



**NSPRA**

Communication Audit Report:

# Bellevue School District 405

National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org) | [f](https://www.facebook.com/NSPRAAssociation) NSPRAAssociation | [t](https://twitter.com/nspra) nspra



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## Introduction

The Bellevue School District 405 (BSD) in Washington state serves about 20,000 students in 16 elementary schools, one Spanish immersion elementary school, one Mandarin dual language elementary school, five middle schools, four high schools and two choice schools for grades 6-12.

The diversity of its schools reflects the diversity of BSD families. Nearly 100 languages are spoken in the district, with 40.2% of students speaking a first language other than English. Additionally, 17.2% of students qualify for free/reduced price meals and 15.7 % receive English language learner (ELL) services.

The district is widely known across the Puget Sound area for its academic excellence and the expansive breadth of its education program. It has been recognized as one of only three districts nationwide with at least 40% of its teachers who have earned National Board Certification. It also enjoys a stellar reputation for serving students with disabilities.

The district's clear strengths also are a source of its challenges. Its size and diversity present natural obstacles to ensuring that tens of thousands of stakeholders—students, parents, instructional and support staff, volunteers, taxpayers, community and business leaders, legislators, etc.—feel engaged in their schools, valued by the district and represented in the important decisions that affect them. The district was able to pass a large bond issue prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, which will allow older schools to be rebuilt and modernized. However, the ongoing pandemic has eroded BSD's enrollment base and its effects have potential budget implications.

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (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 comprehensive, customized

NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

- An important foundation for developing and implementing a strategic communication plan.
- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

In serving BSD, the goals of the NSPRA Communication Audit process were to:

- Seek data, opinion and perceptions, and from these to assess the effectiveness and management of public relations, marketing and engagement efforts in the district.
- Provide customized recommendations on strategies and best practices to enhance the overall communication program.

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the BSD Board of Directors and Superintendent Ivan Duran, Ed.D., to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Communications Department or any other department or individual school, they are intended to help BSD improve the effectiveness of current communications, engagement and marketing efforts and to support its commitment to continuous improvement.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall, but individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met for example. The real measure of success, though, is whether the communication program is helping the district move forward its mission. Accordingly, in developing recommendations, the auditing team reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of the district's mission, vision and goals.

## Guiding Definition

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

*Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization.*

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

## Opinion Research as a Foundation

An NSPRA Communication Audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions and the effectiveness of current public relations, communication, engagement and marketing efforts, and offers recommendations to enhance or expand the overall communication program. It also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication program begins with opinion research.

## Scope and Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of BSD enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultants for this communication audit were Steve Mulvenon, Ph.D., and Carol

Fenstermacher, APR. Their vitae are included in the [appendix](#) of this report.

## Materials Review

The first step in the NSPRA communication audit involved the Communications Department submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., the BSD Strategic Plan: 2018-2023, *Leadership News* and *Principals Digest*, individual school newsletters and *Back to Buildings Updates*). The auditors conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites, media coverage and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditors reviewed the district's demographic data, strategic plan, news clips and digital communication analytics.

## Virtual 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 auditors met with 18 focus groups virtually and conducted online interviews with the superintendent and communications staff on November 30 – December 4, 2020. 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.

In addition to interviews with the superintendent and Communications Department staff, the stakeholder groups represented in the focus group sessions included the following:

- PTSA parents/guardians
- Spanish-speaking parents/guardians

- Elected officials/community leaders
- High school student representatives
- Teachers from elementary, middle and high schools
- Non-instructional support staff
- ESC/WISC staff
- Paraprofessionals and classroom aides
- Administrative assistants/secretaries
- Certified administrators, executive directors
- Elementary and secondary principals
- Board of Directors

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments and interview feedback, the auditors identified key findings and prepared recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected within NSPRA's [\*Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures\*](#) benchmarking publication.

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by NSPRA Executive Director Barbara Hunter, APR, and Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR.

## Assumptions

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

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution

and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. It is also a "snapshot" or view of the district at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Communications Department by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. Recommendations are designed to address gaps and assist BSD leaders' efforts to communicate consistently and effectively.

## Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

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. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication tasks, and others may apply to additional departments or all staff. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake while maintaining existing programs. This is a long-term effort during which the report should serve as a road map for the future.

Communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, evaluated and regularly updated. With this NSPRA Communication Audit Report, BSD now has the research and guidance necessary to more effectively manage its communication with key stakeholders.

## Copies to participants

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the virtual focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that the findings of this report be shared with focus group participants and posted on BSD's website.

## Key Findings

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

### District Image Strengths

- The Bellevue School District (BSD) lies in a largely affluent community with strong support for education among parents, taxpayers and local businesses, including the technology industry. Despite the affluence, there are distinct areas within the district with high poverty.
- The Bellevue student population is increasingly diverse.
- The district has a reputation for high expectations, high quality instruction and academic achievement. Staff, students, parents and community members all cited the rigorous and excellent academics offered in every school throughout the district. Advanced Placement for All, college readiness, school choice and the variety of academic options available to students were highlighted as just a few of the things that make BSD one of the best in the state, region and country. The district has a strong special education program. It is noted that one focus group participant went so far to say that Bellevue is so superior to other districts that people lie to get their kids into the district. Another noted that there aren't really any charter schools in Bellevue because the traditional public schools are so outstanding.
- Strong community support was mentioned repeatedly as a strength of the district. This is evidenced by the consistent passing of bonds and levies throughout the years. It was noted that resources in BSD are above par, and that there is great technology and tech support for students and staff.
- The district has multiple communication channels available to provide information to staff and parents. While this was identified as a strength, the conflicting messages sent by different departments is viewed as an area that needs improvement
- This communications audit was conducted while district schools were in distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants, overall, felt that the district has done a good job in providing a high-quality education to students during the pandemic. Many felt that the district's use of and support of technology prior to the pandemic placed the district in an enviable position when students and staff had to shift to distance learning.

### District Image Challenges

- Several focus group participants mentioned that within the district there is a perception that there are two distinct sides of the district: the affluent side that greatly serves its white and Asian students and a side that does less well by its low income, non-native English speakers and students of color. BSD staff shared that even state agencies and other school districts assume that BSD is a rich district, with no recognition of the needs of numerous students and families. Staff members, including teachers, principals and clerical, shared in focus groups that they believe that divide has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the reliance on distance learning.
- Almost every focus group talked about the need to improve communications: from district administrators to school leaders, from school leaders to teachers, from BSD to parents and students, and between departments. Employees report that they get information at the same time as or after parents and the community receive critical information. Participants described

communications as often being unclear, confusing and contradictory of other communications from the district.

- School-level staff do not feel that they have the opportunity to provide input into initiatives that impact their daily work. Principals say they are held accountable for initiatives and programs with no input on how to make the program successful and no professional development or guidance on how to implement programs in their school buildings. Instructional staff are given new curriculum in their content area with no input. The Board of Directors appear to be cognizant of this issue and are discussing revisions to Policy and Procedure 0130, which requires attention to stakeholder involvement.
- The district is fortunate that it has the financial resources to implement a wide variety of programs and initiatives for students. However, staff focus group participants report that they feel many of the initiatives/programs are not well thought-out, do not match the district's goals and are put in place without the necessary supports, including professional development. This perception among internal stakeholders suggests missed opportunities for communication that can build understanding and support for initiatives/programs.

### Communication Strengths

- BSD has numerous tools at its disposal to communicate with staff, students, parents and the community (e.g., websites, social media, *Leadership News*, *Thrive*, *Back to Buildings Update*, *Principal Digest*, *BSD News*, Let's Talk and School Messenger). Recently, the Communications Department won several awards from the Washington School Public Relations Association, a state chapter of NSPRA.
- BSD has begun to conduct some research to help plan its communication program. For example, based on the annual parent survey, the district knows the

communication methods that different demographic groups of parents prefer (i.e., email, teachers, text messages and school/principal newsletters).

- The Communications Department uses an online tool, Let's Talk, to improve customer service, track important issues and monitor response time for inquiries. As a test of the system, auditors posted a question on January 14, 2021, at 10:09 a.m. and received a response at 10:34 a.m. the same morning. The department tracks dialogs, response times and customer experience ratings.

### Communication Challenges

- The BSD website is hard to navigate. It is difficult to find information on the site, and there are numerous areas where the information is not kept up to date. The site was described by many focus group participants as clunky and a dead-end for information that is requested and needed by parents and staff.
- A concern raised repeatedly throughout both internal and external focus groups is that the district consistently puts out conflicting messages, causing confusion about what is accurate and what is not. In addition, staff expressed frustration that more times than not, information is released to parents and the community before or at the same time it goes to staff. Several instructional staff indicated that they wait for critical information to come from their union president because they trust that information to be accurate.
- In the focus groups, both parents and staff said that they were frequently overwhelmed with the volume of emails they receive. Parents said that was especially true if they had students in multiple schools.
- Parents are unclear about whom to call or where to go to get information. BSD was described by a focus group participant as "a large and complex piece of machinery with no user manual."

- *Thrive*, the newsletter put out by the Human Resources Department, is not seen as useful or valuable among staff focus group participants. They observed that information is often repeated from one issue to the next, the newsletter is long and dense, and the most important or useful information is often buried at the end of the publication.
- Messages are not crafted with the diversity of the audience in mind. It appears that communications are written with the assumption that all families have a strong grasp of the English language.
- In focus groups, the auditors heard frustration and deep concern about the quality, accuracy and quantity of information produced by the Communications Department.
- Staff throughout the district are unsure of the Communications Department's role in the district. While some staff indicated a wish to have access to the department to assist them with their communication needs, they were uncertain about how to proceed.
- The district makes frequent use of outside communications and marketing consultants to supplement the work of its internal communications staff. For example, consultants assisted the district on its ballot measures, its strategic plan, communicating about potential budget reductions and the online State of the District address by the superintendent.
- Communications staff report feeling often hurried to produce messaging or products without sufficient time to fact-check and vet content. This sense of being brought in at the last minute, rather than being full participants from the beginning of a new initiative, may be why they also feel they are on the sidelines when important decisions are being made.
- Auditors' review of the district's 2019 study on crisis management and communications found that there is a perceived lack of clear guidelines on whom to contact in the event of a crisis or a lack of understanding of those guidelines. Principals and teachers reported that their buildings had good plans for responding to serious incidents, but there was a lack of procedure and clear guidance related to crisis communications at the district level. Parents and community members indicated they most often hear about such crisis incidents through word of mouth.

## Internal Communications

- District publications (*Leadership News*, *Back to Buildings*, *Thrive*) and the website got mixed reviews by focus group participants and were rarely mentioned as a source of information by staff.
- Internal focus groups expressed a strong need for communication about important issues to be shared with staff prior to being sent to parents and the community. The communication shared with staff usually only includes "what" the district is doing and not the "why." Staff would like to understand the reasoning behind decisions, initiatives and new programs so they can be better ambassadors for the district.
- Staff understands that they are the district's best messengers, but they feel unprepared to deliver timely and accurate information because of the lack of consistent, relevant and accurate messages shared with them.
- Internal communication seems too often to be an afterthought and done "on the fly." For example:
  - Communications from the district office (emails, newsletters, fliers) are scattered, lengthy and not written with the audience in mind. There is no clear approval and vetting process to ensure accuracy and quality. Communications

from different departments/people sometimes contradict each other, causing confusion.

- As information flows from the district to schools, or cascades throughout the district, it becomes diluted, changed and fragmented. Principals do not appear to be trained and supported for their roles as communicators. They are unsure of what is expected of them regarding communicating with families and the community.

## Website

- The Bellevue School District has a stellar academic reputation, but the website does not effectively market the district's reputation and highlight the expectations and high standards for which BSD is known.
- The district's website is difficult to navigate with much of the information needed by parents and staff buried or not readily available. Information such as organizational charts is outdated.
- While some schools have a staff member serving as a webmaster, those that do not report that they do not feel supported by the district's webmaster. They therefore do not refer anyone to the website for information.

