

the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report

Darlington County School District

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Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Darlington County School District (DCSD) has contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for an in-depth, independent review of the school district's overall communication program. The NSPRA Communication Audit process helps to identify the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in a school communication program through an extensive research process that includes:

- A review of print and digital communication materials, tools and tactics;
- Quantitative research through the surveying of district staff (instructional, support, administrative, etc.), parents/caregivers and community members; and
- Qualitative research through focus groups with these same audiences and through interviews with staff who perform formal communication functions for the district.

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

The results of this process are shared in four main sections of the report:

- The Key Findings section provides details about what was learned through the review of materials and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.
- A SWOT Analysis distills these findings into the district's primary internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats related to its communication goals.
- The Benchmarking of Results section reflects how the district's communication program compares to other districts on nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey questions and national standards of excellence in school public relations, as outlined in NSPRA's *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*.
- The Recommendations section details suggested strategies and tactics for addressing identified communication gaps and for enhancing effective strategies already in place.

Report Synopsis

Following is an overview of this report. As with all school systems, DCSD has areas in which it excels as well as areas where improvements can be made. For a full understanding of what was learned, the rationale behind the resulting recommendations and what will be required to implement those steps, it is recommended that the report be read in its entirety.

Key Strengths of the Current Communication Program

- All stakeholder groups rate satisfaction with DCSD communications highly, and the district scores at or above national averages in 84 of 85 areas on NSPRA's SCOPE Survey Scorecard, which measures communication reach and effectiveness compared to districts nationwide.
- Director of Communications Audrey Childers and Communications Manager Chris McKagen both have deep roots in the community and are strongly committed to making improvements to an already strong communications program. Both have earned high levels of trust and respect for keeping parents, employees and the community informed of all information related to the district.
- Employees and the parents of enrolled students uniformly praised the district for its caring, skilled teachers and the

breadth of opportunities the district offers students, demonstrating a high awareness of the district's strengths and the benefits its programs bring to students.

- The Office of Communications has a comprehensive communication plan that includes many effective tactics and keeps stakeholders well-informed of district news and information.
- Superintendent Dr. Timothy Newman and district leaders are committed to investing in communication and providing the department with adequate staffing and communication tools.

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- The district excels at sharing information with parents and employees but lacks an overall, research-based communications strategy that sets measurable objectives based on research and tied to the district's strategic goals.
- A gap exists regarding the perceived quality of DCSD schools between employees/parents and those in the broader community who have no direct experience with the district.
- Some business and community leaders are unaware of the excellent work occurring in DCSD schools, including the range of opportunities, and do not recognize a cohesive strategy in the district's academic programs and services.
- The Office of Communications is praised for its excellent work, but outside the department's purview, communication is not effectively incorporated into other areas of district operations.
- Internal communication infrastructure inefficiencies have contributed to perceptions that the district does not release information in a timely and transparent manner.
- District leaders expressed concern that negative coverage of the public school system in the national media has led to the local community having negative perceptions of the schools.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing the DCSD communication program. For each recommendation, a series of practical action steps based on industry best practices, award-winning strategies and innovative approaches to communications are included in the report.

1. Update and enhance DCSD's communication plan.
2. Elevate the perception of DCSD schools through branding, marketing and storytelling.
3. Expand communications and outreach efforts that build community awareness of DCSD's accomplishments.
4. Strategically engage families and the wider community through enhanced social media content.
5. Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's internal communications infrastructure.
6. Increase transparency and trust by focusing on two-way communication in decision-making processes.

Implementing these recommendations is a long-term process that will involve everyone responsible for communicating in DCSD, not just communications staff. *It is generally not feasible to address more than two to three recommendations each year*, but this report offers ideas for quick improvements without a significant investment of resources as well as opportunities to rethink existing practices.

Introduction

The Environmental Setting for Communications

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

About the District

Darlington County School District (DCSD) serves just under 9,000 Pre-K-12 and Adult Education students in 20 schools in Darlington County, South Carolina, located about 75 miles northeast of the state capital in Columbia and northwest of Myrtle Beach.

According to the South Carolina Department of Education, enrollment in the district has declined by more than 1,000 students since the 2017-18 school year. In recent years, several new private and charter schools have opened in the region, enrolling students who may have otherwise enrolled in DCSD.

Darlington County includes four municipalities—the cities of Darlington and Hartsville, and the towns of Lamar and Society Hill—and covers more than 500 square miles. According to the U.S. Census, Darlington County has a total population of about 62,000 residents. Demographic data from the census, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) reflect the following:

- 34 percent of DCSD students are white (SCDE) compared to 56 percent of county residents (U.S. Census).
- 50 percent of DCSD students are Black or African American (SCDE) compared to 42 percent of county residents (U.S. Census).
- 86 percent of county residents are high school graduates, and 19 percent are college-educated (U.S. Census).
- Median household income in Darlington County is just over $44,000, which is $20,000 to $30,000 lower than state and national median household income (NCES).
- 32 percent of families of students enrolled in DCSD have incomes below the poverty line (NCES).
- 47 percent of DCSD students live in single-parent households (NCES).
- 87 percent of households have a computer, but only 70 percent have a broadband connection, which is 17 percent lower than the national average (NCES).

DCSD is the largest employer in the county, with about 1,650 employees. (Other significant employers in the county include Georgia Pacific, Duke Energy, Sunoco and Nucor Steel.) The district has an annual operating budget of approximately $100 million, and it has been led by Superintendent Timothy Newman, Ed.D., since June 2018.

Along with the eight-member DCSD Board of Education, Dr. Newman is leading the implementation of the district's five year strategic plan for 2023-24 to 2028-2029. The

DARLINGTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

plan includes among its four goals to "ensure all resources are aligned to create an environment that fosters success for all" (goal 4). In support of that goal, the plan explains that the district aims to "strengthen external communications to support the district's vision and mission" in part through an "external communications audit to acquire best practices."

About the Office of Communications

DCSD's Office of Communications is led by Audrey Childers, who has served as director of communications since August 2002. She supervises Communications Manager Chris McKagen and Administrative Assistant Brittany Cade. Childers reports to Dr. Newman and serves on his Senior Leadership Team.

Responsibilities of the director of communications, updated in 2022, are wide-ranging and include duties such as:

- Managing the day-to-day operations of the Office of Communications;
- Developing and managing an annual communication and marketing plan;
- Serving as a strategic advisor to the superintendent, leadership team, principals and district staff;
- Providing support and direction to district departments and schools in communications;
- Serving as a district spokesperson;
- Developing and sustaining relationships with community, employee and public interest groups;
- Crafting and managing the district's communication messages, including during crisis situations, through various traditional and digital means for both internal and external audiences; and
- Contributing to the district's overall communications and branding efforts.

Responsibilities of the communications manager include duties such as:

- Overseeing media relations and writing news releases;
- Serving as district webmaster and social media coordinator, managing district and school websites, while providing training/technical support to site administrators;
- Serving as backup to the director of communications;
- Collaborating, creating, revising and editing district crisis communication plans, publications, etc.;
- Serving as district videographer and photographer;
- Coordinating and implementing new digital communication tools; and
- Planning, documenting and/or publicizing events and recognitions.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Process

NSPRA's mission is to develop professionals to communicate strategically, build trust and foster positive relationships in support of their school communities. As the leader in school communication™ since 1935, NSPRA provides school communication training, services and national awards programs to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

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

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

The development of any effective communication program begins with research. Therefore, the first step of the process is to seek data, opinion and perceptions. The process for this research is detailed in the following section, and the results of this research can be found in the Key Findings.

Based on the research findings, the auditor identifies common themes and makes general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the communication program. The auditor then uses this information to develop Recommendations designed to help the district address communication challenges and enhance areas of strength. **Each of the customized recommendations are accompanied by practical, realistic action steps grounded in today's public relations and communications best practices**, as reflected within NSPRA's 2023 edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* benchmarking publication.

It is important to note that the primary goal of any communication program is to help the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, the auditor developed each recommendation in light of the district's mission, vision, beliefs and goals as outlined in DCSD's strategic plan. The result is a report that will provide DCSD with a launching point for improving and enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

Research Components

The NSPRA Communication Audit process incorporates three methods of research to capture both qualitative and quantitative data.

Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the Office of Communications submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences, including the district's strategic plan, the communication plan, district organizational charts and job descriptions, samples of communications produced by the Office of Communications and schools, social media and website analytics and more. The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor's review of websites and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content.

