to other employees to allow her to focus on the areas where she has unique expertise. For example, the public information officer does not have administrative support, so she spends time on clerical tasks and paperwork. She also currently fulfills time-consuming responsibilities for event planning and coordination.

Whether these tasks are shifted to another current employee or the need for additional communications staff is identified, freeing up the public information officer from such tasks will enhance her ability to focus on higher-level, strategic work that can help the district meet its strategic goals and objectives.

Action Step 2.3

Revise the job description for the public information officer and consider expanding communications staff.

Once Action Step 2.1 and 2.2 have been completed, a new job description should be created for the public information officer that reflects the assessment and the increased focus on strategic communication needs. At that point, it will also be easier to identify the skill sets that will be needed in other personnel so that tactical responsibilities can be shifted from the public information officer. This will allow her to concentrate on strategic planning, advisement and other activities that will take Ascension's communication program to the next level.

At this point, the public information officer is assisted by a digital media coordinator, who is primarily focused on the district and school websites. Ascension should consider whether some of the public information officer's current responsibilities can be shifted to this position, but it is the auditor's assessment that additional communication staff will still be needed to free up meaningful capacity.

For example, a communications specialist position could be created for fulfilling tasks such as content generation for the website; newsletters and print production; production of video content; and coordination of staff and

community engagements. If Ascension created this additional capacity, the public information officer would be responsible for assigning tactical duties while concentrating on more strategic communication initiatives.

For sample job descriptions, evaluations and counsel on communications staffing models, visit the Staffing and Supporting Communications section of NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) website at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Staffing-and-Supporting-Communications.

Action Step 2.4

Have the public information officer report directly to the superintendent.

The superintendent can directly supervise only a limited number of staff. However, it should be noted that the school districts with the most effective communication have a reporting structure in which the public relations/communications position reports directly to the superintendent.

It is critical for the superintendent to have easy access to the professional serving in the public relations role and vice versa. The superintendent should spend enough time with the public relations person to trust their advice and counsel, and likewise, the professional serving in the public relations position needs to know the superintendent well enough to anticipate how he or she might react to various situations.

Ascension's public information officer has already worked with the incoming superintendent and has an existing relationship of trust with her. Nevertheless, a direct reporting structure will increase the effectiveness and expediency of communication. The more layers that exist between a superintendent and the office of public information, the more likely it is that an opportunity to convey a key message will be

missed or that an emerging issue will not be addressed in a timely and effective manner.

The public information officer role serves as a right-hand of the superintendent, scanning the landscape, anticipating situations, and suggesting communication when questions arise. In many districts, the public relations role also attends community functions with the superintendent and becomes a recognized ambassador in the community. This provides helpful back-up for the superintendent and also adds depth to the community's understanding of the district, which in turns results in more targeted and effective messaging.

Action Step 2.5

Develop a support and training program for all staff who are responsible for communicating.

District and school leaders lauded the public information officer for her high levels of support, but she may not always be available when a situation requiring communications arises. The SCoPE Survey data about communication preferences and levels of feeling informed provide an excellent opportunity for the district to provide enhanced communications training to all staff responsible for conveying information—both veterans and new hires—and should include chief administrators, the District Organization Team and principals.

Quarterly training, or alternatively, an annual communication boot camp, would provide strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help them in their leadership roles and in their communications with stakeholders. This training would also strengthen their partnerships with the public information officer, who can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments and support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators. Similar training for school board members also should be considered and is often offered by state school boards associations.

Following are some recommendations for how to structure quarterly trainings or a communication boot camp:

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review the SCoPE Survey data, as well as local and national research, to determine what families and community members want to know from their schools and school districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as holding a live Twitter chat using a district hashtag, doing mock on-camera media interviews and/or doing a self-reflection exercise based on where they are as the chief communicator for their school, department or district area.

- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from one of the district's schools or a department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices, challenges they have encountered and ways they might overcome them.

- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review the goals and objectives of the 2022-23 Strategic Plan. Lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.

- **Schedule it for the greatest level of participation.** Offer communication boot camp during a less busy time of year, such as summer vacation. Keep it to a half-day program to start, and provide refreshments or other incentives such as district-branded door prizes.

To demonstrate the commitment to enhancing communication efforts and underscore its importance, a communication component should be included in the evaluation of chief administrators, District Organization Team members and school administrators, if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria. Making a commitment to measure something helps ensure it gets done.

Action Step 2.6

Clearly define the communication role all Ascension departments play in sending various types of information.

All Ascension district, department and school leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the public information officer. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at meetings of chief administrators, District Organization Team members and principals, so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

While the auditor perceived and SCoPE Survey data showed that information generally flows efficiently in Ascension, developing and annually reviewing a chart (like the sample on the next page) that clarifies administrators' communication roles and responsibilities may prove beneficial to ensuring that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the strategic plan.

Consider producing a guide that sets clear communication expectations such as in the "Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations" of Brenham (Texas) Independent School District, available at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/administrators-guide-communications-pr_brenham-isd.pdf?ver=rhT4CrnYqy2YO6cTspBedw percent3d percent3d.