## Social Media

- The Bellevue School District has a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but focus group participants rarely mentioned it as a go-to source of information. In general, the level of engagement with social media depends on the nature of the content. As the date for bringing some students back to school approached, the engagement quantity on district social media skyrocketed. The district appears to have gotten better in providing useful information via social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Future Communication Challenges

- A final question in each focus group asked about the major communication challenge facing the district in the immediate future. While there were many and varied responses, the most frequent centered on:
  - How best to communicate with families;
  - Rebuilding internal, personal relationships that have eroded with Zoom and Teams;
  - Tearing down silos that have been amplified with everything being conducted online;
  - Managing email overload; and
  - Crafting quality messages that are written with the audience in mind.

# Observations and Analysis

## Observations

The auditors offer these general observations and comments following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process:

- Bellevue School District has strong community support.** From the Bellevue School Foundation to Eastside Pathways and Bellevue LifeSpring as well as ongoing contributions to the Family Connection Centers, support is widespread. The recent passage of the school bond is further evidence of the value the Bellevue community places on education and the trust it has in district leaders.
  - It is time for BSD to reimagine the role of its Communications Department.** BSD's well-deserved reputation for academic excellence and instructional rigor needs to be matched by an equally rigorous, more strategic and professional marketing and communications effort. Communications staff currently function more as technicians doing day-to-day tasks than as strategic advisors helping to inform future plans. There also appears to be a sizable overlap in goals and responsibilities between the Communications Department and the Office of Family and Community Engagement, which creates an opportunity for streamlining or closer cooperation. This report contains recommendations and action steps to guide that effort.
  - A more comprehensive, strategic communication plan will better support achievement of BSD's goals.** The existing communication plan provided for the auditors' review is more of a to-do list, while a strategic communication plan is research-based with clear, measurable objectives and evaluation tools to provide actionable
- feedback. The recommendations in this report should serve as a foundation for creating future communication plans that support BSD's vision and mission.
- A concerted effort to improve internal communications must be a high priority.** The most frequently heard comment in the employee focus groups was deep frustration with being "out of the loop," the "last to know," and not having the information they need to be effective ambassadors for the district. Messages vary in quality and timing from one school to another and are too often contradictory. Expectations about who is to communicate what, when and to whom are fuzzy and ill-defined. As a result, trust in messaging from district administrators has been eroded. During the focus groups, auditors were told this was a problem not brought on by the necessity to communicate electronically during the pandemic, but that it was always there.
  - Attention must be paid to developing and implementing a crisis management and communication plan.** A district study done in October 2019 contains some proposed steps for such a plan, but it has not yet been implemented. It also does not follow the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and does not appear to have been developed in concert with King County emergency management or law enforcement officials.
  - Both the district's external website and its social media efforts could benefit from a more strategic, engaging and thoughtful approach.** While website traffic has increased during the ongoing pandemic, the auditors heard from both internal and external focus groups that the website is "clunky," unattractive, hard to

navigate and it has too much out-of-date content. Rarely was the website mentioned as a primary source of information. While social media posts are frequent, especially on Facebook and Twitter, they were not particularly engaging in terms of user interactions until recent posts about the return to in-person learning—a topic that has been both engaging and polarizing in many school communities. Staff had generally positive comments about the internal Staff Portal, though. Auditors also found the Staff Portal to be attractive, be easy to use and have features that could be incorporated into the external website.

- **BSD could benefit from more consistent processes and structures to engage its stakeholders in important decisions that impact their work.**

While there is recent evidence of outreach in decision-making such as the Superintendent’s Community Advisory Council and the new Family Engagement Advisory Group, it does not appear to be an institutionalized practice with educators and staff within the district. Participants in internal focus groups often lamented about the lack of their involvement in decisions. Principals in particular said they were expected to implement programs and processes in which they had no input. The district website lists a number of committees dealing with curriculum and textbook adoption. A few appear to be active, but many are dormant and date as far back as 2016. When surveys are sent out, respondents say they are never sure how their input was used or if it was just “window dressing.”

## Analysis

The auditors have identified the following items as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) affecting the ability

of Bellevue School District to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed in the recommendations of this report.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BSD communicates with a wide variety of tools and platforms in an effort to reach its various audiences.</li> <li>• The members of the communications team are dedicated, cohesive, energetic and work well together.</li> <li>• BSD’s reputation as an academic leader gives it a strong underpinning upon which to move ahead.</li> <li>• Superintendent Duran and the Board of Directors are visible and well-respected members of the community.</li> <li>• The district’s commitment to equity and inclusion is widely recognized and applauded internally and externally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There may be an overreliance on electronic communication tools, leaving out families and community stakeholders who lack the necessary resources to connect to those tools.</li> <li>• Communications staff are too narrowly focused on their roles as technicians and “producers of products” rather than as strategic advisors.</li> <li>• Expectations about how communication is to cascade throughout the district, from the district to schools and from there to families are poorly defined.</li> <li>• The lack of a comprehensive strategic communication plan leaves the Communications Department subject to a reactive, day-to-day approach rather than a proactive stance.</li> </ul>
External	Opportunities	Threats
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The district enjoys great community support and benefits from a host of nonprofits and the Bellevue Schools Foundation. They are capable of a more robust relationship. It also seems that the business community, represented by several national players, is an underdeveloped resource.</li> <li>• The Superintendent’s Community Advisory Council should be extended beyond the current budget conversations and assume the role of a key communicator network.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The potential for budget challenges has strained relations and eroded trust with various bargaining groups.</li> <li>• The current necessity of distance learning has exposed the need to reexamine how BSD is meeting the needs of all its students as well as how it is communicating about its efforts to do so.</li> <li>• The lack of a crisis communication plan is a serious vulnerability.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

In Bellevue School District, communication efforts are guided by the district Strategic Plan and the Communications Department’s goal “to provide general information to the public and foster two-way communication with the Bellevue community.”

BSD’s Communications Department is led by the director of communications, who is aided by an assistant director of communications. Supporting their efforts is a web content manager and a web content and social media communications manager. The department is further supported by a senior secretary. Together, the team is tasked with providing communications strategy, guidance and support in a variety of areas for the district and its schools.

Over the years, the communications staff have accomplished a great deal in BSD. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the district’s communication program, but that should not detract from the many positives coming out of that office. In fact, many of the recommendations will require commitment and participation from the entire BSD administrative team—at both the district and school levels—if the district is going to realize meaningful improvements in its communication program.

**Effective communication is only possible when it is a priority for and responsibility of all departments, schools and staff.**

The superintendent, BSD Board of Directors and director of communications were all supportive of the NSPRA Communication Audit process in hopes of strengthening the district’s efforts to effectively engage with its stakeholders. The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to implement different recommendations and action steps at different times. Some can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. This is a long-term effort, and new communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources, pandemic restrictions and staff capacity allow.

Readers of this report will note that recommendations focus primarily on addressing internal communication issues. There is good reason for that. To begin with, auditors heard few comments in focus groups about external communication issues. More importantly, what auditors did hear and observe over the course of the audit process suggests that Bellevue School District’s time, energy and focus should be directed first at strengthening its internal communication efforts.

### Summary of Recommendations

1. Strategically align the overarching goals of the communication program and the daily efforts of the communication staff with BSD’s mission, vision and strategic plan.
2. Make internal communications and employee engagement a strategic priority.
3. Increase alignment between BSD’s communications and engagement functions.
4. Enhance and implement the crisis communication plan.
5. Continue to refine the district’s social media presence and engage more stakeholders.
6. Develop a digital communication plan.
7. Enhance communication to better serve the needs and interests of non-English speaking and minority families.

## Recommendation 1:

### Strategically align the overarching goals of the communication program and the daily efforts of communications staff with BSD's mission, vision and strategic plan.

The day-to-day demands of any public school system can easily consume a majority of staff members' time, leaving little time or resources for communication planning and evaluation. This can result in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering the district's key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools. Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision and measurable objectives, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. If routine or urgent communications become the primary focus, proactive communication opportunities designed to expand the district's outreach and brand, and that support BSD's overall mission and objectives, will be missed.

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective plan nor does it guarantee improved information flow. A strategic communication plan with clear goals and measurable objectives will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of BSD's communication dollar. It should also focus on engaging people as well as informing them. The plan should include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, responsible staff, desired outcomes and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative.

The current plan reviewed by the auditors is missing many of those key elements (BSD communications strategy and plan - draft updated November 4, 2020) and is instead more of a to-do list. For example, it states plans to "include all key stakeholder groups *in some way* (emphasis added) in our planning processes"

and to "actively collaborate with community partners towards shared goals." Yet nowhere does the plan detail how these plans will be accomplished, who will implement them, when they will be undertaken or how success will be measured.

The BSD Strategic Plan has annual goals for most departments and offices, the Communications Department included. There, the 2020-21 target for communications says 80% of families and staff will report feeling informed and that they know how to access services and resources, in response to the October Family and Staff Survey. That level of specificity is needed in the Communications Department plan, along with details on the strategies, tactics, tools and staff that will be used to hit those targets.

Without a strategic communication plan, it is difficult for communication staff to effectively deliver the messages that are important to BSD and its stakeholders while creating an open dialogue that builds support for the schools. BSD leaders should use this communication audit report, in conjunction with BSD's Strategic Plan, to determine critical communication and engagement priorities. Use that information to focus the communication effort by identifying areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that need more support. Then develop a strategic communication plan and identify the timelines and resources that will be needed to implement the plan.

### Action Step 1.1

**Develop a strategic communication plan that outlines measurable objectives intended to move the communication program toward achieving its goals.**

Planning strategically for communications is about taking a proactive approach to the exchange of information between BSD and its stakeholders. When done well, it will allow the district to strengthen relationships with stakeholders by building credibility and by increasing understanding on both sides.

Developing a formal, strategic communication plan will help communications staff ground their efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, time- and cost-effective for the district, and most likely to succeed in the local community.

A strategic communication plan adheres to the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE. Begin developing the plan by following these four steps.

1. **Research** and analyze the situation facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. An NSPRA Communication Audit is an excellent starting point on that research, with its data on the communication preferences of internal and external stakeholders. Following are some additional data types worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:
  - Reports specific to the school system — Enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by local news media, 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 website
  - National public opinion on schools — PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>)
  - Global communication trends — Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>)
2. **Plan** for how to address the situation by setting longer-term communication goals and shorter-term, measurable objectives.

# #1

## Strategically align the overarching goals of the communication program.

In the plan, articulate clear goals and measurable objectives for communication based on desired changes in awareness levels, knowledge levels, perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Identify the strategies to use to achieve the objectives and the tactics/tools for accomplishing each strategy. Focus on key messages. Identify affected stakeholder groups and the best ways to reach and build relationships with them. Delineate specific tools and tactics for each audience. Identify needed resources to deploy tools/tactics and how they will be acquired.

3. **Implement** the plan and begin communicating with specific tools on an established schedule. In the plan, articulate who is responsible for deployment of each tool/tactic and the timeline for deployment.
4. **Evaluate** the outcomes, whether measurable objectives were achieved and the success of the strategies and tactics used. When initially writing up the plan, identify evaluative measures to be used at a later date to determine the success in achieving the articulated goals and measurable objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. They may also become the basis of "research" findings to inform future updates to the communication plan.

The finished plan should demonstrate how communication projects, tasks and responsibilities support overarching school district goals. It should also provide clear direction for communication staff by helping to identify communication practices that are (or are not) likely to be effective in the local community. A well-crafted strategic communication plan measures and demonstrates the value of projects, programs and activities in which communications staff are engaged.

The resulting plan will serve as a “road map” that will enable BSD to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication efforts. It will help ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication that can overwhelm school districts. With goals tied to the overall strategic plan and measurable objectives for communication activities, the plan will also provide a means for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability. While time-consuming, good communication planning usually takes much less time than dealing with misunderstandings, confusion and controversies that arise from poor communication.