SCOPE Survey

NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communications Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked survey was conducted for DCSD from Feb. 8 – March 3, 2024. Its questions seek to understand:

- How people currently get information and how they prefer to receive it.
- How informed they are in key areas such as leader decisions, district plans and district finances.
- Perceptions about what opportunities exist to seek information, provide input and become involved.
- Perceptions about whether communications are understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

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

Responses to the SCOPE Survey resulted in attaining the following confidence intervals (aka, margin of error) for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the district and using the industry standard equation for reliability.

- **Parent Survey:**
  - 319 surveys completed
  - ±5.5 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)
- **Faculty/Staff Survey:**
  - 307 surveys completed
  - ± 5.6 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)
- **Community survey:**
  - 31 surveys completed
  - ± 17.6 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met, no significant findings included in report based solely on community survey responses due to low participation)

This same survey has been administered to more than 100 school districts across the United States, and the Benchmarking of Results section includes the SCOPE Scorecard, which compares DCSD's SCOPE Survey results with those of other districts that have conducted the survey.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit process is the focus groups component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent, director of communications and communication manager on April 9-10, 2024.

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

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

- Support staff
- Principals
- Central office managers
- Teachers
- Community members with no students enrolled in the district
- Business leaders
- Community leaders
- Board members
- Students
- Parents

Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

The NSPRA team who delivered these communication audit services included the following:

- Communication Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR
- Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR
- Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR
- Communication Specialist Alyssa Teribury

The team's vitae are included in the Appendix of this report.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the DCSD Board of Education, the superintendent and the communications team, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its constituents. It is intended to build on the positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Office of Communications by suggesting options for strengthening the overall communication program.

Adhering to public relations standards is crucial for effective school communication strategies. Thus, an effective strategy in one school system may be applicable in another. As a trusted leader in school communication, NSPRA advocates for established industry best practices in school public relations. While our communication audit findings are unique to each school system and our recommendations are tailored to those findings, industry best practices are applicable to and may be recommended across multiple school systems. With that in mind, the recommendations included in this report are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking DCSD's communication program to the next level.

When reviewing the report, it is important to acknowledge that:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Office of Communications** by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. The recommendations included here are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking DCSD communication program to the next level.
- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.
- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit: Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. As NSPRA audits only school communication programs, the findings in this report center on opinions and perceptions related to communications, but survey and focus group participants may have commented on areas and individuals outside of the scope of this audit.
- **Perceptions are just that.** Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.
- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditors' analysis,** and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time it is issued.

Next Steps

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Implementation of the recommendations should be approached strategically, using this report as a road map and taking the following into consideration:

Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.
- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority,** but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Office of Communications.** NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the Office of Communications, others may apply to additional departments or all staff.
- **Look for opportunities for immediate improvement and to rethink existing practices.** Action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the school or the Office of Communications and still pay quick dividends are noted as "quick wins" with the symbol at right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task or process that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders' feedback and the auditor's analysis. These are noted with the symbol shown to the left.





- **Some recommendations may require additional staff capacity or financial resources** to undertake while maintaining existing communication activities.

Sharing the Report

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that DCSD share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward.

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

NSPRA's auditing team can provide suggestions and examples for how this report could be effectively shared with various internal and external constituencies.

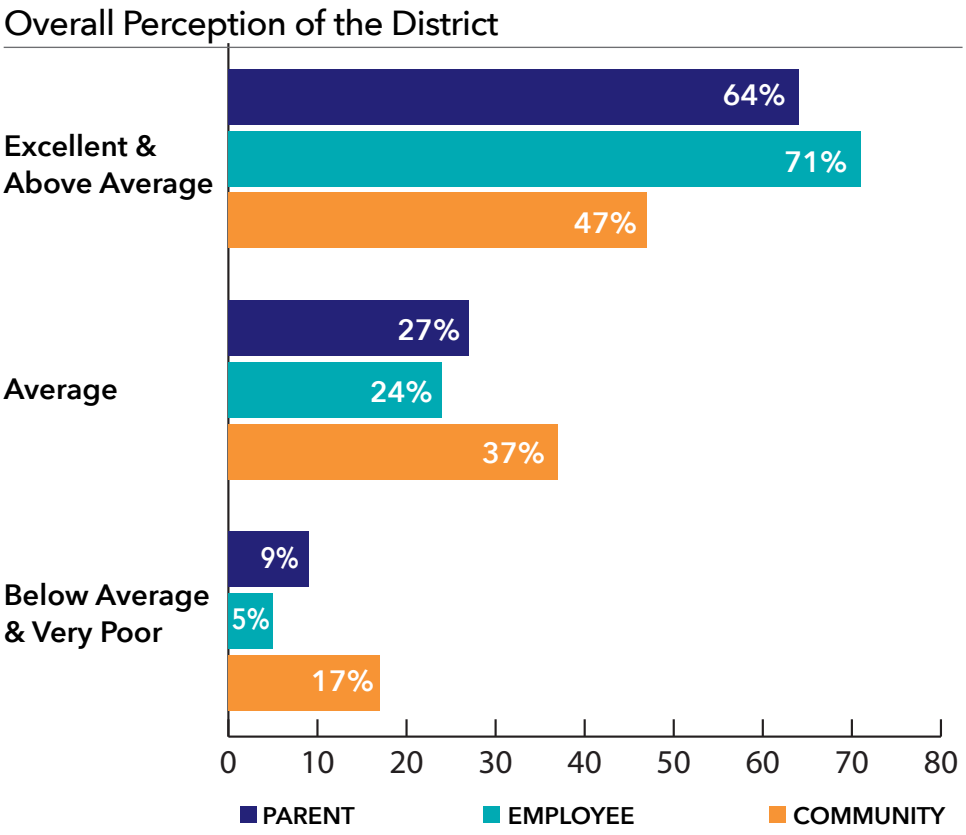
Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the SCOPE Survey, focus group discussions, interviews with district leaders and review of district materials. This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the DCSD's image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders. Conversely, the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals. When reviewing survey data charts, please note that percentages sometimes may not total 100 due to rounding or respondents' ability to select more than one response to a question.

District Image/Brand

- On the SCOPE Survey, when participants were asked to rate their overall perception of the district, 64 percent of parents, 71 percent of employees and 47 percent of community members rated the district as excellent or above average.

  When those responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCOPE Survey results of more than 100 districts nationwide (see SCOPE Scorecards), DCSD's ratings are above the national average for all stakeholder groups surveyed.



Overall Perception of District	DCSD	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	3.8	3.7	2.6	4.3
Employees	3.9	3.6	2.3	4.2
Community	3.4	3.3	2.1	4.3

- **When asked about the image of DCSD during focus groups, auditors noticed a difference in perceptions between internal audiences and external audiences that mirrored the data in the SCOPE Survey.** While parents of enrolled students and employees praised the district, residents with no students enrolled and community and business leaders expressed concerns about the quality of the schools. A staff member commented, "People literally move here for our schools." Yet, a business leader said, "There is a perception that families with school-aged children shouldn't move to Darlington." Other typical comments included:
  - "It's difficult to recruit white-collar employees to this area and a lot of it […] is because of the schools." (business leader)
  - "When we're trying to bring in staff and they compare us to [a neighboring district], 99 percent of the time, they opt to go to the [neighboring district]." (business leader)
- **During focus group conversations, district leaders noted a "gap between reality and perception**," suggesting that those with no district affiliation are unaware of the high quality of education occurring inside the school buildings. Education examples shared by some leaders include a career development program with internships; magnet programs in math, technology, biomedical innovation and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme; and an eSports program.
  - At least some of the gap was attributed to a national loss of confidence in public schools: "We're fighting a larger public education battle. We are [dealing with] a lot of societal problems we don't have control over."
  - Another participant noted that a neighboring district is often lauded for programs that are also offered at DCSD, but the community is unaware of the DCSD programs. "We communicate well to people who are here, but not to people coming into the community. The message is not getting out to our businesses. The general public doesn't think we are focused on developing a workforce."
- **A focus group of teachers expressed a belief that DCSD is "one of the best districts" in the state, citing caring staff and a wide variety of opportunities for students**, but they also noted a lack of awareness about the district's strengths in the broader community. Comments such as the following were typical:
  - "I don't think we do a good job of getting out the amazing things that are happening here." (teacher)
  - "If you're not connected to the school in some way, you don't know how good the schools are." (teacher)
- **Members of the community with no students enrolled who participated in the focus groups were positive about the district's image**, noting, "We have a lot of new buildings in all the various communities, and test scores are better than surrounding districts."
  - A participant from a local corporation felt that the large corporations in the community get involved with schools because they perceive it to be good for business, but small businesses have not shown as much interest in supporting the schools.
- **When asked about the strengths of DCSD, focus group participants in nearly every group most often named caring teachers, focus on students and the breadth of opportunities.** A district leader noted, "We are laser-focused on identifying where students are and how we move them, how

we grow them, on a weekly basis. Our teachers and staff get the very most out of each student."