Example: Communication Roles Guide for Administrative Staff

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used

Communications Staff	• District-level updates on:
	  ▪ Routine matters that impact more than one school
	  ▪ Urgent matters that impact any school
	  ▪ Major districtwide initiatives
	
	• Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals
		District-level tools for internal and external audiences:
		• Emails
		• Automated messages
		• Text messages
		• Website
		• Print/digital newsletters
		• Social media
		• Video channel
		• News releases to media
		• Paid ad placements
		• Tool kits for administrators

Superintendent	• Board decisions and policy changes	• Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries • Emails to staff • Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Administrative Assistant	• Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/action briefs • Board policy changes	• Board webpages
Supervisor of Child Welfare and Attendance	• Academic/curriculum updates and changes	• Curriculum webpages • Emails to staff • Staff, board and community meetings
Director of Business Services	• Budget and finance updates • Bond/capital project updates	• Business office/budget webpages • Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter • Emails to staff • Staff, board and community meetings
Director of Human Resources	• Employee benefits and resources • Job openings • Compensation-related items	• HR webpages • Emails to staff • Administrative and staff meetings • Board meetings

Principals	• School-level updates on:
	  ▪ School-specific routine matters
	  ▪ School-specific urgent matters
	  ▪ Major districtwide initiatives (using tool kit provided)
		• School-level tools for internal and external audiences:
		  ▪ Emails
		  ▪ Automated messages
		  ▪ Text messages
		  ▪ Website
		  ▪ Print/digital newsletters
		  ▪ Social media

Recommendation 3:

Address information overload by streamlining, targeting and reducing communication outflow.

Ascension is facing a challenge common to many school districts in this time of media saturation: information overload.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal, "Why Do Schools Send So Many Emails? They Don't Have To," focused on the topic, with the writer, Julie Jargon, opining, "My kids head back to the classroom in about two weeks. So far I've received nine emails, five text messages and two newsletters from their schools, some of which directed me to other sites to fill out forms. I've received notifications of numerous Facebook posts but haven't had the bandwidth to look at them. Schools deliver information in multiple ways in an effort to keep families informed...but do they need to do this much communication? For parents and guardians, already crazed at work, managing school chatter can feel like another full-time job." As Ascension thinks about how to streamline communication in Ascension, the article is worth reading, including the 100+ comments submitted by parents.

Ironically, information overload is a sign the district is providing a steady outflow of information and the SCoPE Survey showed more than two thirds of all stakeholders indicate that they are moderately, very or extremely informed in all areas except the district budget. Most districts would prefer to be criticized for providing too much information than not enough. However, information overload causes its own problems, the most serious being that stakeholders can start to tune out communication and miss something important.

Determining what information to send in which channels and how often to send it can be tricky, but the extensive data gathered in the audit can serve as a guide (chart showing the top sources relied upon for information).

Action Step 3.1

Use the SCoPE Survey findings to create an information distribution guide.

QUICK WIN

Stakeholders' communication preferences provide solid data upon which to create a guide to communication channels such as the sample below. Provide such a guide to staff who communicate regularly to help them

Example: Communication Channels Ranked by Stakeholders' Preferences for Information Types

Info. Type	Email	Website	Text	Social Media	Local Media	Call	E-Newsletter	Printed Information
School closings	#1		#2	#4		#3		
School and district events	#1	#4	#3	#2				
General news and information	#1	#4	#3	#2				
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues	#1	#2	#4	#3				

better determine which channels are best used for various types of communications.

It's important to use this chart not only to see which channels to use, but which channels NOT to use. One of the culprits of information overload is the tendency to send everything on every channel. For example, SCoPE Survey data showed that only 51 percent of all stakeholders rely on local news and media for information about Ascension. This does not mean Ascension should not send a press release to local media. It does mean that the amount of time spent on these activities should be proportional to the preferences stated by users.

Comparing users usage and preference data against communications time tracking data (Action Step 2.1) will be helpful.

Action Step 3.2

> Continue to provide concise, easy-to-read sample messages and talking points that can be used by all frontline communicators.

In line with best practices, the public information officer already provides templated messages to those responsible for communicating. For every situation, decision or issue, continue to provide brief, bulleted talking points that provide the facts and reinforce the core values of the district. This will allow communicators throughout the system to shorten their communiques and will ensure consistency in how any particular issue is discussed. Use headlines, bullet points and infographics whenever possible to make information quickly digestible by stakeholders.

Action Step 3.3

> Conduct a vendor review of current mass communication systems.

Many focus groups and SCoPE Survey participants commented on the many types of communication channels used and how the number of platforms contributes to information overload. As described in the Key

#3

Address information overload by streamlining, targeting and reducing communication outflow.

Findings, individual schools and teachers may use classroom communication tools such as Class Dojo or Remind. As a result, parents with children at multiple schools may be juggling the use of multiple school- or classroom-based apps in addition to the district app (adopted in April 2022), emails and text messages. (The current automated messaging system, School Messenger, was adopted in 2011 and at the time required parents to opt-in to receive text messages. As noted earlier in the report, not all parents have opted-in, therefore text messages do not reach all parents and are not used for routine communication.)