In addition to the four-step public relations process of research, planning, implementation and evaluation noted above, a strategic communication plan should address the following questions for every action or activity 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?

The most effective communication plans are revised annually, not only to assess progress, but also to include goals for any new district initiatives planned for the coming year.

At the times when the new communication plan is finalized and when annual changes are made, the document should be shared at school board and leadership meetings to highlight its major components. This step in the planning process ensures that all district leaders are informed about communication strategies and activities. It also sends a clear message to all stakeholders that the district is serious about communication.

Along with an overall communication plan for the district, it is important to extend planning into the daily work of the communication staff and the district’s administrative team. Project-specific communication plans should continue to be developed whenever key issues or initiatives (such as potential budget challenges) need to be addressed or implemented. While these issue or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic plan, this type of thoughtful planning around key issues affecting the district is important.

Following are two examples of strategic communication plans created by school districts based on the recommendations from an NSPRA Communication Audit Report:

- Rockwood School District, Eureka, Mo. (22,000 students) - <https://www.nspr.org/files/docs/RockwoodCommunicationsPlan2015-2016.pdf>
- Columbia Heights (Minn.) Public Schools (3,400 students) - [https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/chps-communications-plan-2014-2018.pdf](https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/chps-communications-plan-2014-2018.pdf)

View a blank communication plan template developed by a NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning district at [https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/communication-plan-template-pattonville-sd.pdf](https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/communication-plan-template-pattonville-sd.pdf).

## Action Step 1.2

Use “communication protocol” questions to guide decision-making.

Communication—how, when and what to share with others—is often an afterthought in the decision-making process of many organizations, and BSD focus groups commented on it locally as well. By incorporating several communication protocol questions into discussions of major decisions, communication can be more effectively integrated into the process. The questions can be used as a regular component of the superintendent’s District Leadership Team meetings and adapted for department, school-level and advisory council/committee meetings as well.

Communication protocol questions include the following:

- **What is the issue?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- **Who is affected by this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that will be directly or indirectly affected by the issue as primary or secondary target audiences for communications.
- **How does this issue affect stakeholders?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district and community.
- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem, and how it will be presented to stakeholders to heighten awareness and understanding.
- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.

- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the strategies and tactics that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders.
- **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for implementing the strategies and tactics.
- **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will represent the district in discussions with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute copies for use in the discussion. Over time, these questions will become routine and an integrated part of the district’s communication process.

## Action Step 1.3

Communicate with objectives in mind, and avoid jumping to preferred strategies and tactics.

Once a comprehensive, strategic communication plan has been developed, the Communications Department should organize part of its regular staff meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep staff energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with less impactful tasks.

These discussions can also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind and not jumping first to preferred strategies and tactics, although those may be most familiar and comfortable for staff. For example, while social media capabilities are abundant within the office, a particular objective may require a video, an app, a podcast or even an old-school flier to reach the target audience. Creativity should be encouraged in exploring new strategies and tactics to keep the communications efforts relevant and highly effective.

### Action Step 1.4

Refocus strategies from increasing communication output to increasing stakeholder understanding and engagement.

During focus group discussions, many participants noted feeling overwhelmed by the volume of communications they must sift through daily, including those coming from the district and its schools. For some, this led to them missing BSD messages, intentionally or unintentionally. At the same time, local feedback and national trends suggest education stakeholders want schools and district information customized to them: when and where they want it on whichever platform(s) they prefer.

As the Communications Department plans its work, consideration should be given to focusing strategies and tactics more on achieving desired stakeholder behaviors/outcomes and less on increasing departmental output; producing things and stuff. While patrons often need to see a message multiple times before they act on it, a greater volume of communications does not necessarily translate to patron action when that volume is seen as overwhelming, distracting or unfocused.

With the variety of communication tactics available in BSD, prioritize those platforms that have been shown to secure the greatest level of stakeholder engagement with the messages communicated via the tactics. (To guide this effort, use data from the annual family and staff survey, platform analytics and this audit report.) This will allow staff to use their time more efficiently and effectively. A tactic should not be used just because it is there and available; it should be used because it is the best tool for the job.

Whenever and however those key messages are delivered, begin with the audience in mind. Begin by asking what the intended audience wants and needs to know, what is their current level of understanding and then, what do we want them to do with this information. A frequently repeated frustration in the external

focus groups was that too many messages seemed to be created in a vacuum without these considerations.

### Action Step 1.5

Include proactive issues management as part of communication planning.

The focus group discussions identified several challenges facing Bellevue School District. Examples include negative or inaccurate perceptions about the district's affluence and diversity; state and local funding issues; a perceived lack of consistent messaging; and growing mistrust between the district and its many bargaining units. If left unaddressed, these perceptions could grow into true crises that could significantly hurt the district's efficient and effective operations while undermining credibility and its ability to educate students.

Issues management is the ability to anticipate and prepare for a potential crisis before it occurs, by monitoring trends. It is a proactive exercise in which communicators help shape the outcomes rather than waiting to react after an issue has erupted into a crisis. Proactive issues management is an integral part of any well-planned, strategic communications program. It not only helps school systems avoid crises, but it also helps build trust and goodwill by demonstrating awareness of and concern for stakeholders' priorities.

Consider adding a goal and/or objectives related to issues management to your strategic communication plan. The district already has systems for spotting trends through its various surveys and the "Let's Talk" application. The functioning of those systems could be expanded by more proactively addressing issues on the horizon and by equipping district leaders with talking points to start the conversation. In that manner, the district can frame the conversation on its own issues rather than allowing others to do so first.

## Recommendation 2:

### Make internal communications and employee engagement a strategic priority.

A pressing need overshadowing all other aspects of the Bellevue School District's communications effort is to improve internal communication and focus on building trust and connections with employees at all levels. The first step in strengthening the communication program and increasing its effectiveness is to promote and continually reinforce a "culture of communication" so that all faculty and staff feel part of a team and recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the district.

Feedback from employees at all levels in the focus groups pointed to the same problems and frustrations:

- No single, trusted information source.
- A lack of consistent, timely messaging across the school system.
- The perception that while input is allowed, it is not always considered.
- Uncertainty as to where or to whom to turn with questions.

Principals, teachers and clerical staff voiced strong concern over the lack of clear communication protocols and competing or conflicting messages, which negatively impacts their ability to provide information to students and parents in a timely manner.

The importance of internal audiences cannot be overlooked in building a successful communications and public relations program. Employees must feel they are part of a bigger organization and understand the school district's mission and vision. A well-informed and supportive staff will have a positive influence on external communication efforts as well as on the overall environment of the school district. Employees at all levels will not only be

aware of district initiatives and issues, but also able to share that information when the need or opportunity arises.

The following action steps can enhance internal communication and enable BSD leaders to become more proactive in keeping staff well-informed. These action steps also can help staff members feel more valued and engaged in school district operations.

### Action Step 2.1

**Clearly define the communication role of all BSD departments, as collaborators with the Communications Department, to ensure integration of strategic communication at all levels.**

As the Bellevue School District's official communication arm, the Communications Department has a very specific role to play in planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information and messaging via the district's primary communication channels. Communications staff also typically serve as the point of contact on crisis communication for a district and its schools. An effective communication program is one built on trust, relationships and regular interactions, which requires the active communication leadership of all administrators.

**All BSD district, department and school building leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the Communications Department.**

Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at District Leadership Team meetings and principal and administrative meetings so that there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications. By clarifying administrators' communication responsibilities and ensuring that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the Strategic Plan and integrated at all levels, BSD can broaden its outreach, connect more directly

with parents and community members, and create more internal trust and engagement among employees. This will also provide the Communications Department with more time and capacity to focus on developing strategic communication initiatives for the district.

### Action Step 2.2

Establish internal communication expectations for district administrators and principals, and support them in those efforts.

Maintaining effective communication requires thoughtful, well-defined guidelines and protocols to deliver clear, targeted messages. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, information bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. Staff focus group participants consistently pointed to issues in communication between the district office and the schools.

To ensure that BSD leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how the district and its leaders will communicate with all staff. For example, one expectation might be that staff should receive important information at least 30 minutes before parents and the community so that they can serve as frontline communicators and ambassadors for the schools. Another expectation might be that any information employees need to know is delivered in a timely manner (e.g., at least 48 hours before they need to act on it). Other communication expectations for leaders might be to regularly include:

- Rationale behind decisions;
- Articulation of how initiatives or decisions align with the mission, vision and strategic direction of the district;
- Summaries of important meetings; and
- “Nuts and bolts” of district operations and policies that affect staff job duties.

## #2

Make internal communications and employee engagement a strategic priority.

To ensure consistent information delivery, these expectations should:

- **Identify who is responsible** for communicating with different employee groups;
- **Outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared**, perhaps in a chart that illustrates the order and timeline for communications (i.e., who is notified when and in what order);
- **Identify the district's preferred communication vehicles** for use in specific situations, to maximize effectiveness and efficiency;
- **Provide tips and strategies** for effective inter-department and department-to-school communication; and
- **Provide templates** for reporting the outcomes of meetings.

Providing annual communication skills training for administrators in areas such as media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, cultural competency, and ambassadorship will help them feel confident in their communication leadership role and ensure consistent quality of communications.

To demonstrate the district's commitment to enhancing communication efforts, we suggest a communication component be included in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria.

Following are two examples of guides for district and school administrators that set clear communication expectations

- **Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations** — Brenham (Texas) Independent School District ([https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/administrators-guide-communications-pr\\_brenham-isd.pdf](https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/administrators-guide-communications-pr_brenham-isd.pdf))
- **Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators** — Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools ([https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/ccps-communications-guide-2019\\_redacted.pdf](https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/ccps-communications-guide-2019_redacted.pdf))

### Action Step 2.3

Develop a consistent process for how key information is communicated within the school system.

Throughout the focus groups, staff reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and their supervisor. The District Leadership Team should work closely with the Communications Department to clarify the process for internal communications and to develop a list of available vehicles for internal communication. The process and list should be shared and reviewed with district administrators and school principals at least annually.

The internal communication process document might include:

- **Guidelines for what information goes into a staff newsletter and what gets pushed out individually by departments or administrators.** Ideally, routine and non-emergency notices that are relevant for most/all staff belong in a staff newsletter. Legitimately urgent (and not because the sender was late in preparation) and information pertaining to subgroups can be sent outside of the e-newsletter via email.

- **Plans to issue talking points for department and building staff meetings for all major initiatives.** To ensure all staff are receiving the same information simultaneously, BSD should structure a system of developing talking points around key issues. The points can be drafted by those responsible for the issues, but they should then be vetted through the communications team for consistency of message and coordinated distribution.
- **The dedication of time for key announcements during leadership meetings.** These key meetings need to include an agenda item on what everyone on the various leadership teams needs to know. As critical information sources for the rest of the staff, these leaders must be informed in a reliable, timely and thorough way.
- A communication responsibility **grid template.** One way to address inconsistencies and improve communication follow-through after meetings is through use of a responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of “who does what” for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. This type of grid can also be used with any councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated.

#### Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes for “FYI,” “to be shared” and “confidential” to each agenda item. The person facilitating each

topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If an item is marked “to be shared,” then a discussion will be needed to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed. The above communication grid could then be employed.

**Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes**

FYI	
To be shared	
Confidential	

Noting what is to be done with specific agenda items will help ensure that the right people are informed in a timely manner.

**Action Step 2.4**

**Regularly publish staff e-newsletters targeted specifically to them.**

Auditors recommend that the district consider two e-newsletters targeted specifically to staff.

The first would replace and combine *Leadership News*, *Thrive*, *Back to Buildings Update*, and *Principal Digest*. Issue it weekly or every other week (follow a consistent schedule), and fill it primarily with district level/central news relevant to staff (e.g., updates on issues, messages from the superintendent, human resources news and updates, opportunities for involvement, finance and facilities updates). The content needs to be rich and relevant from the staff’s perspective and must support the key messages the district develops.