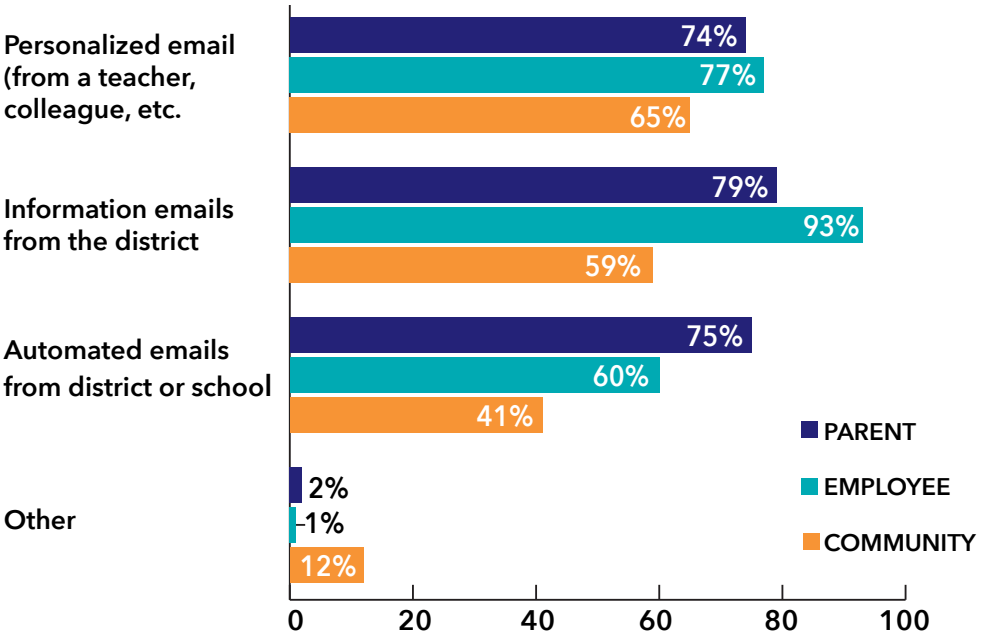
- **Numerous district leaders felt that an exodus out of the area and increased competition from charter and private schools has contributed to an enrollment decline** that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comments related to communications and marketing included:
  - "We need to communicate more about why people need to come to our school. We are all feeling the pressure [to address enrollment decline]."
  - "Private schools are beating us at our game. Private schools cannot compete with the resources and opportunities we have, but they have the relationship game down and we do not."
- **Independent school ratings systems commonly used by real estate agents provide prospective families the following information about DCSD schools**:
  - Niche.com rates DCSD overall and most schools at a B (on the A-F scale) and rates the district as 11 out of 76 for the best places to teach in South Carolina (https://www.niche.com/k12/d/darlington-county-school-district-sc/#schools). DCSD's page includes 55 reviews of the district, 42 of which are excellent or very good.
  - GreatSchools.org does not assign a numeric ranking to the district overall but it rates most DCSD schools at a 6, 5 or 4 out of 10 (https://www.greatschools.org/south-carolina/darlington/darlington-01-school-district/?searchWhatType=autosuggest&searchLocationType=city&searchWhatKeywordValue=darlington). The district page features three recent reviews, all of which are positive.
- In reviewing **the district's current brand identity elements and marketing efforts**, the auditor found the following:
  - The district's brand is currently represented by a logo that spells out the name of the district in a dark green and white color scheme, using an image of an apple for the "o" in Darlington. There is consideration among district leaders and communications staff for updating the logo in 2024-25.
  - There does not appear to be an official tagline that expresses the district's value proposition, and its mission statement, *Educate, empower, and prepare for an ever-changing world*, is not used in connection with branding on the website or in the district materials reviewed by the auditor.
  - The district does not appear to have branded, printed brochures or paid print/digital advertising to market enrollment to prospective families, but it does have a one-page flyer with information about Magnet Programs.

Communication Sources and Preferences

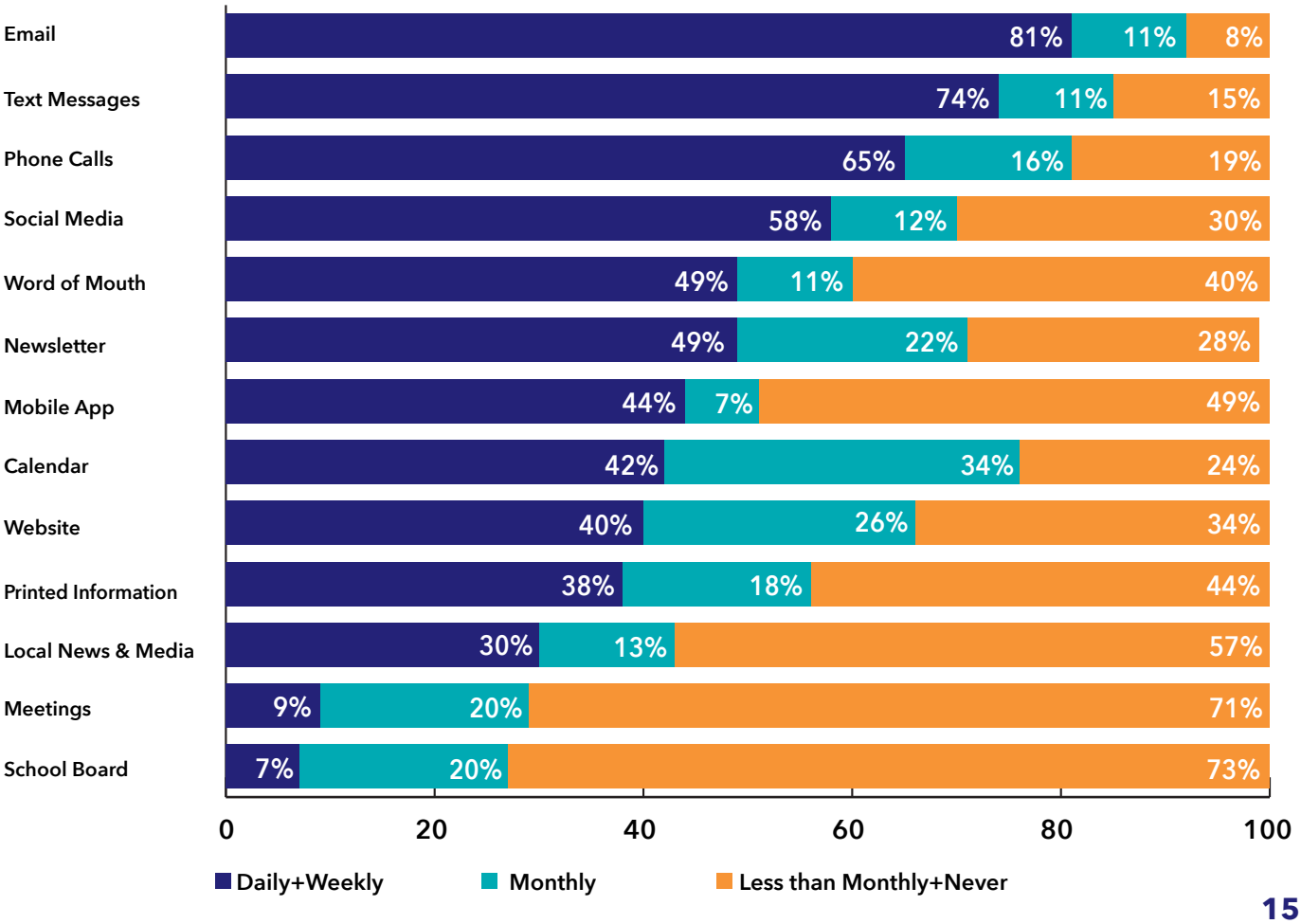
- **DCSD uses an array of sources to communicate news and information about the district**, including email, text messages, message apps, phone calls, social media, newsletters, a website and information provided to local media.
- The SCOPE Survey sought participants' insights on the frequency with which they rely on various sources to learn information about DCSD. The full results can be found on pages 15-17 and show that on a daily or weekly basis, the top sources of information vary by audience. The results for the top five sources are shown on page 16.

- When survey participants who use email as a frequent source of information about the district were asked which types of email they reference, **parents and employees rely most heavily on information emails from the district**, but also show a heavy reliance on personalized emails and automated emails. Community members rely most heavily on personalized emails.