Another contributing factor to information overload is the common tendency for districts to adopt multiple platforms that each address a single communication challenge, rather than looking for a holistic solution that integrates many communication capabilities into a single platform. The range of products and features available today is much greater than in 2011 when the district last conducted a review of products. School Messenger offers improved and expanded features, and new vendors have also entered the space. Some of the other vendors often used by NSPRA members include Apptegy, Finalsite/Blackboard, Catapult K12, Edlio and Gabbart Communications/ ParentSquare. Some offer integrated features, (e.g., one-click posting of messages on text, email, website and subscription-based messaging) and allow parents to choose what communication channels they prefer. If individual users were able to select how they want to receive information and only receive

it that way, fewer would feel the frustration of getting pinged by email, text message, auto-generated calls and social media all at the same time.

The auditor advises against adding any new communication tools until a group of teachers, parents, principals and technology staff convene to review the tools that are currently in use across the district and conduct a robust vendor review of currently available products.

Once a new system is adopted and/or the use of existing systems is fine-tuned, provide clear guidelines on how and when each messaging service should be used. The guidelines should be consistent across all district departments and schools so that audiences will learn to expect an automated email, text message or phone call regarding specific issues.

A recent article in Forbes Magazine, "How To Better Understand Customers' Communication Preferences," is oriented to how companies can serve the needs of their customers but contains some helpful tips for school districts. Consider the following tips included in the article:

- **Remind stakeholders frequently to review and update whatever communication options you currently provide**, and tell them how they can subscribe and unsubscribe to information feeds. In some cases, a person may opt-out of a communication channel, like text messages for example, then forget they've done so and become frustrated when they miss urgent communications.

- **Notice and periodically track how stakeholders communicate with you.** If they are using email, they probably prefer email. If they are calling the district office, they probably prefer a phone call.

Recommendation 4:

Strategically engage the community through enhanced social media strategies.

Social media and video use is high among U.S. adults and teens today. Among adults, 81 percent use YouTube, 69 percent use Facebook, 40 percent use Instagram and 23 percent use Twitter, according to the Pew Research Center. The center found that teens' usage patterns differ slightly, with 95 percent using YouTube, 62 percent using Instagram, 32 percent using Facebook and 23 percent using Twitter. A recent survey from Gallup shows similar usage patterns, with 76 percent of U.S. adults saying they use Facebook and 89 percent saying they use YouTube.

Ascension maintains a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Ascension benefits from above-average engagement levels on its primary social media pages, as detailed on page 28 of the Key Findings, yet there is still room for improvement and an opportunity to use social media platforms for positive storytelling that reinforces the district's core values. While this is not a top priority among the recommendations offered in this report, it is something to consider in the future.

On the SCoPE Survey, when participants were asked how often they rely upon various sources of information, the overall rating for social media was second highest at 60 percent (behind email) on a list of 12 ways stakeholders currently get information about the district on a daily or weekly basis.

- **For parents only, social media was third on the list with 63 percent using it daily or weekly.** Of parents who use social media, 98 percent use Facebook, compared to 16 percent who use Instagram and 4 percent who use Twitter and YouTube.

- **For staff only, social media was fourth on the list with 56 percent using it daily or weekly.** Of staff who use social media, 98 percent use Facebook, compared to 15 percent who use Instagram, 5 percent who use YouTube and 3 percent who use Twitter.

Given that high percentages of Ascension stakeholders use social media on a weekly or monthly basis to find or learn information about the district, social media presents an opportunity to further strengthen engagement with families and the community in particular.

The auditor understands that the public information officer does not currently have the capacity to increase Ascension's social media presence, but as part of the development of a strategic communication plan (Recommendation 1), the district should consider whether social media and video—as overall strategies or as platform-specific tools to implement a strategy—can help Ascension reach the district commitments expressed in its 2022-23 Strategic Plan. If the district expands the capacity of the Office of Public Information, it should consider the following action steps to more strategically engage the community with purpose through social media and video.

Action Step 4.1
Develop post content more strategically.

The Ascension Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube accounts are professional in appearance and easy to read. The photography is especially eye-catching, which helps engage social media readers. The three main platforms have a good mix of announcements, recognition and news.

All that is needed is a more strategic approach to developing content, in support of specific communication goals and objectives that will be identified in the strategic communication plan described in Recommendation 1. Incorporate the following best practices in the strategies to enhance current posting practices:

- **Do not share identical post content on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.** It is efficient and logical to carry posts across the platforms, but the three sites should also take into account the differences in the intended audiences. For example, tweaking longer Facebook post content for more headline-style posts on Twitter, using only photos and hashtags captions for Instagram, and making use of short video reels can get the same message out in ways of greater appeal to each platform's primary users (e.g., teens on Instagram, parents on Facebook, news media on Twitter). Adjust the district's post tone accordingly for each platform.

- **Add commentary when reposting messages from the schools.** It is a good strategy to repost messages from individual schools, but adding supportive comments when reposting to the district feed can make them more engaging.

- **Depict learning taking place that highlights district goals in action.** For example, post a short photo story about high schoolers preparing for the rigorous Advanced Placement exams or feature a Teacher of the Year's philosophy on teaching rather than just showing recognition photos of the winners.

Action Step 4.2

Focus on creating engaging posts on the Ascension Facebook page.

Social media platforms are intended to be engaging spaces where people interact with other users and organizations; Ascension should consider how it can make its Facebook page a space stakeholders want to visit more regularly.