This e-newsletter can and should replace the multitude of emails from district and department administrators. It requires planning ahead, based on release dates and deadlines, to gather timely and appropriate content. Give careful consideration to its distribution list. A frequent observation among the staff focus groups was that information in the current *Leadership News* was not made available to all those who needed it such as school secretaries and administrative assistants.

A second staff e-newsletter, issued once monthly, should be lighter in nature and provide staff recognition, staff birth and marriage announcements, funny things that happen in the classroom, honors, award and recognition, etc. Auditors support the consideration being given to bringing back *Inside BSD*.

The Communications Department should give consideration to designating a team member to focus on development and coordination of these staff e-newsletters as well as on internal communications in general.

**Action Step 2.5**

**Regularly and systematically gather employee input on decisions that affect their jobs.**

When potential decisions will directly impact staff members and the schools, BSD leaders should seek employee input in advance whenever possible. This need is acknowledged in the 2020-21 Annual Plan, but participants in several staff focus groups indicated that this process is not employed consistently across the district. Consistency is particularly important as leaders seek to implement changes to established procedures; the effective engagement of staff members will ultimately serve to strengthen trust, connection and transparency throughout the district.

Gathering staff input may require extending decision-making timelines, but it pays big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. It also helps identify concerns, from a grassroots perspective, of those charged with implementing decisions. This can be done via staff meetings and personal interaction in many cases. When it requires input on a broader scale – for example, from all instructional staff – opinions and suggestions can be gathered through surveys, polls, virtual meetings or in focus groups. By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, BSD leaders will expand the

ownership of change and contribute positively to employees' feelings of being valued team members.

For the engagement of staff, there are three key considerations that will help build and expand engagement in the district.

- **Do not ask for input from staff if a decision has already been made.** When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, staff can easily feel that their input does not matter because the decision has already been made. In these cases, staff feel they are being sold an idea rather than being provided with the opportunity to help shape a decision. It is important to seek input on all key issues and to listen to that input as part of the decision-making process.
- **Give staff input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or directions for the district.** In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, but choose to seek staff input before finalizing it. When this is done and staff input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders have an interesting dilemma. Asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause staff to disengage from the district. Requesting input does not mean district leaders must follow the suggestions, but the input must be given due consideration. If it is not actionable, then the reasons why should be explained along with the rationale for the final decision.
- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** In most cases, the school board or administrators seek input to gather information in order to make a better decision. Confusion and frustration may enter the process if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive that they are

“making” the decision. To avoid such a situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used, and who will make the actual decision. If these positions are clearly defined on the front end of the process, it will be less likely that those providing input will misunderstand their role.

It also is important to have an intentional plan at the beginning of the input process for how information will be shared with participants before and after a decision is made. Any time input is sought from employees, as well as from parents, students or community members, the district should communicate to the participants how it plans to use that information and what was learned from their feedback.

### Action Step 2.6

Develop a list of staff “resource people” with responsibilities noted.

A number of participants in the employee focus groups, especially secretaries, said that they often don't know whom to call or email with questions because they don't know co-workers' responsibilities. This is a fairly common concern in school districts with a centralized district office and separate campuses. One solution to the problem is the development of a directory listing of staff members to call with questions by topic or responsibility. Polling or surveying administrators and secretaries, along with other relevant support staff, will ensure all topics of interest are covered. This can be a simple one-page list that would be posted on the Staff Portal.

### Recommendation 3:

## Increase alignment between BSD's communications and engagement function.

At the time of this communication audit, there were two offices with responsibilities for communicating and engaging with families: the Communications Department and the Office of Family and Community Engagement. A review of their responsibilities reveals a considerable amount of overlap. For example, the website describes the work of the Family and Community Engagement office as follows:

- We work to ensure that families and community members are aware and understand what we do, the direction we are heading, know where to find support and feel empowered to contribute.
- We provide opportunities for families, educators and the community to learn together and from each other. We develop two-way communication systems to better understand diverse perspectives and needs. We help build the capacity of schools to establish collaborative, meaningful relationships with families. We help parents become leaders and knowledgeable partners in education. We bring community resources and services to struggling families.

Many of those responsibilities are found nationwide in school Communications Departments, which often fill a community engagement role. Further, the district Strategic Plan lists the following 2020-21 goals for the Communications Department:

- The majority (80%) of families and staff report feeling informed and know how to access services and resources.
- At least 75% of families in each of the following subgroups - Black, Hispanic, ELL, Low-Income, and Students with Disabilities - report feeling informed and knowing how to access services and resources.

In treating the communication and engagement functions as separate offices, BSD may be losing opportunities for the sharing and implementation of best practices that would strengthen the district's overall communication program and stakeholder engagement efforts.

### Action Step 3.1

#### Merge leadership of the Communications Department and the Office of Family and Community Engagement.

Clearly, these two departments are pursuing related, if not identical, goals and objectives. Merging them into a combined Office of Communications and Family Engagement and bringing them together in one location would increase opportunities for strategic collaboration and strengthen the effectiveness of both initiatives. This may involve a reimagining of current leadership positions and responsibilities in order to make room for a new position of chief communications and engagement officer or executive director of communications and engagement, who would report to the superintendent.

As examples, here are three job descriptions from other school districts with combined communications and engagement functions:

- **Director of Communications and Community Engagement** — <https://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription2.pdf>
- **Chief Communications and Community Engagement Officer** — [https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/job-chief-communications-community-engagement-officer.pdf](https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/job-chief-communications-community-engagement-officer.pdf)
- **Assistant Superintendent for School and Community Relations** — <https://www.nspr.org/files/audio/007AssistantSuptForSchool%20CommRelations.pdf>

In reviewing the position description for the communications director, it could become the description for the newly created chief

communication and engagement officer with some additions to reflect the family engagement piece. With a strategic leader in that new, enhanced position, BSD would have the opportunity to capitalize on its investments in communications and engagement and more quickly realize its ambitious goals. The current communication director position could become a manager position with a job title and description that reflects the more day-to-day responsibilities of managing communications staff, handling media relations, coordinating publications, etc.

Given the potential for budget challenges due to the ongoing pandemic, it may not be possible to fully implement this recommendation now. In the meantime, and at a minimum, the two offices should regularly meet together to plan, share resources, review common goals and discuss answers to the following questions:

- Are there common goals or a vision for the departments as a whole that unifies the efforts of staff in both offices?
- How well are staff members' daily efforts aligned with achieving the goals for each office and for the district? Is a significant amount of staff time consumed with lower-priority projects?
- What level of independence are staff members allowed in performing the essential tasks outlined in their job descriptions? Are any steps in the review and approval process causing bottlenecks that slow down the timeliness of project delivery?
- Are both offices taking full advantage of the skill sets among staff, not just to serve the district but also to provide each other with professional growth and to enhance feelings of employee satisfaction with their respective assignments?

Auditors also offer the following suggestions in Action Step 3.2 for building on the strengths of the two offices to enhance the district's communication and engagement program.

## #3

### Increase alignment between BSD's communications and engagement functions.

#### Action Step 3.2

**Provide the leader of communications and community engagement efforts with access to ongoing professional development opportunities.**

Investing in ongoing professional development helps ensure high-quality, innovative work, whether in communications or teaching. The Communications Department has experienced several leadership transitions recently, with three directors in the last four years. BSD can help ensure the success of its communication leadership by providing access to management-level professional development opportunities, training and resources.

Professional associations such as the following offer a variety of opportunities for communication leaders to strengthen their people and project management skills as well as their communication strategies:

- **National School Public Relations Association** (<https://www.nspira.org/>) – Offers monthly and annual professional development opportunities on a variety of topics and skill areas for school communicators at different levels of experience, including new, advancing, mid-career and veteran PR professionals. Association members receive weekly and monthly e-newsletters; access to exclusive web content such as a “Gold Mine” of samples, timely advisories on school PR issues and an exclusive, national social network for resource sharing on the

members-only [NSPRA Connect](#) platform; discounted pricing on programs, awards entries and the annual [NSPRA National Seminar](#). Of special note is the fact the 2024 seminar is set for the Hyatt Regency Bellevue from July 14-17.

- **NSPRA's Washington chapter** (<https://www.wspira.com/>) – Conducts monthly virtual professional development workshops.
- **American Management Association** (<https://www.amanet.org/>) – Offers introductory and advanced management and supervisory skills training. Association members receive discounted pricing, professional publications, access to exclusive web content and other benefits.
- **International Association of Business Communicators** (<https://www.iabc.com/>) – Offers an academy of webinars, online workshops and face-to-face training in management, advising and leading, measurement, strategic implementation and other categories. Association members receive discounted pricing, a monthly magazine, access to case studies and work plans, and other benefits.
- **Public Relations Society of America** (<https://www.prsa.org/>) of **PRSA Puget Sound** (<https://prsapugetsound.org/>) – Serves public relations and communications professionals in Western Washington. It offers opportunities to advance careers through networking and access to professional development resources.

Communication leaders also can increase their effectiveness and demonstrate their strategic talents by earning Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). APR signifies a high professional level of experience and competence. Communicators who earn their APR must first demonstrate Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) in the following areas:

- Researching, Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Programs;

- Leading the PR Function;
- Applying Ethics and Law;
- Managing Relationships;
- Managing Issues and Crisis Communications; and
- Understanding Communication Models, Theories and History of the Profession.

Learn more about the expertise and value of an accredited communicator at <https://www.nspira.org/apr>.

### Action Step 3.3

#### Track and evaluate time on task.

To ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful to track the progress of each task and record the actual time spent on it. This would allow department leaders and staff to evaluate their operational efficiency and determine if there are lower-priority tasks that take time away from strategic priorities. That opens up the opportunity for discussions about whether those lower-priority tasks could be shifted to other departments or managed differently.

Today many NSPRA members on multi-person communication teams report using online project management tools such as [Basecamp](#), [Trello](#), [Asana](#) and [Monday.com](#) to increase collaboration and work efficiency while improving their ability to meet deadlines. These tools also can be useful in tracking who and how much time is devoted to each ongoing task or special project. Some even include timer integrations for generating personalized time sheets. This data will allow for a quick assessment of the status of the workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary.

Sharing this information with cabinet members can also build awareness and understanding of the communication function and help set priorities for the year.

## Recommendation 4:

### Enhance and implement the crisis communication plan.

In today's world, school districts must be prepared to deal with the unexpected – from terrorist threats to weather events to major health epidemics. The speed of today's communication technology adds another layer of challenge. The ability of students and staff to call or text as an incident is taking place can quickly relegate schools to the role of a communication observer rather than a valued information provider.

Currently, the Bellevue School District has not yet implemented a crisis plan that outlines the management of communication responsibilities during a crisis. The district undertook a study in 2019 that proposed steps for such a plan, and that work should continue. Developing a crisis communications plan helps ensure that administrators and educators can focus on managing the crisis while communications staff focus on keeping internal and external stakeholders informed—timely and accurately—during the crisis.

When done well, such a plan also takes 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). BSD's focus group participants did not share concerns regarding crisis communications in the district, but their more general concerns about conflicting information and the timeliness of communication are important to consider when planning to communicate during a crisis. Given the heightened public awareness about school safety in recent years, it is imperative to have a comprehensive, updated plan in place.

The following action steps are offered as a guide for reviewing and updating the proposed crisis communication plan to make it a more comprehensive management tool.

## Action Step 4.1

### Assign responsibility for specific crisis communication responsibilities.

A crisis management plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels. With a relatively small communications team, assistance from other administrators will be needed to help gather and disseminate critical news during a crisis. The organizational structure of an incident response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should be designated to take charge of various communication responsibilities in the event of a major crisis. These should include:

- Leadership advisement regarding communications;
- Internal communication;
- External communication;
- News media relations, research and monitoring;
- Communication command center operations;
- Digital communications (i.e., website and social media posts, monitoring and comment moderation);
- Voice and text notifications;
- Donations and volunteer management; and
- Special events (i.e., memorial services).