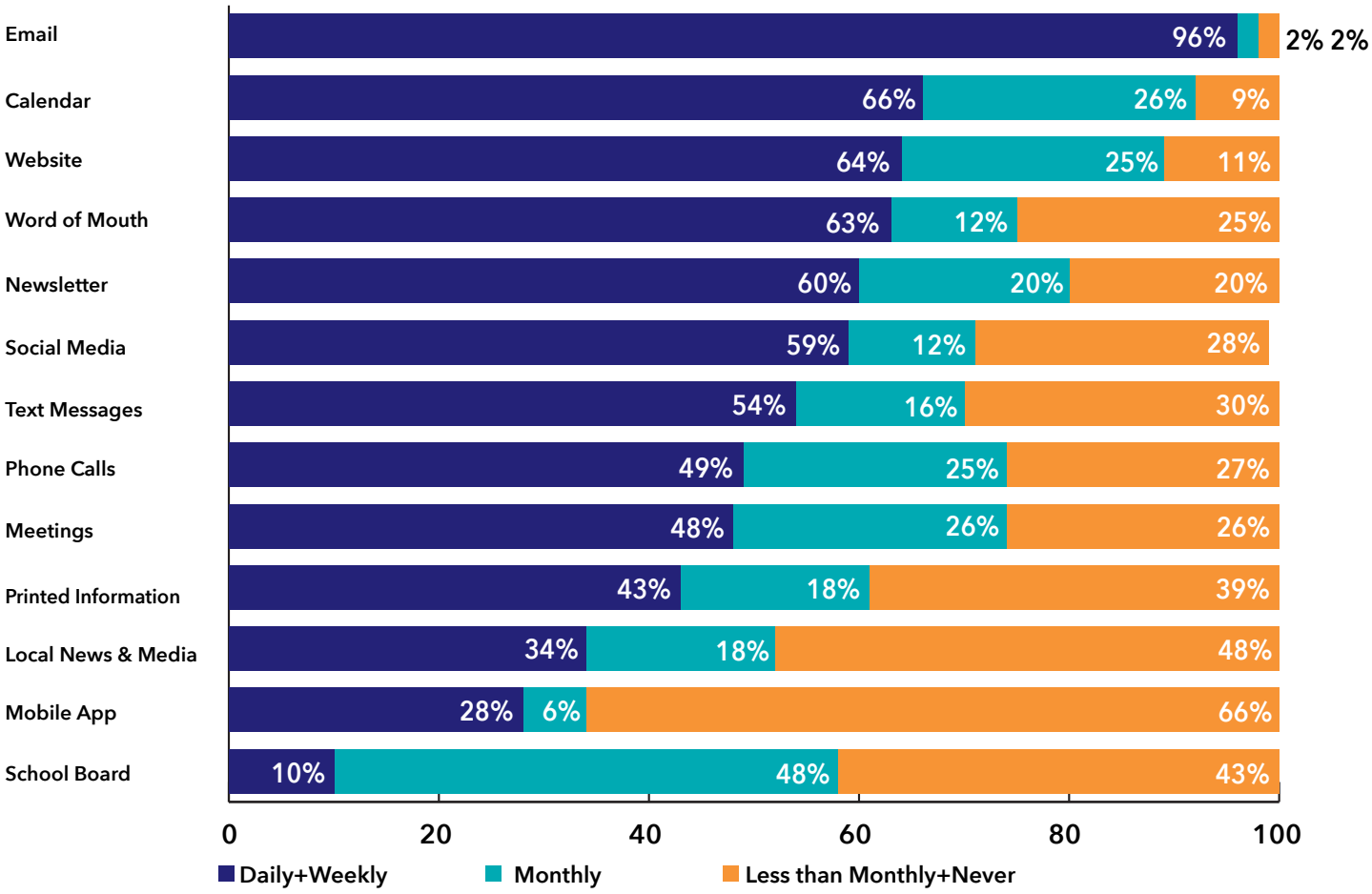
Which email do you use to get information about the district?



Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District – *Parents/Guardians*



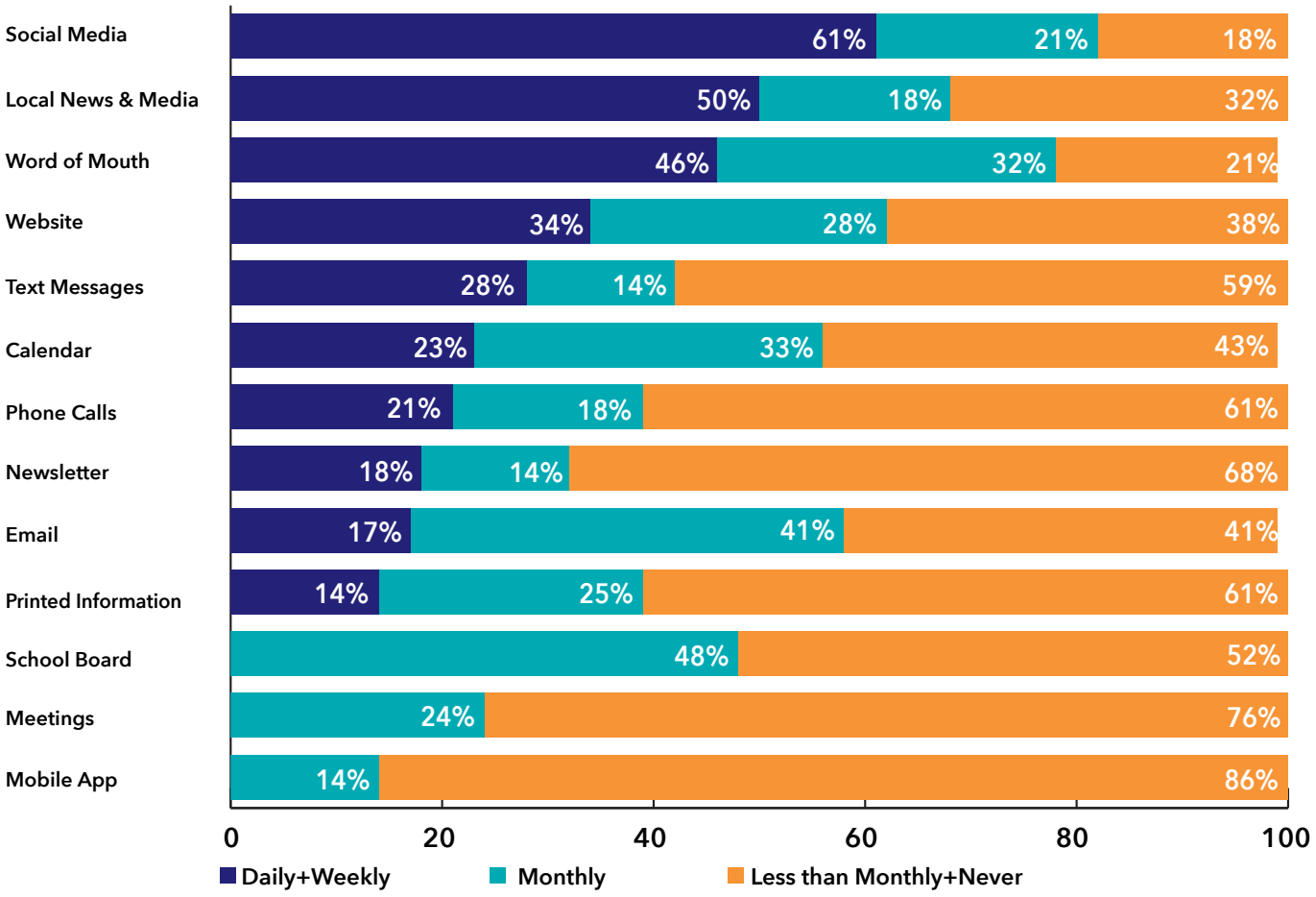
Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District – *Employees*



Top Five Most Frequent Sources for Information About the District

	Parents	Employees	Community
1	Email (81%)	Email (96%)	Social Media (61%)
2	Text Messages (74%)	Calendar (66%)	Local News (50%)
3	Phone Calls (65%)	Website (64%)	Word of Mouth (46%)
4	Social Media (58%)	Word of Mouth (63%)	Website (34%)
5	Word of Mouth (49%)	Newsletter (60%)	Text Messages (28%)

Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District – *Community*

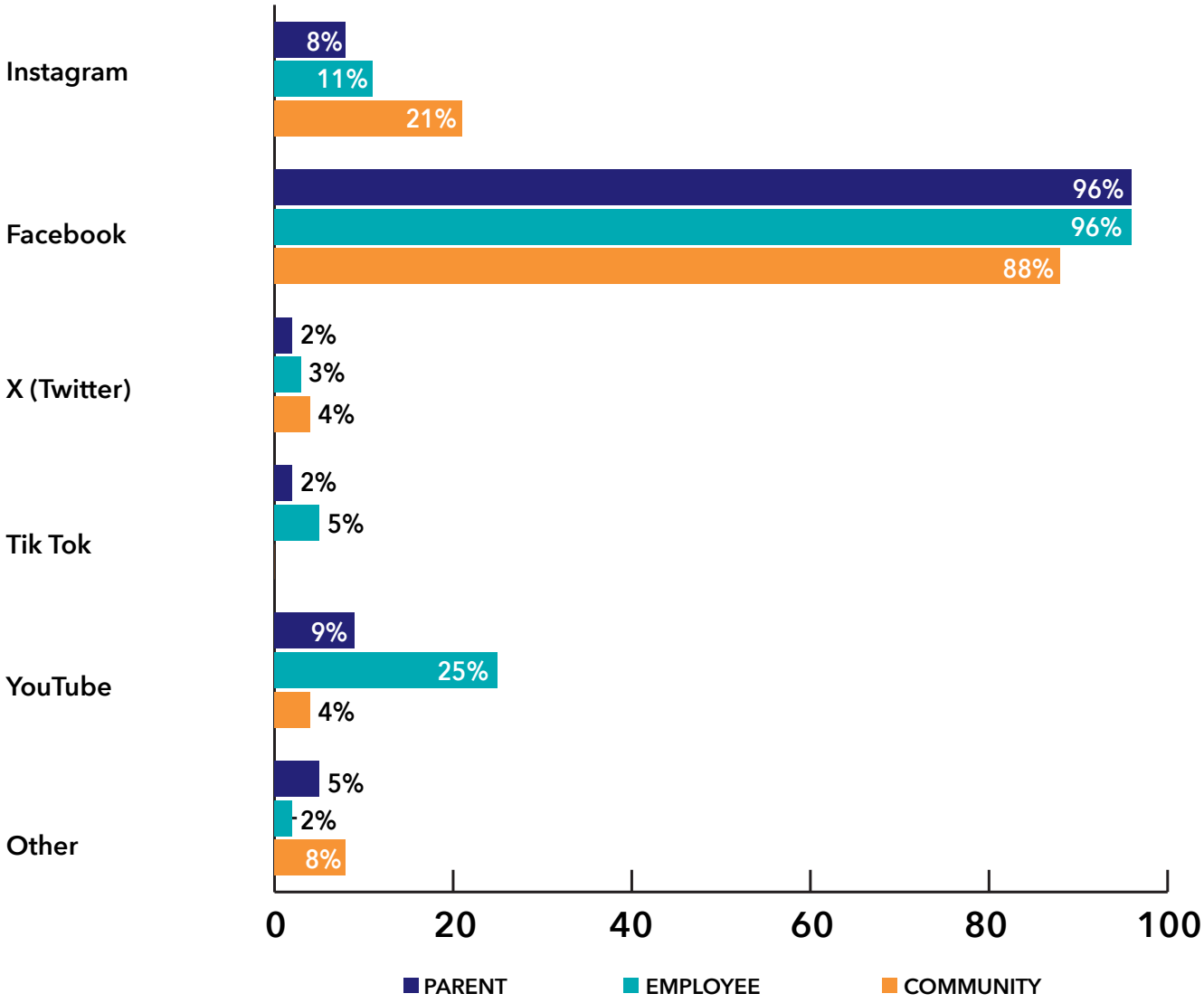


- **Social media is a more relied-upon source of information for DCSD parents, employees and community members than the national average for SCOPE Survey participants**, with 61 percent of DCSD community members, 59 percent of DCSD employees and 58 percent of DCSD parents indicating they use social media on a daily or weekly basis to learn information about the district, compared to 40 percent of parents, 39 percent of employees and 39 percent of community members nationwide. It is important to note that this may include social media accounts from individuals or other organizations; it is not solely based on district accounts.

Percent of Stakeholders Who Use Social Media on a Daily/Weekly Basis to Learn about the District

Stakeholder Group	DCSD	National Average
Parents	**58%**	**40%**
Employees	**59%**	**39%**
Community	**61%**	**59%**

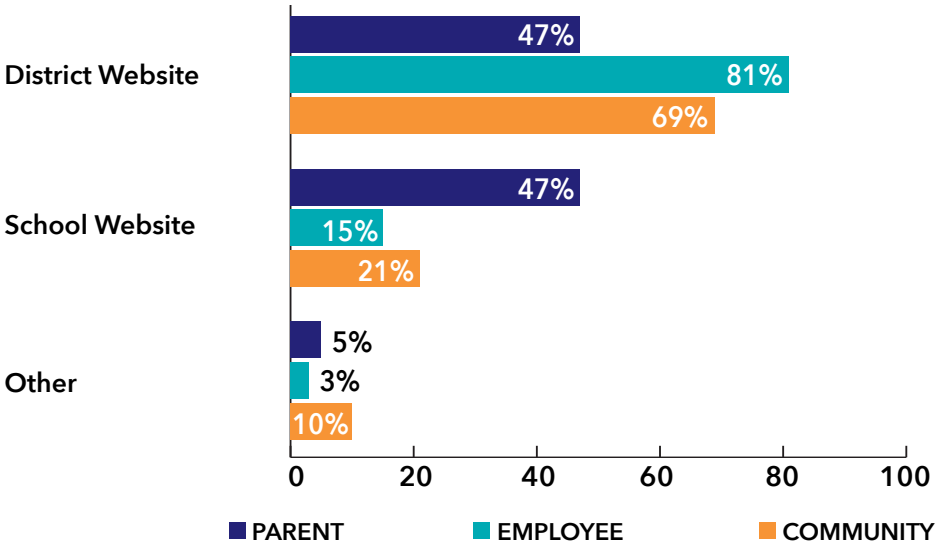
Which social media platforms do you use for school related information?



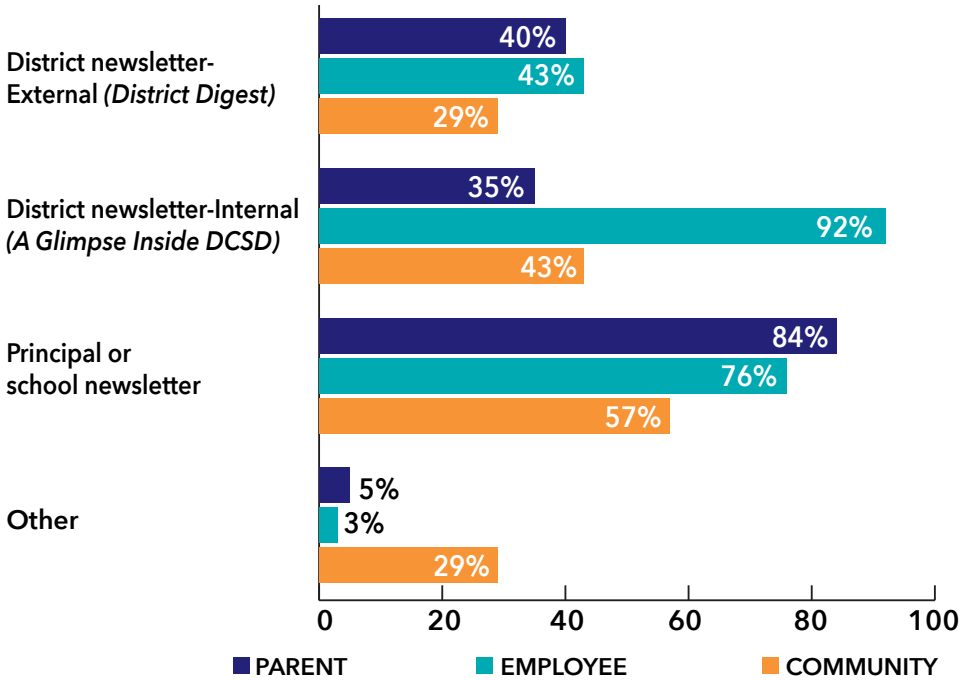
- **Participants in a focus group of community members reinforced the importance of social media, indicating that Facebook and Instagram are their primary sources of information about the district.** "We haven't had a 'regular paper' [in Darlington] for five years," by which the auditors understood them to mean a paper that is published daily. The remaining local papers are currently published on a weekly basis. Members in this focus group also expressed their desire for other ways to learn about the district, noting that not everyone has internet service and many of the students in the district are being raised by grandparents who may not be as tech-savvy as younger parents.
- Of DCSD stakeholders who use social media daily or weekly for information about the district, Facebook is by far the most popular platform, as shown above.
- **Parents rely equally on the district and school websites**, and employees rely more heavily on the district website, as shown in the top chart on page 19.