It has been said of social media pages that likes are a good measure of how many people have stopped by your organization's "storefront," but the number of engaged followers is a measure of people who "handled the merchandise." Social media followers will

#4

Strategically engage the community through enhanced social media strategies.

ultimately drop off if they have no interaction with your Facebook page, largely because of how algorithms determine what content gets featured for each user. The more overall comments, shares and reactions you receive on posts, the more likely that existing followers will see your content in their news feeds.

To give people a reason to click and comment, consistently employ these best practices, some of which Ascension is already following:

- **Communicate the district's brand on the main page** with a banner photo that showcases one of your key messages. Many school districts use this banner space to showcase candid photos that are fun but have no immediate news value, so they aren't quickly outdated (see example at https://www.facebook.com/ hollandpublicschools/).

- **Look for ways to highlight board member and superintendent actions or involvement in the community.** This will be especially important for helping the community get to know the incoming superintendent. Showing leaders actively involved in the schools and community displays transparency and builds familiarity as well as trust.

- **Encourage user-generated content** by:
  - Asking followers to post old local high school prom photos each spring.
  - Asking recent Ascension graduates to post selfies from their colleges, giving a shout-out to their high school.

- Asking older alumni to post selfies from their workplaces.

- Asking high school sports fans to nominate the community's biggest sports fan each spring and fall.

- Running trivia contests with prizes.

(See Action Step 6.3 for more ideas for encouraging user-generated content.)

- **Look for ways to make your standard announcement posts more engaging.** For example, a promotion for an upcoming high school play could show a poster or photo from previous musical productions going back five or 50 years. A caption can highlight the old photo and still put a plug in for the new musical. Combining that with the current post would only increase readership.

- **Highlight a parent volunteer of the month.** The auditor's analysis of Ascension's social media posts showed the highest level of engagement among those posts that honored achievements or accomplishments of individuals.

- **Collect and post quirky statistics** such as the number of hamburgers served in the cafeteria each year.

- **Post infographics** for visual interest or to share data. Canva and Venngage are helpful infographic-creation tools.

- **Share posts from other sources that compliment or highlight school programs.** Acknowledgment by outsiders sends a positive message to parents, students and staff, but use of existing posts from other organizations can expand the post reach.

Action Step 4.3

Integrate more video into Ascension social media posts.

Social media posts that include a video generate 1,200 percent more shares than text and image content combined. Students have traditionally been drawn to video, and they are now being joined by a newer generation of parents who widely view video content online as well. Best practice to increase reach is to post native video files within a social media platform (think, Facebook and Instagram Reels), but it is also possible to share YouTube video links.

Recommendation 5:

Combat misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, easy-to-find information using a variety of communication channels.

When asked about the biggest communication challenges facing the district, several focus group participants, including top district leaders, commented on the threat posed by misinformation (e.g. inaccurate information) and disinformation (e.g. deliberately untruthful information), which can spread rapidly on social media. Maintaining a reputation based on accuracy and truth, as one of the participants defined it, is a challenge for every school district in this age of rapid communication, where everyone with a mobile device has the power to spread information.

Misinformation and disinformation occur around big issues and decisions facing the district and also in regard to individual students or staff members. The latter is particularly hard to address, as obligations to protect the privacy of individuals often prohibit full disclosure of the facts. (Action Step 5.5 provides suggestions on how to handle these situations.)

A proactive effort to provide information and understand community sentiment around potentially controversial topics or district decisions can help build understanding and support for key initiatives and head off potential misunderstandings before controversy breaks down trust. Listening carefully with compassion encourages positive outcomes and is far preferable than being forced to react after an issue has erupted into a divisive or polarizing event.

The following actions steps provide ways to inoculate against the threat of misinformation and disinformation through the deployment of deliberate strategies for providing truthful information through a variety of channels. It is important to note that these steps cannot be the sole responsibility of the Office of Public Information and should be handled by a small group of district leaders working together.

Action Step 5.1
Monitor emerging issues.

Identify a small team of no more than three to five staff members who will be responsible for monitoring emerging issues. The team should include at least one school site administrator, one district administrator and the public information officer. It will work best if the team members have strong existing relationships in the community.

The team should work to identify and discuss new and emerging issues they have heard about, both locally and nationally, that may impact the district and its policies. Questions to discuss as a team might include:

- What is the issue, and how widespread is its area of concern?

- How did we become aware of this issue?

- How might the issue impact the district?

- Is talk about the issue factually accurate?
  - If it is not accurate, what needs to be clarified/corrected, with whom and how?
  - If it is accurate and indicates that the district needs to take corrective action, what actions need to be taken?

Team members should follow local and national news coverage, scan social media posts and community forums, and talk with key communicators in the community. In addition, district and school committees could be asked regularly to share issues they sense are emerging so the team can consider them as well.

The team should meet at least quarterly to share new areas of concern that may be emerging and discuss the status of those that have been identified and are being addressed. The public information officer should be

responsible for sharing summaries or fact sheets on this information, as needed, with other district leaders.

Action Step 5.2

Develop quick reference fact sheets on potentially controversial issues.