## Action Step 4.2

### Emphasize crisis communication preparation and training.

Being truly prepared to communicate effectively during a crisis requires preparation, planning and training. School staff members face unusual demands and can be overwhelmed by the extent and magnitude of an incident, but in a crisis situation, one will react as he or she is organized and trained. Knowing who

is supposed to communicate what and how, as well as under which circumstances, in a crisis can be the difference between chaos and calm among district and school leaders and communications staff as well as among the communication recipients: families and staff.

If a crisis communication plan is essential, putting it into practice is a must. Schools have stepped-up crisis response training, from table-top scenario discussions to active shooter drills with local law enforcement and fire-safety partners. Practicing for communications during a crisis should be a part of those exercises, too. Include communications staff in the table-top scenarios. During a drill, have them reassess their communication go-bags (e.g., Wi-Fi hotspot, administrators' mobile numbers, login info for all communication tools) and review the likely media holding/press briefing areas for different types of crises. Crises have no time or structure limits, so teach staff flexibility with the pre-established procedures for responding to an incident.

Crisis management experts recommend that school leaders periodically re-evaluate their security measures. Crisis communication plans should be similarly dynamic documents. They are not meant to gather dust on a shelf or be opened only when an incident occurs.

### Action Step 4.3

#### Offer a crisis communications training session for school principals.

Formal training and a checklist for principals to use when handling communications during a crisis could prove useful. District leaders may not always be able to be at the site instantly, and until they arrive, principals will need to take the lead.

Components of such crisis communications training for principals (and other administrators) could include the following:

- **Using 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

# #4

## Enhance and implement the crisis communication plan.

effectively. A first-response checklist helps principals manage that first hour. It essentially is a reminder of actions that should be done to ensure accurate and effective crisis communications such as:

- Collecting the basic facts of the situation: who, what, when, where, why;
  - Determining priorities for managing and communicating about the crisis;
  - Identifying whom to contact first; and
  - Developing the beginning of the response, in terms of actions and public statements.
- **Maintaining 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 on hand means not having to brainstorm the list whenever a crisis occurs.
  - **Using district-provided templates for initial public statements.** A template can serve as a backup communication starter even if the principal is out of the building when the crisis unfolds. The Communications Department should provide templates for various school crisis scenarios that include the following:
    - What can be confirmed;
    - What the district and/or school is doing to respond to the situation;
    - Schedule of when updates are expected to occur; and

- Messages of concern and sympathy for anyone directly and negatively impacted by the crisis.
- **Reviewing news media protocols.** With today's environment of instant communication via smart devices and social sharing, the news media often hear of any 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 the information they have from whatever source they do find: students, parents or teachers who text or post; relatives getting those text messages and posts; or the random passerby on the street. Principals must know their role in responding, responsibly and timely, to media requests. News media protocols are typically developed by district communications staff and include expectations for the following:
  - When will interviews be available?
  - Who will give the interview?
  - Where will they be held?
  - Are photographers allowed on school grounds?
  - Can students be photographed?
- **Preparing and distributing statements for receptionists and secretaries.** Parents will be concerned about their own children, even if the crisis occurs in another school. Building staff should be aware of this responsibility and have a statement to share from or approved by the principal and communications staff.
- **Expectations for communication with staff during and after a crisis.** School employees need to be updated and, if possible, they should hear what is happening before messages are sent to parents and the community. Staff members can be important information ambassadors during a crisis. 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 communication with parents and students during and after a crisis.** The best time to let students and families know what to do in an emergency is before it happens. Include multi-lingual 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. Communicate the fact that BSD has plans for crisis management, and stress that student safety and welfare will always be the primary concern in any crisis.

#### Action Step 4.4

##### Incorporate social media capabilities in the crisis communication plan.

Audiences today are fractured and turn to a variety of platforms for their news and information, so BSD should not rely on any one source for sharing information about an incident. Emergency preparedness plans must account for multiple approaches to disseminating information throughout a crisis. Authorities on school safety and crisis management suggest the following simple approach to being prepared:

- **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 about an incident and how schools are responding.
- **During the crisis, communicate.** Social media provides an opportunity to share information with stakeholders quickly and easily. It also enables two-way communication in today's world

where people crave dialogue. When it is used during a crisis, be prepared to have a communication staff member monitoring and participating in the inevitable online conversation.

- **After the crisis, communicate.** Re-engaging on social media platforms may be the best opportunity to regain the trust of stakeholders and to lead the way in connecting 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, communicate and regain trust in order to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

### Action Step 4.5

**Expand the definition of affected stakeholders who need notification beyond those who are enrolled in a specific school.**

When a crisis happens at one school, more than those at that school need to be aware of what is happening. In the focus groups, auditors heard a concern that educators and staff across the district were getting information via the grapevine about incidents at other schools. Their concern was that their spouses worked there or that siblings at another school were impacted. It's also possible that students attending a Choice School or commuting teachers may be traveling back near an affected home school location.

Auditors recommend expanding use of the district's SchoolMessenger notification system to inform staff and the parents of students who may reside near an affected school in addition to those who attend or work at the building. Perhaps the crisis notification system can be aligned with geographical boundaries for home address as well as for school/work location. This can help BSD become more transparent by providing timely information to all affected stakeholders.

The district also can benefit from clear guidelines on how and when the automated messaging service should be used, particularly during a crisis. Though the vast majority of focus group participants praised the system, some felt that they receive an abundance of calls, sometimes on issues of little importance to them. 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 on specific issues.

The district also should put in place a clear process for developing urgent messages quickly so that they can be sent out to staff, parents and community members early. During a serious incident, both speed and accuracy are paramount. Consider developing a series of go-to template messages that buildings can use during unexpected, but not atypical crisis situations (e.g., weather closures, bomb threats, neighborhood incidents that trigger a lockdown). Consider asking neighboring districts for copies of their emergency messages. That's an easy way to build a library of quickly accessible messages.

Early, proactive communication to staff, parents and community members during a crisis will reduce the void others can use to co-opt and frame negative or erroneous messages about the district first.

### Action Step 4.6

**Establish a memorandum of understanding with the public information officers from first responder agencies to set forth how information will flow during a crisis in or around a school building.**

The rules governing the release of information by school districts and by police departments are not always the same. Creating and maintaining a collegial, collaborative working relationship with law enforcement as it relates to communication is vital to the release of accurate information to the public.

This makes knowing who says what and in what circumstances critical, especially in crisis situations.

As a best practice, auditors recommend that the Communications Department work in collaboration with the head of the BSD Safety and Security Department and representative public information officers (PIO) for local law enforcement to:

- **List the specific communication responsibilities of the district and local law enforcement or emergency response personnel.** For example, it might be established that PIOs should notify a designated district communications staff member as soon as an incident impacts a school building or the area adjacent to the school.
- **Establish parameters around the appropriate and timely release of information.** Determine who will serve as primary contact for law enforcement and for the schools so both sides can direct reporters to the correct spokesperson. Law enforcement should not address questions about school policies, and school staff should not speak to issues surrounding police functions, investigations and actions.
- **Formalize the arrangement, and create a crisis communication leadership team composed of key district staff, law enforcement and first responders.** This group would oversee the district's response to emergencies and coordinate with PIOs from all local emergency response agencies. The response team is charged with convening during a crisis to oversee the communication function of the crisis management team. Furthermore, the team should meet periodically to revise and re-familiarize themselves with the procedures. Typically, an administrator responsible for the district's communication function takes a lead role in directly assisting the designated leader of the crisis situation. Other members of

the crisis communication leadership team could also be included to provide website, social media and other messaging support.

### Action Step 4.7

**Involve community agencies and identify available resources when developing the crisis communication plan.**

To be as well-prepared as possible to face a crisis or emergency, school districts must involve representatives from local emergency response agencies (i.e., police, fire, behavioral health services, etc.) in crisis communication and management planning. After all, in a serious incident it is law enforcement who will be the lead agency, with school personnel in a supporting role. In addition to local resources, many states offer assistance in developing a crisis response and communication plan under the federal Safe Schools program.

For example, King County Emergency Management has various tool and training opportunities available at <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/emergency-management/emergency-management-professionals.aspx>.

The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) likewise has a host of excellent resources available at <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/health-safety/school-safety-center/school-safety-security-related-rcws-wacs/emergency-preparedness-and-response>.

NSPRA offers a resource that is helpful in developing a crisis communication manual, *The Complete Revised Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools*. It is available as a CD through the online product catalog at <https://www.nspira.org/products>.

## Recommendation 5:

### Continue to refine the district's social media presence and engage more stakeholders.

Bellevue School District maintains a presence on a variety of social sharing platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn.

On Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/bsd405>), the district has almost 11,000 followers. It posts multiple times each week, sometimes multiple times per day. During the time of this audit, engagement on Facebook ebbed and flowed depending on the nature of the post. Posts with basic information such as deadlines for enrolling at choice schools had very low levels of engagement. As the date for returning to in-person instruction for K-2 students approached, engagement soared. For example, a post on January 17 about the availability of well-being resources had 7 reactions and 34 comments, one of which was from a teacher who had 2 replies and 58 reactions. On the same day, a post about Welcome Back banners at schools had 27 reactions, 13 comments and 4 shares. A January 8 post about 600 families receiving food and hygiene items through the Family Connection Centers had 238 reactions, 26 comments and 3 shares. Finally, on January 20, a post about final plans for bringing 2nd grade students back had 123 reactions, 441 comments and 9 shares.

On Twitter (<https://twitter.com/thebsd405>), the district is approaching 4,500 followers. The posting volume and timing on Twitter mirrors what appears on Facebook. The content and graphics are exactly the same. Engagement on Twitter is significantly lower than Facebook, even on those tweets that had high involvement on Facebook. With more followers and higher engagement, the district's Facebook page appears to be the preferred social media platform for BSD stakeholders, which follows [national trends](#).

The district's Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/bellevueschools405/>) has more than 3,500 followers. It posts several times a week. Large group photos and images of students and staff have the greatest level of engagement. For example, a January 8 post about 600 families receiving food and hygiene items through the Family Connection Centers had 114 likes. A similar item on December 21 about meals-to-go with thanks to Nutrition Services and Transportation garnered 99 likes.

Auditors generally found the social media content on these three platforms to be appropriately concise and visually pleasing. Facebook posts, however, could benefit from more photos of students and staff. Not in keeping with best practices, however, the district does not clearly outline social media policies for its users on the district's Facebook "about" page or in its brief Twitter bio. Acceptable Use is addressed in Board Policy 6800. Focus group feedback suggests that social media, despite the engagement statistics above, is not a frequent source of information for the majority of stakeholders. It is just not on the radar of many of the participants.

The district's YouTube channel (<https://www.instagram.com/bellevueschools405/>) is not included among the social icons promoted on the district webpage, but it has more than 1,000 subscribers. Over the last year, the number of monthly video posts varied from a low of two in July and October to a high of 25 in June. The most viewed video in the last year was about the capital bond (+37,900 views), but for other videos, viewership generally fell between 50 - 800 people. Video messages from the superintendent were consistently among those with the highest viewership.

The district's LinkedIn page (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/bellevue-school-district/>) also is not included among the social icons promoted on the district webpage. It shows more than 5,000 followers, including 2,000 employees, connected in the platform, but the page has only two posts. It does not appear to be used as part of any regular communication strategies.

The following suggestions are intended to help the district enhance the effectiveness of its current social media strategies.

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### Action Step 5.1

Tailor social content to appeal to the users on each platform.

BSD Twitter and Instagram may be getting some eyes on district messages, but the auditors' review suggests that the majority of stakeholders most likely to consume and interact with district messages are on Facebook. This reflects larger [national trends](#) showing that 69 percent of U.S. adults use Facebook, while 37 percent use Instagram and only 22 percent use Twitter. That Twitter usage becomes even narrower when you consider that the top 10 percent of tweeters generate 80 percent of the content, as recently observed by the [Pew Research Center](#).