- **Survey participants who use newsletters as a frequent source of information** about the district were asked which types of newsletters they reference. Results indicate that 92 percent of employees read *A Glimpse Inside* (a compilation of school Facebook posts), 40 percent of parents and 43 percent of employees read the district newsletter *District Digest*, 84 percent of parents read a principal or school newsletter, and interestingly, 57 percent of community members also read a principal or school newsletter as shown in the middle chart at right.
- **Parents in DCSD rely more heavily on phone calls for information about the district than parents nationwide who have participated in the SCOPE Survey.** In DCSD, phone calls are the third most frequent source of information for parents, with 65 percent of parents saying they use phone calls on a daily or weekly basis to get information about DCSD, as shown in the bottom chart at right. Nationally, phone calls are the 10th most-frequent source of information for parents, 20 percent of whom use phone calls for information about their district or schools on a daily or weekly basis.

Which website do you use to get information about the district?



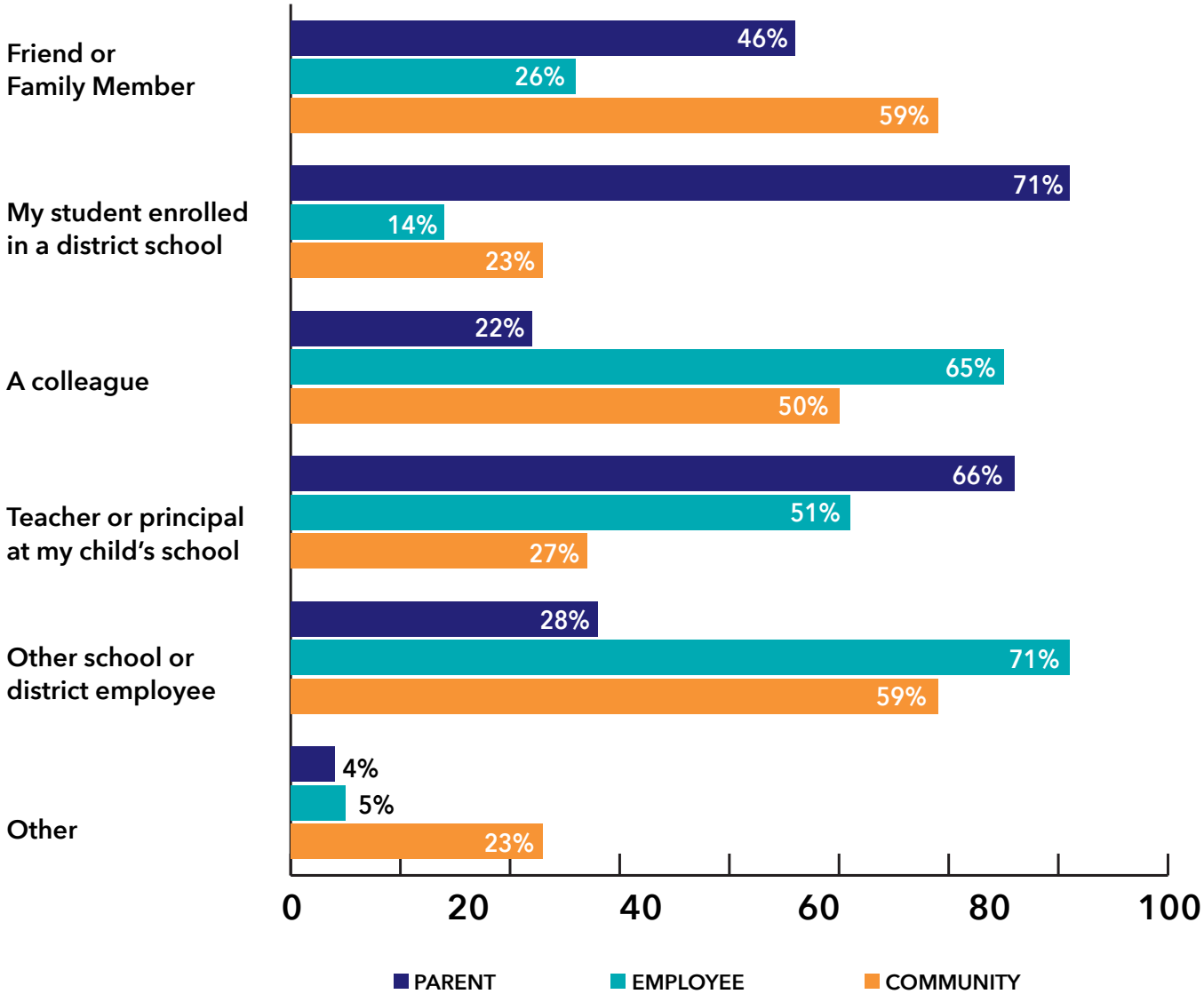
Which newsletter do you use to get information about the district?



Parents: Phone Calls as Source of District Info	DCSD Parents	National Average of SCOPE Parents
Percent who use phone calls daily or weekly	**65%**	**20%**
Rank as source of information	**3rd**	**10th**

- Survey participants who frequently rely on what other people tell them for information about the district were asked who their sources of information are. As shown in the chart below, parents lean most heavily on their students for information, employees rely most heavily on other employees, and community members rely most heavily on what a friend or family member or school/district employee tells them.
- **NSPRA used Meltwater, a media monitoring service, to analyze news coverage of DCSD from March 31, 2023, to April 1, 2024**. Meltwater's analysis of the "sentiment" of these articles, as shown in the pie chart on page 21, finds that

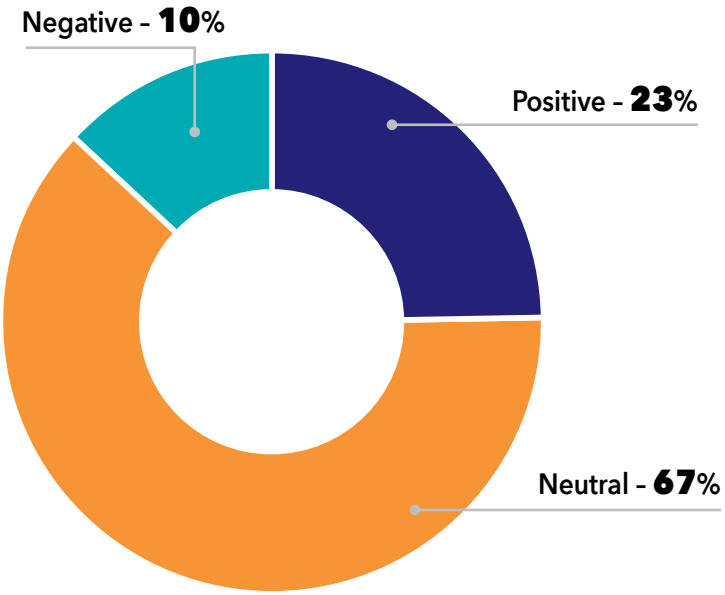
Who tells you information about the district?



67 percent of the stories were neutral, 23 percent were positive, and 10 percent were negative. Meltwater's sentiment analysis algorithm classifies articles as neutral if they are reported accurately and objectively. It identifies sentiment through keywords linked to emotions; if clear sentiment isn't detected, it defaults to neutral. Thus, positive news stories might be categorized as 'neutral' due to their objective tone.

- During the yearlong analysis, 231 news articles or TV stories mentioned DCSD. The majority of coverage was by newspapers, with the *Florence Morning News*, *The Darlington County News & Press*, and *The Post and Courier* representing the bulk of news coverage of the district.
- 103 TV news stories mentioned the district, the majority of which were from stations covering Myrtle Beach, Florence, Pee Dee, and Grand Strand.
- Unusually large spikes in coverage occurred on Oct. 1, 2023, when news coverage of a Darlington High School student who died in a car crash was covered by media around the country, and on Oct. 10, 2023, after a shooting occurred in the parking lot of the Darlington-Lee Adult Education campus in Darlington. These two stories accounted for 35 of the total news articles published.
- Positive articles focused primarily on staff and student awards and achievements, improvement in district test scores, and news related to school sports.