Print and digital "quick reference" fact sheets on emerging and existing issues can be created as a resource to share with administrators, front-line staff and key communicators. These can also be posted on the district website and, when appropriate, linked to social media. By identifying and framing key issues, these fact sheets can help people feel more confident in articulating the school district's position. This helps foster understanding and more transparency around issues, policies and leadership decisions.

While fact sheets will differ based on the topic, following are the basic components typically included:

- **The issue at a glance.** In a sentence or two, describe the overall situation or issue.

- **Details of the issue.** Provide the pertinent details of the situation or issue in layman's terms, including the barriers and/or objections to be overcome. Use infographics and pictures, as appropriate, to share data or illustrate a point.

- **Timeline.** Outline what has been done so far and when the issue is expected to be resolved.

- **Next steps.** What is the process being used to address the issue or solve the problem? Include any means for community engagement that will be made available and how that input will be used.

- **Community involvement.** Beyond participating in any formal community engagement opportunities that may be provided, share what various stakeholder groups can do to assist in the process.

#5

Combat misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, easy-to-find information using a variety of communication channels.

- **Key messages and talking points.** Provide succinct answers to frequently asked questions.

- **For more information.** Direct people to where additional information on the topic can be found and who to contact if they have questions.

Action Step 5.3

Build a network of digital ambassadors.

Before the advent of social media and rapid-fire communication, a common strategy school districts employed to combat misinformation was a key communicators group, made up of influential members of the community who could spread accurate information through word-of-mouth messaging to build support for the district.

Today, when so much information is spread quickly via social media, an adaptation of that idea is to build a network of voluntary digital ambassadors, who can build trust and provide general communications support for the district by helping to share accurate information about issues as well as good news. Ascension is fortunate to enjoy high levels of trust from parents and employees, and the high percentage of stakeholders who strongly agree or agree that information from the district is trustworthy

provides a large pool of candidates to serve as ambassadors.

To put together such a team, consider publicizing the effort and asking for those interested to apply to serve as volunteer frontline communicators. They will be the first to get information and will be asked to share it over their own networks, providing their own perspectives. Providing in-depth info to those who have the time and interest to absorb detailed information helps spread understanding to those who may be looking for a short-hand explanation from someone they trust. Those selected for the team should participate in an in-depth briefing event, in which key aspects of district operations, finances and pending decisions are reviewed.

Digital ambassadors should also receive training on how to best share information they receive from the district. For the digital ambassadors network to have authenticity and gain trust, it needs to be understood that the district cannot and should not control all the content members put out.

The ambassador tactic is common among colleges, but some districts have embraced it as well. Following are some examples:

- Social media ambassador, Bethlehem (Pa.) Area School District Nation— https://www. basdnation.org/social_media_ambassador

- Social Owls, Temple University Alumni Association—https://alumni.temple. edu/s/705/alumni/16/interior_1col. aspx?sid=705&gid=1&pgid=10645

Action Step 5.4
Respond quickly to misinformation and disinformation.

Information relating to just one school or just one classroom can be addressed on a targeted basis. For information of broader interest, consider having a Frequently Asked Questions page on the district website where factual information can quickly be posted. The link can then be shared with those who have

comments or questions, rather than responding to individual comments on social media posts, which sometimes ends up generating more attention to misinformation.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules about when to respond and when not to respond. False information and rumors are more likely to take hold when they are connected with a larger national-level issue. This is where the small monitoring team described in Action Step 5.1 is useful. When in doubt, check with the members of this team to see if an issue is emerging locally, regionally or nationally. If so, it is important to address the situation with accurate information as soon as possible.

Here are two examples of tactics other school systems have used successfully to fact check emerging issues:

- VBCPS Fact Checker website, Virginia Beach (Va.) City Public Schools—http:// www.vbcpsblogs.com/factchecker/

- The Plain Facts (formerly, Heard It Through the Grapevine) website, Shenendehowa (N.Y.) School District— https://www.shenet.org/plainfacts/

Action Step 5.5
Create a parent guide describing privacy laws in simple, easy-to-understand language.

Parents often want more information about student- and staff-related situations than the district is allowed to release. Ensuring in advance that parents are educated about privacy laws and the limitations of what the school district can disclose will help the district to not appear defensive or obstructive as a specific situation is unfolding.

This information should be shared annually with parents within start-of-school materials. In addition, as noted in the previous action step, make sure this information is posted on the website so that parents can be directed to it as needed. This allows the district to clearly lay out the legal restrictions it is obligated to follow,

while also letting parents know that these are
established rules that apply to all situations and
are not decided based on the details of a
specific event.

Recommendation 6:

Adopt cutting-edge strategies that make Ascension a model for school communication best practices.

Ascension is fortunate to have a highly-effective communication department, with relatively few areas in need of improvement compared to many other school districts for which NSPRA has performed communication audits. This creates an opportunity to build on success, rather than fix problems. Following are leading-edge practices that may provide significant benefit to Ascension and allow the district's communication program to serve as a model for other districts regionally and nationally.

Action Step 6.1

Use video to engage stakeholders in learning about student and district successes.

Ascension currently has limited capacity to produce videos that tell the district story, but if a video or communications specialist is added to the department, this would be a fantastic way of elevating stories about student achievement, district issues, and fun or informative events. Some districts regularly use videos at the beginning of school board meetings, on social media and at local community meetings such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary Club.