[Facebook Analytics](#), [Instagram Insights](#) and [Twitter Analytics](#) can be useful tools in identifying more detailed, local demographics for BSD followers, including age and sex, whether they're primarily mobile or desktop users, which times of day are best for posting, and much more.

BSD's current practice is to post relatively similar (or identical) content on both platforms in high volume. But to maintain and/or improve user engagement with the district's social messages, the district should post content specifically tailored to the primary users of each platform. Review the district's analytics to identify user demographics for each platform, and allow that data to inform the development of social objectives, strategies and tactics. Quality, not quantity, should be the aim, especially as social platforms increasingly use engagement measures to determine who sees social content.

As the district considers how best to tailor its social content, be sure to also consider the communication preferences of non-English and non-native English speakers in the BSD school community ([Recommendation 7](#)). Following

Continue to refine the district's social media presence and engage more stakeholders.

are examples of school systems that provide tailored social media pages in some of their stakeholders' native languages:

- **CFISD en Español** - Cypress-Fairbanks (Texas) Independent School District (<https://twitter.com/CFISDnoticias>)
- **Garland ISD español** - Garland (Texas) Independent School District (<https://twitter.com/gisdnoticias>)
- **Lekòl Palm Beach** - School District of Palm Beach County, Fla. (<https://twitter.com/PBCSDKreyol>)
- **SCS En Español** - Shelby County (Tenn.) Schools (<https://www.facebook.com/SCSK12Espanol> and <https://twitter.com/SCSK12Espanol>)

### Action Step 5.2

Continue to develop original and engaging post content.

A good next step to increase user engagement on BSD social media is identifying which types of post content have historically received the most engagement. (The auditors' analysis, outlined earlier in this recommendation, should assist in that effort.) Developing posts that are thematically of a similar nature should yield positive results.

Posts that authentically generate comments (i.e., make people *want* to say something—and not by asking for comments) and other forms of engagement (likes, shares, video views) also

will further expand BSD's social media reach. Social media today prioritizes quality of the post engagement over the quantity of posts. In other words, posts with general parenting tips or annual district announcements will almost always reach far fewer social media users than great photos or videos with a quick story that:

- Arouses a strong emotion such as excitement, laughter or amazement;
- Makes the user look good by being able to demonstrate a personal connection or special knowledge; or
- Generates burning questions and then (timely) provides the answers.

When crafting a post, consider whether its text will arouse an emotion, make a re-sharer look good or lead to thoughtful questions.

### Action Step 5.3

**Create virtual opportunities for stakeholders to engage with the district and schools via social media.**

The district frequently invites stakeholders to share input via surveys and in-person meetings, but social media also offers opportunities for soliciting live stakeholder input.

Consider increasing the district's use of Facebook Live from promoting school events to also offering stakeholders convenient opportunities to chat with district leaders about key initiatives. A Texas superintendent [used this engagement method](#) to help build support for a successful bond campaign. Since then, he has continued to provide live updates about district and school initiatives on his [superintendent Facebook page](#) to build stronger relationships with his community. Dr. Duran might consider doing something similar.

### Action Step 5.4

**Develop guidelines and protocols for responding to social media posts.**

One issue that challenges school districts across the country is whether to respond to social media questions and inaccurate or misleading comments. Best practices suggest that a conversational give and take is at the heart of social media; that's what makes it "social."

The Communications Department has indicated that staff answer legitimate questions and correct factual errors, but there is no protocol or written guidelines that spells that out. The auditors also observed several legitimate and important questions posted on social media that were not answered. Given the heightened engagement on social media around the return to in-person learning, it is especially important to have a well-defined and consistently applied process for handling questions, inaccurate statements and complaints.

The department should develop internal guidance for its social media response protocols so that it's clear when to respond, who has the authority to do so, what oversight or approvals are necessary, and when to disengage from a contentious follower, perhaps by calling the person directly, hiding the post, deleting the post and/or blocking a commenter.

Here are two examples of social media response guidelines for a communications team:

- **Online Engagement by District Stakeholders Policy** — West Fargo (N.D.) Public Schools ([https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/online-engagement-district-stakeholders-west-fargo-ps.pdf](https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/online-engagement-district-stakeholders-west-fargo-ps.pdf))
- **Social Media Response Guidelines** — Papillion La Vista (Neb.) Community Schools ([https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/files/gold\\_mine/social-media-response-guidelines-papillion-la-vista-cs.pdf](https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/social-media-response-guidelines-papillion-la-vista-cs.pdf))

## Action Step 5.5

Increase the use of video and make the district's YouTube channel more visible.

There are numerous studies showing that video is the top draw on many social media outlets. Social media posts that include a video have [48 percent more views](#) and [generate 12 times more shares](#) than posts with text and image content. With video consumption on mobile devices [rising by 100 percent](#) every year, experts predict that by 2022, online videos will comprise more than 82 percent of all consumer internet traffic. The power of video for a communications program should not be underestimated.

BSD's current use of video seems somewhat sporadic and not part of an overall strategic plan. While the district website has links to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, there is no YouTube link. It may be that videos are developed primarily for posting to other social platforms, as the district videos posted on Facebook suggest, but this absence is a missed opportunity to promote BSD stories.

School districts that use quality video as part of their communication program can reach a wider audience. As the district looks to expand the reach of its communication program, high quality video is a logical direction, but for more informal purposes such as Facebook Live broadcasts, videos can be produced quickly and well on a good smartphone. While there are obvious budget and staffing implications for incorporating more video into the communication program, it is becoming increasingly affordable to produce them in-house or on a contract basis.

Here are some other considerations and ideas for using video to tell the district's story and communicate key messages:

- **Take inventory of video production capabilities.** The director of communications has little time to produce videos, so establishing this capacity in the strategic communication plan (see [Recommendation 1](#)) will help determine the feasibility of increased production.
- **Continue to add to the inventory of video on BSD's YouTube channel, but set consistent expectations for the number of releases each month.** Short videos with testimonials and content showing students engaged in learning activities will help tell the BSD education story as well as or better than any brochure or newsletter.
- **Link videos in e-newsletters.** Give your audiences another reason to read the school and district newsletters. Videos keep them abreast of district and school events in a creative way and help to promote understanding and pride.
- **Highlight employees in short customer service or community service spots.** Identify and celebrate examples of employees providing great customer service or volunteering in the community.
- **Make the videos of Board of Director meetings easier to find.** Create a playlist that contains all school board meetings.

## Recommendation 6:

### Develop a digital communication plan.

Digital communication planning involves consideration of the variety of digital tools, channels and platforms available to reach different stakeholders and how they can be leveraged to achieve goals and objectives related to communications, marketing and engagement. With so many digital channels available, it is more important than ever to develop them holistically and not silo each platform as a stand-alone effort. Since each platform has its own unique features, strengths and weaknesses, it is important to have a plan for using them collectively to grow and improve BSD's digital communication efforts.

A digital communication plan, as part of the strategic communication plan, can help to promote awareness, drive traffic to and encourage interaction with the BSD website, school websites and the district's social media sites. It might lay out social media micro-campaigns to help news and events go viral. It should use social media and website analytics to set objectives for increased awareness, reach and interaction. An emphasis on consistent branding across all of the district's digital platforms would ensure it is easy to recognize each as part of BSD.

In addition to generating engagement and dialogue online, social media can be a useful tool for driving traffic back to the district website for the most accurate and detailed information. However, while the current website is mobile friendly, it lacks some functionality and requires lots of scrolling to get to different sections. The website design should be reviewed from an accessibility perspective for both those with impairments and those accessing it on a smartphone or other mobile device. If the website cannot be adequately adjusted for easy and quick use by smartphone users, consideration should be given to developing a mobile app.

## Action Step 6.1

Begin plans to upgrade and redesign the BSD website.

Across the focus groups, both internal and external, participants found the current district website to be difficult to navigate and find information, with poor search capability and content often out of date, particularly at the school level. As a result, no focus groups cited the website as a primary source of information. The website seems to be more inward focused as a tool for staff and current families. In an increasingly competitive environment, BSD should rethink how the website can be used and reimagine it as a marketing tool to tell the BSD story to new families.

Any website design process should begin by asking these key questions:

- Who are our primary audiences for the district website? For the school websites? For any existing or desired microsites?
- What are our objectives for each audience? What should they be able to do, know or believe by visiting the sites?
- What current website functionality and features should we keep, get rid of or improve?
- What integrations with other apps/ programs must the website platform be able to handle?
- What is our development timeline?
- What works and does not work in our partnership with our current website design provider?
- When we get to the end of this website redesign process, how will we know it was successful?

To assist in understanding stakeholders' experience with the current website, consider also conducting user experience (UX) testing through a contracted service or by coordinating the district's own website user testing sessions.

This method asks users (e.g., parents, students, staff) to complete specific tasks on the website. They then share how user-friendly the experience was, how it can be improved and what additional information, features and functionality might be added.

Use your answers and the UX feedback to create a request for proposals (RFP) for a website redesign. WordPress, the current free platform BSD uses for website hosting, appears to have some limitations that may not make it the best fit for meeting BSD's digital communication goals and objectives. When issuing the RFP, consider inviting five or six vendors to demo their products first and then asking only the top two to three vendors who best meet BSD's needs to submit a formal proposal. NSPRA members discuss their experiences with various website providers on [NSPRA Connect](#), the online members-only community forum.

## Action Step 6.2

### Make the district website “communications central.”

Because the website is such a visible part of BSD's communication efforts, redesigning the main entry page should be a high priority. Work towards a graphically appealing site, but first, with website analytics, make a prioritized list of the information people access on the site. Look for ways to get site visitors to that information with a minimum of clicks—three at most. Focus group participants frequently said what they needed was buried too deep.

Here are six recommendations for improving the existing website design:

- **Keep a majority of the important information on each home page “above the fold,”** meaning that a user would not have to scroll down for most information on a 1024 x 768 resolution screen. (This phrase comes from looking at a newspaper when it is folded in half and seeing what appears on the top half, above the fold.) Too much of the news and announcements on the district home

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## Develop a digital communication plan.

page and school home pages currently are below the fold. For example, the critically important Back to Buildings Plan is in the scroll-down category.

- **The large green banner on the homepage is text heavy and takes up a lot of valuable real estate,** particularly when viewed on a smartphone. Consider reducing the size and/or replacing it with a striking photo that communicates the same key message without words.
- **Add a “Frequently Asked Questions” section to the homepage.** An FAQ section on the home page of the website is a useful resource for the public and staff. Keep it current by asking district office and school secretaries and other staff to track the questions they are most often asked by callers. Use the Let's Talk tool to generate FAQ content. These can then be compiled and added as updates. FAQs can also be used for myth busting and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another prominent spot on the homepage for easy access. School and district publications should promote the website as a source of information when people have questions. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be clearly visible near the home page and not buried deep within the website.
- **Make more use of drop-downs rather than buttons.** One useful addition would be a “I Want To...” feature prominently

placed. Some examples might be: find my school, pay my school lunch bill, watch the latest school board meeting. King County’s website makes excellent use of this feature and is worth reviewing.

- **Provide easier access to basic facts and figures.** Specifically, consider turning the “District Overview” material found under the About button into an infographic.

### Action Step 6.3

**Expand the Finance Department section with an emphasis on user-friendly information.**

One of the elements that is sometimes missing on school district websites is budget and finance materials written with the public and parents in mind; in other words, from a layman’s perspective. Currently, BSD’s finance website contains only the bare essentials such as several years of budget documents. Such documents may satisfy state reporting requirements, but they do little to help the taxpayer understand where the district’s dollars come from and how they are allocated.

The district budget page has the beginnings of a simpler explanation, but it falls short. For example, it has a heading “How are school districts funded?” (revenue) while the graphic shows district expenditures (expenses). It also addresses the Superintendent’s Advisory Council (SAC), which is charged with reviewing the budget and making recommendations for reductions. It lays out the meeting timeline but does not display any meeting materials except for the group’s initial meeting last July. Those agendas and materials are posted on the SAC’s page, but they should be linked to from the budget page, where a casual visitor might expect to find them. At a time when all public entities are under close scrutiny, including school districts, transparency and clarity are paramount. School district budgets are typically the largest in the community and they often draw special scrutiny.