- **Teachers and schools previously used the Remind app for school and classroom communications, but the district switched to ClassTag in 2023-24 to address security concerns.** Numerous focus group participants, including students, perceive



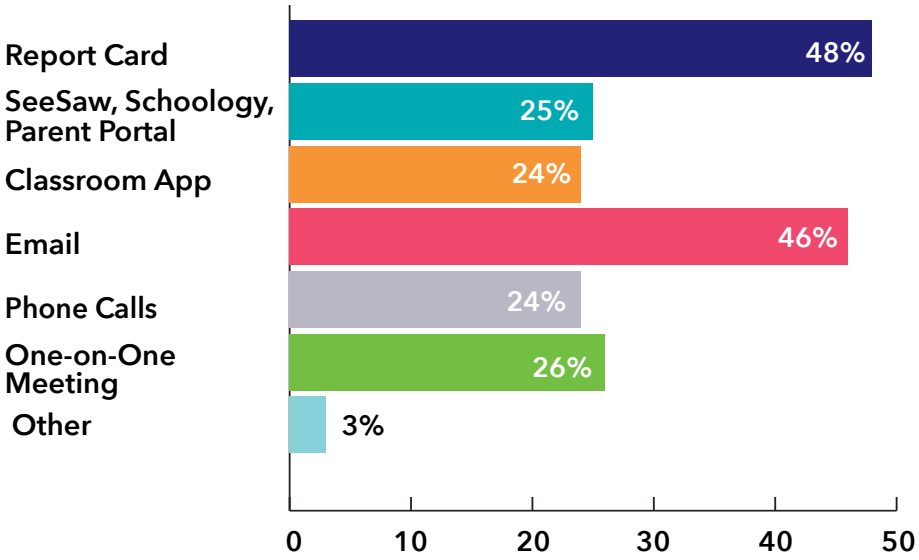
ClassTag to be less effective than Remind. Frequent comments included:

- "I send stuff out on ClassTag, but if parents don't have their phone numbers right, they don't get it, but I have no way of knowing who got it and who didn't." (teacher)
- "My teachers don't know how to use Class Tag. Some don't even use it and post assignments with Schoology." (student)

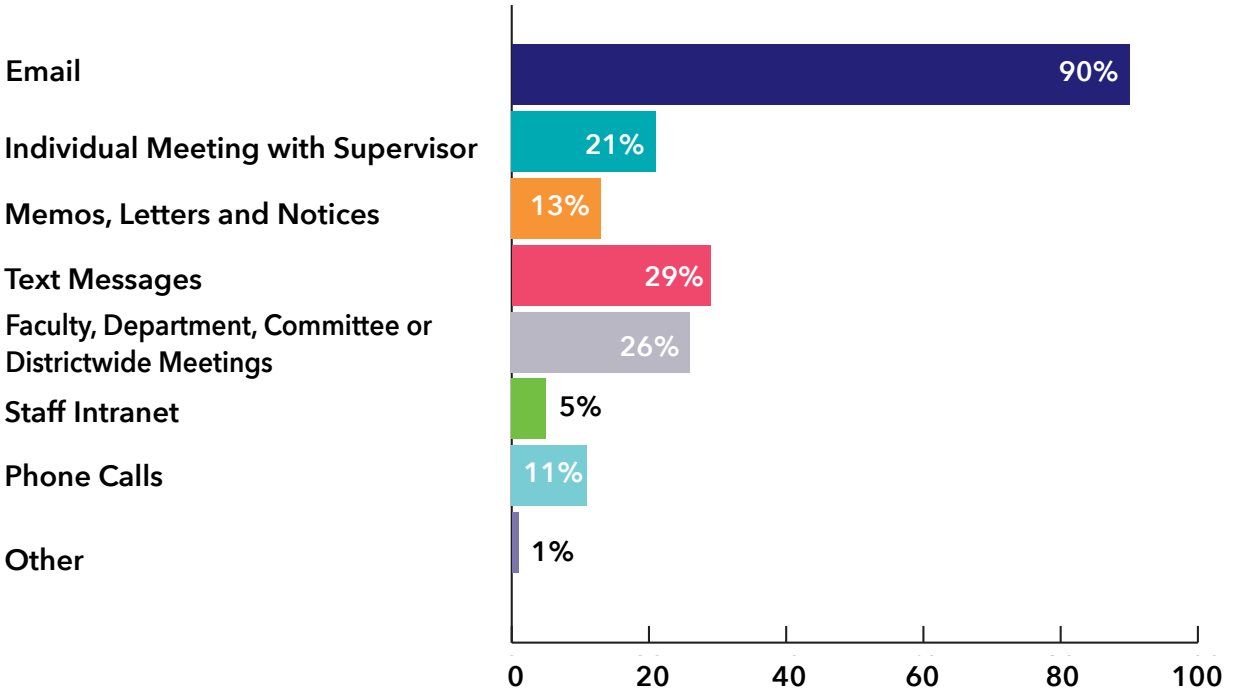
- **Parents, employees and community members rely on different communication sources depending on the type of information they are seeking,** as shown in the detailed SCOPE Survey report.
  - Parents, employees and community members all prefer email as their top source of information for all but emergency communications, for which they prefer text messages.
  - Although social media is a frequently-used source of information about DCSD, it ranks lower as a preferred source of information for all stakeholder groups, than email, text messages and automated calls.

- When parents were asked how they prefer to receive information about their student's progress and how to best support their learning, email and report cards are rated the most highly, as shown at right.
- When staff were asked to identify their preferred methods for receiving information to help them perform their duties and support student learning, email received the highest rating, as shown below.

Parents' preferred methods of communication for information on student progress

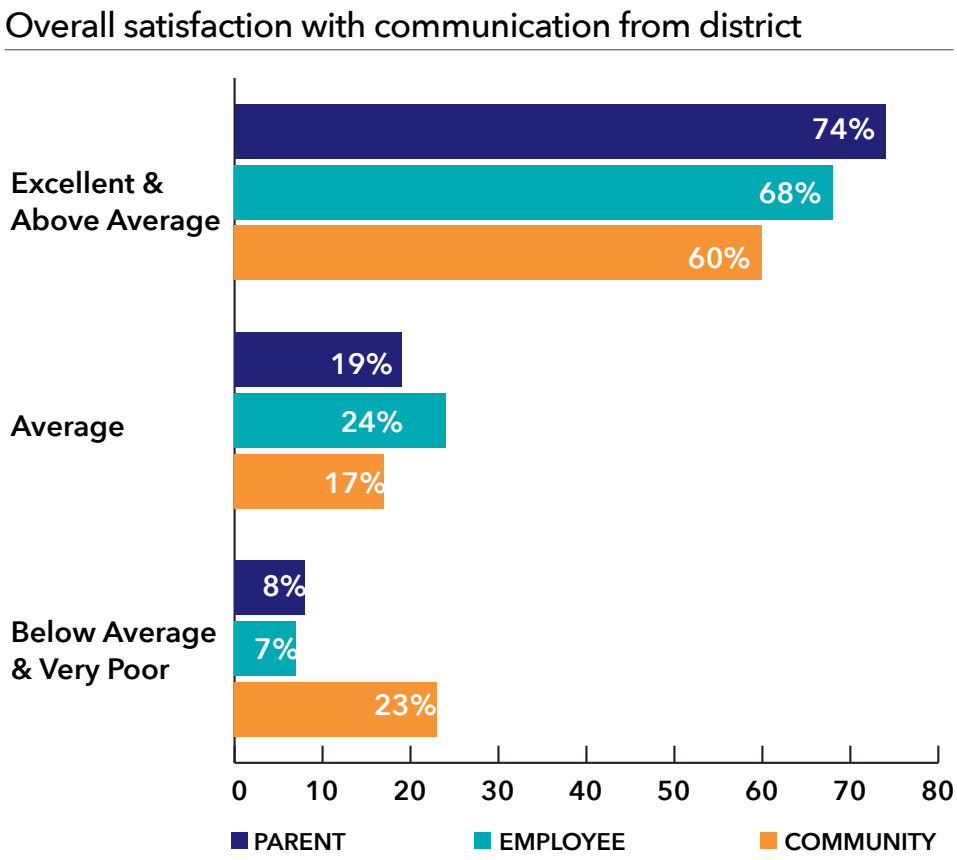


Employees' preferred methods of communication for information related to employees duties



Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- Parents showed the highest levels of satisfaction with communication of all DCSD stakeholder groups surveyed. When SCOPE Survey participants were asked to give an overall rating for their satisfaction with communication from the district, 74 percent of parents, 68 percent of employees, and 60 percent of community members rated DCSD communication as excellent or above average.