Until capacity for regular video production exists internally in the Office of Public Information, consider the following alternatives:

- **Establish a budget and process for contracting video services.** This is a costlier option than producing in-house, but the finished product is generally more professional and shorter turnaround times can be expected. With the public information officer serving as producer, look for freelance videographers or

producers who can take a project from start to finish. There are many NSPRA members who provide this service as consultants or through their educational service agencies.

- **Collaborate with college broadcast and film programs for video production.** High school video classes may also be used for some projects, but the timing and quality control can sometimes be challenging.

Once a budget or resource plan for creating videos has been determined, write a mini-communication plan that aligns with the district strategic plan and the strategic communication plan. Individual videos should be focused on a specific goal, whether it is educating users about an issue, showcasing an innovative classroom practice or celebrating a school or student achievement. Following are some examples of potential strategic uses of video in support of wider communication goals and objectives:

- **Link video segments in Ascension communications** such as Ascension News.

- **Produce brief videos for the Ascension website and social media** with testimonials and content showing students engaged in learning activities.

- **Highlight employees** providing great customer service within the school or in the community.

Following are some video project ideas (and award-winning examples) that other districts used to further achievement of their goals:

- Superintendent's state of the district address (https://www.youtube.com/live/y5TDwBF7kT4?feature=share)

- Marketing videos for teacher recruitment (https://vimeo.com/showcase/9421722)

- Marketing videos to promote enrollment in unique programs/magnet schools (https://youtu.be/LaFmEcR3BNA)

- Video tour of new construction or renovation projects (https://youtu.be/MqsFL-q8P3c)

- High school graduate success stories (https://youtu.be/HhwTQqUX3cg)

- Spotlight videos about special-interest populations such as military families or special education students (https://www.dropbox.com/s/uqdg9v4mt5ufcre/Kaleigha_team_final.mp4?dl=0)

- Communication tools explanation videos for non-English speaking families (https://youtu.be/UTBg1tHVEm8)

- Strategic plan updates for presentations at business/civic groups (https://youtu.be/VrdtzH2m6xo)

- Orientation videos for new families and staff (https://youtu.be/AL940eU4xxU)

Below are examples of videos produced internally by school districts that won NSPRA Awards of Excellence. Some of the video topics may not be relevant to Ascension, but they showcase the work districts of a similar or smaller size have been able to produce:

- Welcome video, Roosevelt School District, Phoenix, Ariz. (7,500 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fYGy8Tm2dU

- Enrollment Video, Asheville (N.C.) City Schools (4,500 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzAicH9ve5w

- Equine Therapy, Broadalbin-Perth (N.Y.) Central School District (1,800 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aUml1IN7XM

- Registration Video Monolingual video just for Spanish speaking parents,

Adopt cutting edge strategies that make Ascension a model for school communication best practices..

Redwood City (Calif.) School District (7,600 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTBg1tHVEm8

- Teacher of the Year, Cedar Hill (Texas) Independent School District (7,625 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCv4D8x4Bjw

For additional inspiration, here are few excellent examples from larger districts:

- Graduation Video Series, Anoka-Hennepin (Minn.) Schools (38,000 students)—https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk01tC6jIIIY6VAGA9_iMxc2zhvTqTkBX

- Woodworking Mixes Art, Practical Skills, Buncombe County (N.C.) Schools, (25,000 students)—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0_TCHhjDE4

- #CommUNITY, Broken Arrow (Okla.) Public Schools (19,000 students)—https://vimeo.com/586174719

Many more examples can be found in the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section of the NSPRA website under the Videos, Photography and Video Conferencing at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Videos-Photography-and-Video-Conferencing. The following presentations might be of specific interest:

- Let's Create a Video: Seven Secrets for School District Success (presentation given at the NSPRA 2021 National Seminar)

- Video Storytelling: Why a Picture Truly is Worth a Thousand Words (presentation given at the NSPRA 2021 National Seminar)

Action Step 6.2

Feature user-generated content in district communications to increase engagement with external audiences.

Using text, images, videos or audio that has been created and shared socially by students, parents or staff in the district's communications can increase engagement and create enthusiasm and a sense of authenticity. As a bonus, it also doesn't require a large investment of time by staff.

User-generated content reflects experiences, opinions or ideas of the users rather than the school district, and can be used for social media posts, blogs, reviews of schools and programs as well as for providing perspective on issues relevant to parents and staff. When used creatively, it can be a powerful tool that builds awareness, engagement and loyalty.

Some examples of how user-generated content might be used and gathered by a school district include:

- **Social media campaigns.** As described in Recommendation 4, Ascension can encourage students, parents, and alumni to share their experiences on social media using a specific hashtag and curate the best content on district social media channels.

- **Contests.** Invite users to submit photos or videos about a particular event or issue, and then use winning entries on posters, publications, websites and social media.

- **Testimonials and reviews.** Ascension can collect testimonials and reviews from current and former students and parents to feature on their website, social media channels and other promotional materials.

- **Student and parent blogs.** Ascension can invite current students and parents to write blog posts about their experiences at the school. This can help prospective families get a better sense of the school culture and community.