The district also should develop an online citizens guide to understanding BSD’s budget.

The webpage(s) should have an emphasis on charts and graphs and be written with the layperson in mind. (The [2020 Bellevue School District Report to Our Community](#) does a good job of this.) Include a FAQ section and consider allowing readers to submit questions online that district leaders would answer and post responses. Building trust, understanding and increasing transparency in the district’s finances are more important than ever given the potential budget implications of the ongoing pandemic. The district is required to produce a Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) and/or a Popular Annual Financial Report, and those should be made available here as well.

Although larger than BSD, these two school districts are excellent examples of how to explain complex financial material in an easy to understand format:

- **Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools Budget 101** — <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/budget-101/index.html>
- **Houston (Texas) Independent School District Budget & Finance** — <https://www.houstonisd.org/budget>

### Action Step 6.4

**Improve the functionality of the Staff Portal.**

Staff focus groups reported navigation and use issues with the Staff Portal. The search engine is problematic, and although the portal contains a lot of information, there is no alert to advise staff when something new has been added. However, as auditors checked the staff portal in December and January, there was very little new information posted in the BSD News and Announcements section. The same item announcing the Superintendent’s State of the District address was the only item there for several weeks. In general, focus group participants expressed frustration over the portal, and as a result many use it only when forced to, which is creating a barrier to effective communication.

As the district works on the website redesign, conduct focus group research with different staff groups to identify priorities and unique content areas they need. The Staff Portal should include current news and updates (updated more frequently than is the current practice) that staff should be aware of in addition to forms, documents and policies. Content can include advisory committee meeting minutes, announcements and talking points on current issues. Post time-specific “news to know” and reminders at least weekly. As the site is improved over time, consider adding interactive components that will allow staff to submit ideas or comments, ask questions, share documents and communicate with each other. These portals have the potential to become dynamic and valuable internal communication vehicles, if given the time and attention they deserve.

### Action Step 6.5

Develop a new section devoted to progress reports and updates on how the 2020 Capital Bond Proceeds are being used.

BSD is aware of the need to regularly report to the community about progress being made on how bond proceeds are being utilized. They have done so with the 2014 bond issue, but it is buried far down in the Facilities section. This material should be placed in a more prominent location that is easier to find on the website.

For examples of how other school districts have organized this material, consider these:

- **Wauwatosa (Wis.) School District Project Updates** — <https://www.wauwatosa.k12.wi.us/referendum>
- **Boise (Idaho) School District Bond Projects by School Project Updates** — [https://www.boiseschools.org/our\\_district/bond\\_progress/bond\\_projects\\_by\\_school\\_with\\_progress\\_updates](https://www.boiseschools.org/our_district/bond_progress/bond_projects_by_school_with_progress_updates)

## Recommendation 7:

### Enhance communication to better serve the needs and interests of non-English speaking and minority families.

One barrier to effective communications is language differences. BSD is an incredibly diverse district with 100 languages spoken and 40.2 percent of students speaking a first language other than English. Given the growing diversity of its population, the Bellevue School District must take steps to ensure that all of its families are receiving and able to understand essential information at the same time. Translations should be routine for districtwide publications, special alerts and important student information that is sent home, either from the district or school campuses. While it may not be practical, in terms of staff time and cost, to translate materials into all of these languages, materials should be translated consistently into the district's predominant non-English languages (e.g., Spanish and Mandarin Chinese).

Such steps are in line with the district's mission: "To serve each and every student academically, socially, and emotionally, through a rigorous and relevant education that is innovative and individualized. As a learning community that values one another's humanity, we provide courageous support for an equitable and exceptional education for all students." Without this effort, families will experience a divide between those who can be in the know and those who cannot.

It is also imperative that the Communications Department look at how best to reach families who may not be served as well by the district's traditional way of communicating. For example, some cultures are more likely to turn to their native-language radio stations for news. Others may pay more attention to guests invited to speak at their church or community center than news items posted on a website.

The auditors heard in multiple focus groups about a perception that the district talks a lot about equity and inclusion, but that some of the district's systems, structures and services can marginalize certain students. When asked what staff would tell a newcomer about the district, most responded they would talk about the outstanding academic opportunities available to students. When asked what they would say if the newcomer was a person of color, the answers changed substantially, to telling parents to advocate for their student because the district does not do as well by its students of color, other than Asian students.

Trust in the district among some parents, community members and to a certain extent, staff, has been compromised by the perception of an achievement gap primarily for African American and other students of color as well as by how the district is addressing and communicating about that gap. When asked about the district's image in the community, multiple participants described it as "split," with low-income and students of color feeling marginalized because the district is not meeting their needs. If BSD is working to support, listen to and address the concerns of racial, ethnic and economic minority populations in its community, then this feedback suggests an absence of effective communications with stakeholders regarding those efforts.

#### Action Step 7.1

**Develop a plan for engaging families of non-English and non-native English speakers as well as those with limited technology access.**

A reality for all school districts is that the increasing transition from printed communications to online forms, digital documents and other e-communications can deny information to the students and families who still have limited or no access to reliable internet outside of school. While the Bellevue School District is fortunate to sit amongst numerous technology companies and students have access to technology in the classroom

and at home, the district needs to remember that not all parents are technology literate. Comments during the focus groups mentioned that the district was relying too much on electronic methods at the expense of print.

When developing the strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)), be sure to include an objective and strategies related to ensuring the district can effectively communicate with the families of non-native English speakers and those with limited technology access. This plan should be informed by input from the affected families and students as well as educators.

The plan should include support for short-term or immediate communication needs, identifying critical information for these families during all phases of the school year. It should also include additional strategies to appeal to the particular interests of these families. To ensure the services are effective, make a feedback process part of the planning.

When feasible, BSD should consider allocating resources to establish a centralized source for translations to provide quality control and consistency. The strategic communication plan might then include strategies to ensure all school district staff are aware of how, why and when to access these services. It is important to ensure translations are culturally appropriate, accurate and grammatically correct, so preference is given to human translation service providers such as on-staff translators, Alboum Translation Services or Transact services for English language learners over digital methods such as Google translate or Microsoft Word translate. Auditors heard positive comments in the focus groups about a new translation application called “Talking Points,” but it was unclear how widespread its use is in BSD. The district should make an effort to promote its availability widely among staff.

## #7

Enhance communication to better serve the needs and interests of non-English speaking and minority families.

### Action Step 7.2

**Maintain an image catalogue with photos and videos of diverse members and students.**

It is common practice for professional communicators to maintain a catalogue of still and video images, taken throughout a year, for potential use with future projects. In larger communication departments, the catalogue is often maintained as a shared drive or folder of visual resources. Communications staff should review any current catalogue to identify gaps in representation of student and staff groups.

Once gaps are identified, review the district’s virtual and in-person event calendars for potential opportunities to capture images that would fill those gaps. Where possible, assign a communications staff member to attend events with the specific aim of taking photos and video that will allow the district to ensure all stakeholders are represented in its communications. Maximize the use of staff time by also having the communications staffer write a news piece about the event for the district and/or school websites, social media and/or a publication.

There are many national and global websites that provide royalty-free or fee-based stock photography and video—Pexels, Pixabay and Storyblocks for example—but it can sometimes be challenging to find images with exactly the

right features to communicate a school district's key messages. Locally sourced "stock" images are almost always a better fit.

Image catalogs can be organized in a variety of ways (e.g., year, event, location), but consider designating a specific folder in the Communications Department's catalogue where images representing student and staff diversity are placed. This will make it easier for communications staff to find those images as needed throughout the year.

### Action Step 7.3

**Review the visual impression created by images in all materials before publication.**

Storyboarding in video production allows a director to envision the shots that will be necessary, well before cameras start rolling, by reviewing a sequence of drawings.

In a similar fashion, communicators can better plan their publications by displaying all pages with images together at once. This could be done digitally on a screen or by printing out hard copies to spread on a table or hang on a wall. Seeing all of the images side by side helps a communicator understand the visual story that will be told to readers, whether consciously or unconsciously.

When reviewing the visual story of BSD in its publications, ask yourself these questions:

- Will all of our students and staff see someone like themselves represented somewhere in this publication?
- Does that representation look natural or staged?
- Do all images make sense in the context of the story?
- Are there any instances where the use of an image suggests an implicit bias? (For example, using a photo of Asian students in an article about advanced placement programs but one of Black students in an article about restorative justice programs.)

Once you have answers, take steps to address any identified issues. Make use of your image catalogue to fill in any image gaps.

### Action Step 7.4

**Strive to create an inclusive culture for the diverse families BSD serves.**

Research is clear about the importance of family involvement in a child's education. However, families cannot be fully engaged and supportive of their child's academic progress if they feel marginalized or if they do not understand the language that the school system uses to communicate. Here are some additional suggestions for increasing the engagement of diverse families and their sense of inclusion in BSD through communications:

- **Ensure that the strategic communication plan has a diversity/inclusion component.** Set measurable objectives for promoting diversity and supporting inclusion through communication.
- **Conduct cultural competency training with all staff** so that they are comfortable and have a better understanding of the students and families they will be interacting with in the schools. Be sure the training includes modules on cultural differences in communication expectations and methods.
- **When communicating major initiatives, expand outreach programs to include neighborhood gathering spots, churches and other community organizations** for the distribution of information and the gathering of feedback. Non-English speakers and minority populations may be more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable. Using community liaisons who work directly with families is one strategy for communicating face to face with parents that has been effective in other districts.

- **Continue to conduct formal research with the district’s diverse communities to better understand their communication needs**, to increase the extent to which they feel welcome and included, and to remove barriers to their full participation.

NSPRA’s *Diversity Communication Toolkit* could be another helpful resource in expanding communication to diverse audiences and building cultural competency. It is available as a free download to NSPRA members at <http://www.nspra.org/products>.

### Action Step 7.5

**Develop a key communicator network among non-English and non-native English speakers.**

To further address the concern articulated in focus groups about engaging non-English and non-native English speakers, consideration should be given to creating a key communicator network with these communities. Key communicators are typically influential, trusted community leaders who are deemed knowledgeable by their peers. The larger community believes them to have access to insider information about local schools and the district, making them a credible source of information. These key communicators should receive regular, bilingual updates and key messages about district and school initiatives.

A key communicator network can serve as an early warning system on emerging issues among ethnically diverse parents and communities, and can help to counter negative, inaccurate information shared in those communities at gatherings or on social media.

To begin establishing a key communicators network among non-English speakers and non-native English speakers, the Communication Department might:

- **Work with principals to identify potential key communicators** for the families of English language learners within their schools.

- **Host exclusive, bilingual events for potential key communicators** and introduce them to the methods that the district uses to disseminate information in multiple languages.
- **Provide bilingual messages and materials to the key communicators** and encourage them to share that information with families they know, at church and in other local gathering spots.

### Action Step 7.6

**Develop website landing pages customized for non-English and non-native English speakers.**

The district and school websites all include language translation features, powered by translation software. The websites contain valuable information for English-speaking and non-English-speaking families alike. However, consideration should be given to developing website landing pages designed specifically to appeal to the interests of current and prospective students and families who speak a primary language other than English.

The landing pages should contain information that addresses issues of greatest concern to these families. Use these customized landing pages to inform parents about school-based and districtwide services provided, how parents can get involved in their child’s school, school safety guidelines, culturally responsive practices and events, etc. The pages also should include information regarding activities, policies and important announcements of particular interest to these stakeholder groups.

Following are two examples of customized, non-English district website landing pages:

- **En Espanol** - School District of Palm Beach County, Fla. (<https://www.palmbeachschools.org/spanish>)
- **An Kreyol** - School District of Palm Beach County, Fla. (<https://www.palmbeachschools.org/creole>)

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

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that our members can use to assess their programs. The work was organized into critical function areas, and to date, rubrics have 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.