In a February 2023 article, industry publication *Social Media Examiner* shared tips for improving an organization's social marketing with user-generated content, including how to organize user-generated content for a social media strategy, how to get permission to share it in marketing efforts and common types of user-generated content. Read the article at https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-improve-your-social-marketing-with-user-generated-content/.

Action Step 6.3

Produce a podcast that provides important information parents and community members can listen to while driving, exercising or taking care of household tasks.

Audio and video podcasts rose in popularity during the pandemic, and they continue to offer a terrific opportunity to provide niche content that appeals to highly engaged parents, staff and community members. Many districts have employed podcasts to deepen the bond between a superintendent and stakeholders or to feature staff at all levels talking about relevant issues.

The December 2022 issue of NSPRA's member e-newsletter *Elevation* featured an article on the topic, "Is a Podcast Right for Your District?" Following are some examples of podcasts that won Awards of Excellence from NSPRA in 2022. A wide range of topics are covered, including anti-racism, drop-out prevention strategies, student mental health, student economic hardship, vaping, etc.

- Supe's On:, Produced occasionally by Bend-LaPine (Ore.) Public Schools (18,000 students)—https://supeson.podbean. com/e/supporting-student-mental-health/

- Peoria Unified's Progress Report, Produced monthly by Peoria (Ariz.) Unified School District. (36,000 students)—https://www. peoriaunified.org/site/default.aspx?PageTy pe=3&ModuleInstanceID=18160&ViewID= E324842B-E4A3-44C3-991A-1E716D4A99 E3&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=44101&Pag eID=6773

Action Step 6.4

Maintain an active presence and strive for leadership in state and national school public relations associations.

The auditor observed that Public Information Officer Jackie Tisdell has a particularly high level of competency and relationship trust with colleagues, and she was uniformly lauded for her good work. In the audits conducted by this auditor, such high praise and recognition from all stakeholder groups is rare.

Under her leadership, the district has earned seven national awards in the past six years, including NSPRA's Gold Medallion Award (2017), the top award given by NSPRA, and NSPRA's Golden Achievement Award (2021). The auditor encourages the district to continue to submit award entries and submit proposals for workshops on effective campaigns and communication strategies to NSPRA and its new Louisiana chapter (LASPRA) that Tisdell is now president of, so that other districts learn from the good work being done in Ascension. This level of involvement will also ensure Ascension has the benefit of continuing to learn about best practices being employed by other school districts throughout the state and country.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that members can use to assess their programs. The work was organized into critical function areas, and as of June 2023, rubrics had been completed for the following:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Branding/Marketing Communications
- Crisis Communications
- Bond/Finance Communications

While it is difficult to quantify the value of public relations and there is no agreement on the best tools and methods, in the spirit of traditional benchmarking practice, NSPRA sought to identify top performers in each critical function area based on results and gathered research in each area to develop the rubrics and suggested measures.

Benchmarking against the rubrics differs from other parts of the communication audit process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews or discovered in district materials. Instead, it addresses how a communication program is doing compared to national standards of excellence in school public relations.

The following pages reflect the auditor's assessment of where the Ascension falls within these standards. The purpose of this section of the communication audit is to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level by moving from "emerging" or "established" to "exemplary," as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, a new edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* was released in July 2023 and is now available in the NSPRA Online Store at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023.

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Exemplary

Ascension's overall communication program is exemplary, following best practices in nearly every component evaluated by the rubric, by:

- Having a robust board policy guiding communication practice,
- Supporting the communication effort with resources,
- Conducting research on a regular basis,
- Deploying multiple and varied communication strategies,
- Supporting constituent engagement,
- Advancing the district brand, and
- Evaluating the communication effort.

A few additional areas that will ensure the district continues to strengthen communication and remain in the exemplary category, include:

- As noted in Recommendation 2, make the public information officer part of the District Organization Team, reporting directly to the superintendent.
- Review all communication plans regularly to determine if objectives, deadlines and budget goals were met.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for two-

way communication between the district and internal and external audiences on finance information.

Internal Communications – Established

Ascension's internal communications program is squarely in the established category and will be exemplary with just a few changes recommended in the report:

- Create a systematic approach for responding to and integrating faculty and staff input.

- Articulate comprehensive, integrated and aligned expectations for district leader and manager communications, and support these efforts with resources and training.

- Include communications effectiveness as a component of leaders' performance evaluations.

Parent/Family Communications – Exemplary

Ascension has multiple ways to reach its parents and families, including email, social media, apps, websites and a newsletter. In addition to the auditor's recommendations contained in this report, Ascension might also consider the following to further solidify its exemplary practices:

- Comprehensive and ongoing professional development in parent/family communication strategies for teachers and building-level staff.

- Comprehensive and ongoing professional development in parent/family communication strategies for communicating and enforcing school and district goals, plans, programs, finances and issues for all district personnel.

- Cultivating an inviting environment at every school that fosters two-way parent/family engagement in their student's education, including programs to increase parent/family understanding and skills in how to support their student, resources on curriculum, instructional strategies and student expectations, and consistent use by teachers of academic webpages to help parents/families understand student's homework and classroom assignments.

Marketing/Branding – Exemplary

Ascension's marketing/branding efforts are in the exemplary category. The district's brand identity is excellent, based on the findings of this report. That brand is demonstrated regularly and consistently on the website, social media sites and other materials. The district has a contract with a marketing company that conducts research and provides expertise.

Ascension is a destination district for staff and students. The district is not in competition with neighboring districts for students and is continuing to grow in enrollment. Therefore, major investments in marketing spend appear to be unnecessary at this time.

While some low-cost ideas related to marketing are addressed in the report, especially regarding social media and use of video, Ascension could also consider the following:

- Comprehensive annual evaluation of the effectiveness of school board members and faculty/district leaders in their roles as brand ambassadors.

- Continuously defining and monitoring the demographics of district and target markets.

Crisis Communications – Established

Ascension does a good job communicating in a crisis and falls in the established category on the rubrics, but it does not have a formal crisis communication plan in place (Recommendation 1). To get to the exemplary category, Ascension can also consider:

- Once a crisis communication plan is written, review it annually and after each crisis with input from first responders and local, state and federal agencies who were involved in the incident.

- Remind stakeholders periodically to review and update contact information and preferences.

- Regularly share school and district safety and crisis communication procedures and protocols with key stakeholder groups.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Exemplary

Ascension's most recent experience with bond/finance elections suggest it is exemplary in this critical function area. On March 25, 2023, voters approved three property tax renewals with more than 80 percent support for each measure.

Success with future elections will depend on continuous outreach and education. Despite the district's long history of electoral success, 54 percent of parents and 38 percent of staff and community indicated that they were only slightly informed or not at all informed about district finances. To ensure continued support, the district could consider the following:

- Provide regular updates on the progress of projects or initiatives approved by voters.

- Conduct periodic stakeholder surveys to

maintain two-way communication that will provide data, anecdotes and insights to inform future steps.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What is the current image of your school system in the community?

   1a. How would you describe the school system to someone new to your community?

2. What do you perceive as the school system's strengths?

   2a. What are the areas needing improvement?

3. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating on large, important issues that affect schools such as educating funding, legislation and curriculum or operational changes?

   3a. How might the school system improve on that?

   3b. Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?

4. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis (e.g., bomb threat, student misbehavior, employee misconduct, social justice protests)?

   4a. How might the school system improve on that?

5. When school system leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?

   5a. What makes you feel that way?

5b. If not, how would you like to provide your input?

6. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. How do school system communications affect your ability to be successful in your job?

   1a. Are there any areas where you need more communications support?

2. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community?

   2a. Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

Additional Questions: Administrators and School Board

1. How can communications staff best support you in your leadership role?

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 Education Activity (DoDEA) schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to develop professionals to communicate strategically, build trust and foster positive relationships in support of their school communities. That mission is accomplished by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to association members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

NSPRA members:

- **Connect and Grow:** This unique professional community includes the NSPRA Connect online forum, Mentor Match, APR Learning Cohort, and national leadership and service opportunities.

- **Expand and Elevate:** Through digital e-newsletters and alerts, free PR Power Hour webinars on tactics, free Leaders Learn webinars on strategies, on-demand learning and National Seminar scholarships, members expand their knowledge and elevate their work.

- **Share and Learn:** Members have access to best practices at www.nspra.org, which offers the online NSPRA Gold Mine; resources on topics such as crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.; salary and career surveys; and more.

With more than 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. The association offers useful communication products and programs as well as an annual NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America. NSPRA also offers a National School Communication Awards program, which recognizes individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

NSPRA has more than 30 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities. NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board. The association also maintains collaborative working relationships with other national education associations and corporate communication professionals.

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

Join NSPRA

To join this vibrant, national association and reap the benefits of being an NSPRA member, visit www.nspra.org/membership.

Auditor's Vita

Naomi Hunter, APR
Auditor

Naomi Hunter is an accredited public relations professional (APR) with 30 years of experience in strategic communications and public relations in the public, private and non-profit sectors. She joined the NSPRA staff in October 2022 as the communication audit surveys manager after working with the association as a consultant auditor for the last several years. Now, in addition to conducting audits, Naomi is managing and overseeing improvements to the SCoPE Survey tool since it was acquired by NSPRA at the end of 2022.

Prior to joining NSPRA, Naomi spent five years providing communication services to numerous school districts and public agencies in the San Francisco Bay area and Southern California, including serving the Redwood City School District (RCSD) as an advisor and facilitator on community engagement processes for school closures and school reconfigurations. She had previously served as director of communications for RCSD for more than 10 years. In 2021 and 2022, she also taught an undergraduate course, Public Relations Theories and Principles, at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, Calif.

Naomi served as chair of the NSPRA Accreditation Committee from 2018 to 2022 and served on the board of the California School Public Relations Association (CalSPRA) from 2015 to 2021. She served as president of the Public Relations Society of America, San Francisco Chapter (PRSA-SF) in 2014 and as a PRSA-SF board member from 2012 to 2016.

Naomi has presented workshops at conferences for NSPRA, CalSPRA, the California School Boards Association (CSBA), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) Women in School Leadership Conference and the ACSA Classified Educational Leaders Institute.

Naomi has also served as a volunteer leader on the campaign committees for five school ballot measures on behalf of her local school district, the Redwood City School District, and has participated in "Get Out the Vote" efforts for seven school campaigns.

the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report