The following reflect the auditors' assessment of where the Bellevue School District (BSD) falls within the rubrics. The purpose of the communication audit was to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level. The recommendations throughout this report are designed to support the district in 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, the complete *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website ([www.nspr.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking](http://www.nspr.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking)).

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## Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging/Established

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BSD's overall communication effort currently straddles the emerging and established categories. As this audit report identifies, the district's lack of a truly strategic communication plan compromises the focus and direction of communications. This is a critical priority for BSD to undertake in the next 12 months because it will help the district migrate from a largely reactive mode to one that is more proactive.

Within the context of these rubrics, the strengths of BSD include:

- Supporting district communications through board policy.
- Representation of district communications personnel on some committees, including the District Leadership Team.
- Efforts to engage target audiences through social media.
- Evaluating communication effectiveness to inform strategy as evidenced by this audit, as well as tracking of some activity such as through social media and the Let's Talk application.

Following are a few of the additional areas that could move BSD's communication program more firmly into the established category (see [Recommendations 1, 2](#)):

- Incorporating a series of approaches to build a culture of communications across district and building operations, with such measures as clarifying who is responsible for various messaging, providing templates for newsletters and talking points on critical issues.

- Providing professional development for district and building leadership in effective communications strategies and methods.
- Refocusing the efforts of the Communications Department from outputs to increasing stakeholder engagement.
- More effectively managing communications by incorporating the four-step strategic planning process, known as RPIE.
- Build stronger relations with local media and be more proactive in issuing news releases.

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## Internal Communications – Emerging

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BSD's internal communications program falls primarily into the emerging category, defined as being in the early stages of development, largely responsive to immediate needs or problems with little proactive planning. As such, the district has many opportunities for improvement as noted in this audit report.

Within the context of these rubrics and in addition to the action steps outlined in [Recommendation 2](#), BSD should consider:

- Making sure that communications with employees are systematically embedded into the district's comprehensive communications plan, maximizing the opportunity for them to exponentially support external communications.
- Frequently disseminating thorough and accurate communications to all employees through newsletters or through emails when information needs to be shared between newsletters.
- Disseminating core messages to employees making clear BSD's mission, goals and key messages.
- Conducting annual educator and staff surveys assessing communication

effectiveness, including readership surveys of all publications.

- Implementing a series of approaches to keep employees informed of key issues in support of their roles as district ambassadors.
- Including in its new employee orientation an overview of BSD and the role of employees in the overall organization. Add a component about employees being viewed by parents and the community as trusted sources of district information.

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## Parent/Family Communications – Established

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BSD's parent/family communication efforts generally fall in the established category, although improvements should be pursued to move into the exemplary category. This is particularly evident in areas of communication consistency from school to school as well as messaging on over-arching district and board priorities. A proactive parent and family communication program directly supports student success in school and keeps parents informed about and involved in their children's education by building collaboration and trust.

Within the context of these rubrics, the following areas stand out for continuing improvement:

- Ensuring all district and building-level leaders, faculty and staff are effective communicators will maximize BSD's service to its students and stakeholders. Additional work to codify communication roles and supporting individual success in them will move BSD firmly into the Established category. ([Recommendation 1](#))
- With many in BSD's communities primarily seeing the school system through the lens of their current school, we encourage the district to make it a priority to communicate school and district goals, plans, programs, finances,

and issues with parents/families. This will not only improve message consistency, but also help build engaged parent advocates when they understand the vision and direction for the district and how it supports their school and family. It also will help to build a beneficial, long-term appreciation for BSD's programming strengths among families, so they remain positive as their children move through the system. ([Recommendations 5, 6](#))

- Begin developing a plan for engaging families of non-native English speakers continuing to research and assess their communication needs in order to increase the extent to which they feel welcome and included, and to remove barriers to their full participation. Such efforts need to engage not only principals and parents but also district office departments and staff, who must assist the schools in effective home and school communications and relationship-building. ([Recommendation 7](#))
- Continue to conduct research to understand parent/family needs, expectations, opinions, attitudes and knowledge levels. This will better equip the district to communicate effectively, foster transparency and build trust with this critical stakeholder group.

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## Marketing/Branding – Emerging

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While public education as a sector has had to increase its focus on marketing and branding, this communication audit report uncovered and focused on more pressing communication concerns currently at BSD. Establishing a clear district direction for communications to support and get ahead of challenging issues, especially in relation to achievement gaps and labor/management relations, are more urgent priorities. With that said, BSD's marketing/branding program is clearly in the Emerging category and much opportunity exists to move it into the Established rubric

Within the context of these rubrics, the following areas stand out for continuing improvement once the priorities identified in this report are adequately addressed:

- Developing a comprehensive branding/marketing plan aligned with the district's enrollment goals and based on recent enrollment trends.
- Building that campaign based on thorough market research to understand demographics, products and services, market trends, market segments and competition.
- Ensuring that once a brand identity is finalized (with perhaps a revitalized logo and tagline/key messages) that it is reflected consistently in signage, print and electronic communications, the district's redesigned website and through social media.
- Providing training for key school and central office personnel, especially administrative assistants, to ensure consistency of applying brand guidelines.
- Using storytelling via video, social media, print and interpersonal to help audiences emotionally connect with BSD's brand.

## Crisis Communications – Emerging

BSD's crisis communications program is solidly in the Emerging rubric, although some work is underway to improve the transparency and timeliness of crisis-related messaging and response. The work to date is still in draft form and has yet to be approved and implemented.

In addition to the action steps outlined in [Recommendation 4](#) of this report, the district should also consider:

- Ensuring communications staff and district leaders have knowledge of a crisis communication life cycle and how to plan messages accordingly to meet the district's information goals.
- Providing staging areas for news media and for parent-student reunification, which are determined at the onset of a crisis and typically communicated within the first or second wave of initial information releases.
- Monitoring two-way conversations on social media during and following incidents, with protocols established to address negative conversations and dispel rumors. The district needs to be less shy about correcting misinformation on its social media platforms than what auditors observed during the time of this audit.

## Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Established

Although a pandemic-related enrollment decline has potential budget implications for BSD, the district is fortunate to have passed a \$675 million bond issue in February 2020. Prior to that, three special levies passed in 2018. Clearly, there is a history of solid community support at the ballot box. BSD followed a common practice among school districts by engaging an outside firm to manage the recent bond election campaign. With that in mind, it is difficult to ascertain how much credit goes to the district and how much to the consulting firm for the communications that led to a successful bond passage.

Nevertheless, ongoing community support should not be taken for granted. One vitally important component to nurturing that support is a consistent and thoughtful effort at engaging stakeholders on the business and finance side of district operations.

In addition to the finance-related action steps outlined in [Recommendation 6](#), consider these suggestions to move BSD from Established to Exemplary in this critical function area:

- Make the Superintendent's Community Advisory Council (S-CAC) a permanent, standing committee. Use it as a Key Communicator Network to build understanding and support for district initiatives.
- Ensure that the messages and information shared with the S-CAC is also shared widely with internal audiences.

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## Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you perceive as the Bellevue School District's strengths? What are the areas needing improvement?
2. What is the current image of your school district in the community? What one or two words or short phrase would you use to describe the district and schools to someone new to your community?
3. How do you get important news and information about issues affecting students, schools and the district?
  - Are there specific publications/e-communications tools that are helpful and informative? How can they be improved?
  - Do the district/school websites provide the information you want and need? Are they easy to navigate? How can they be improved?
  - Do the district's social media channels provide the information you want and need? How can they be improved?
4. In some previous surveys, the district has found that people prefer text messages as a source of information. Do you agree with that finding? How might the district improve its usage of text messaging?
5. What does the district do well when it comes to communicating on important issues that affect schools such as potential budget cuts and COVID-related issues? How might the district improve on that? Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?
6. What does the district do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis? How might the district improve on that?
7. When district 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? What makes you feel that way? If not, how would you like to provide your input?
8. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the district?

### Additional Questions: Staff

9. How do district communications affect your ability to be successful in your job? Are there any areas where you need more communications support?
10. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community? Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

## 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 advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts. The vast majority of NSPRA members are school communication professionals working in public school districts. Members also work in educational service agencies, education associations or state departments of education.

With over 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual NSPRA National Seminar, maintain best practice resource files and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA 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, we have completed comprehensive [communication audits](#) to analyze the effectiveness of their overall communication programs and to recommend strategies for improving and enhancing their efforts.

The [NSPRA National Seminar](#), the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each

July. This four-day conference offers expert speakers on dozens of topics in the areas of school communication, PR, marketing and engagement.

NSPRA members can continue their professional development year round through a variety of electronic and print publications:

- The *NSPRA Network* e-newsletter tackles major education communication issues and offers proven strategies to address them.
- Our e-updates, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor* and *NSPRA Alert*, offer summaries of breaking national education news, in-depth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products and services available.
- *PRincipal Communicator* is a monthly building-level print newsletter that provides practical communication tips for school principals to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.
- *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

At [www.nspr.org](http://www.nspr.org), NSPRA offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public website and more in-depth information, resources and archives in a Members Only section.

The members-only benefit [NSPRA Connect](#) is an online community forum that allows members to connect with and learn from one another while sharing ideas, uploading resources and providing counsel through a robust discussion forum.

[NSPRA has 33 chapters](#) across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for

members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

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 launch the rededication of America's commitment to education and a democratic, free society.

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

## Join NSPRA

To join this vibrant, national association and reap the benefits of being an NSPRA member, visit [www.nspra.org/membership](http://www.nspra.org/membership).

## Auditors' Vitae

### **Carol Fenstermacher, APR** **Consultant auditor**

Carol Fenstermacher, APR, is the chief communications officer for the Centennial School District in Portland, Oregon.

Prior to Centennial, she worked in the Evergreen School District in Vancouver, Washington, for 14 years as the director of community relations. She has also worked for the City of Portland as a communications specialist, the Portland Rose Festival Association as the community relations director and United Way of the Columbia-Willamette as the assistant vice president of communication and marketing. She started working on a local newspaper her senior year in college and reported on sports and business.

A member of NSPRA since 1999, Carol has served on the Executive Board Search Committee, School Communication Benchmarking Project Team, the Communication Equity and Diversity Task Force and was the Northwest Region vice president from 2012 – 15 and NSPRA president in 2018-19. She served on the board of the Washington School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) and was on the board of and is a member of the Oregon School Public Relations Association (OSPRA.)

Carol received her Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) in 2004. She has served on a variety of boards, including the local Habitat for Humanity, DePaul Treatment Centers, Oregon Repertory Singers, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), KBPS Public Radio, the Oregon Chapter of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Women in Communications, Inc., where she was president of the Portland Chapter and the international president in 1994-95.

### **Steve Mulvenon, Ph.D.** **Lead consultant auditor**

Dr. Steve Mulvenon has a 42-year career in public education as a high school teacher, debate coach and administrator. He spent 24 years as the director of communications and community outreach for the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada. In that leadership position, he successfully oversaw the passage of four bond issues, started the district's school-business partnership program, launched the first district website, began a comprehensive community engagement process (for which the district received NSPRA's highest award, the Gold Medallion), a parent involvement program, and oversaw the move into a coordinated social media program. He also served as the district's principal media spokesman.

Before moving to Nevada, Steve held a similar position with the Salina Public Schools in Kansas, serving as its first director of public information. He served two years as the president of the Kansas School Public Relations Association (KanSPRA). While in Kansas, he also served for two years as the director of admissions for Marymount College.

Steve has been a presenter at various national conferences, including the NSPRA National Seminar, the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association annual conferences. He has authored articles for NSPRA publications and conducted multiple communication audits. He also has taught graduate-level classes in school/community relations for both the University of Nevada's College of Education and the Reno campus of the University of Phoenix.

In 2009, he was honored by the Sierra Nevada Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) with induction into its Hall of Fame.



## Communication Audit Report

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**National School Public Relations Association**

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org) |  NSPRAssociation |  nspra