When those responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCOPE Survey results of more than 100 school districts nationwide, DCSD's ratings for overall satisfaction with communication are above the national average for all stakeholders groups and approaching the highest score for parents nationwide, as shown in the chart below.

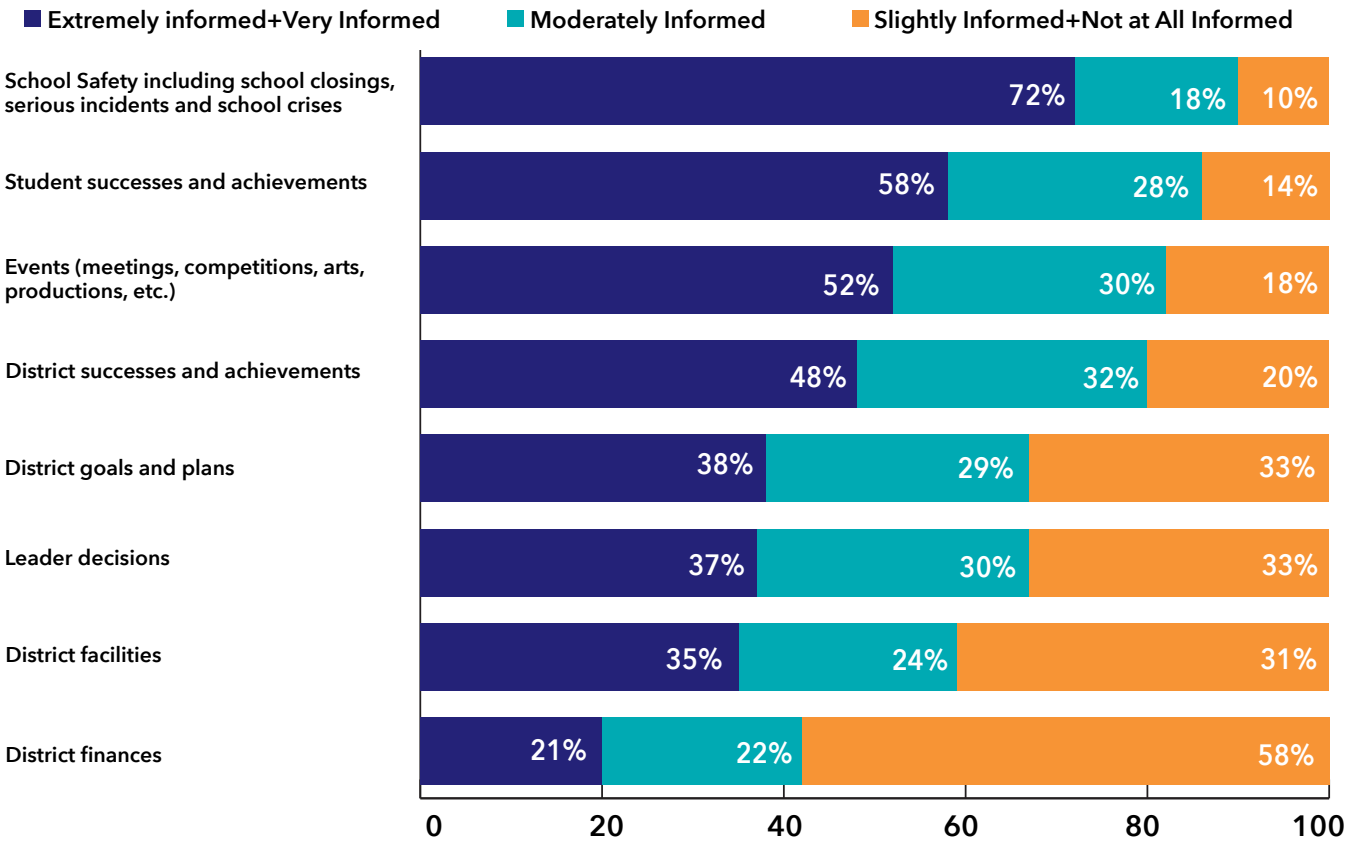
- Director of Communications Audrey Childers was lauded by focus group participants and in the open-ended comments in the SCOPE Survey for her frequent and informative communication and personal touch when connecting with parents and employees. This comment from a parent on the survey was representative of what auditors heard during focus groups: "She speaks so you can understand and gives accurate information. We have had our children

Overall Perception of District Communications	DCSD	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	**4.1**	**3.8**	**3.1**	**4.2**
Employees	**3.9**	**3.6**	**2.6**	**4.2**
Community	**3.5**	**3.2**	**2.0**	**4.1**

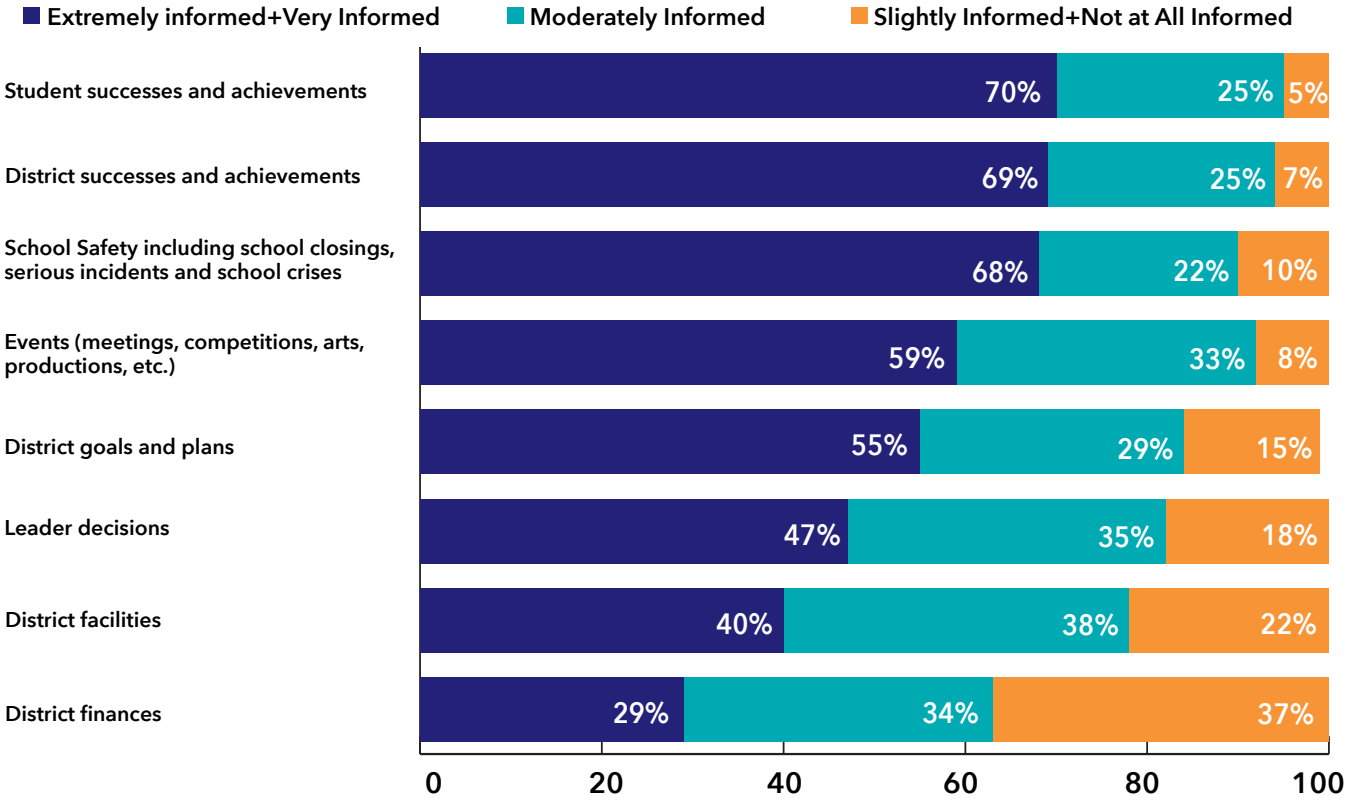
in the district for the past 20 years and look forward to listening to her pleasant speaking voice." Another said, "Audrey is one of the biggest foot soldiers in the district," noting that she is relentless in keeping parents, employees and the community informed.

- **In the SCOPE Survey, parents, staff and community members were asked to rate how informed they are on eight topics** as shown below and on page 25.
  - Parents gave the highest ratings to school safety (including school closings, serious incidents and school crises), with 72 percent of saying they felt extremely or very informed. Employees gave the highest marks to student achievement, district achievements and safety, with 68-70 percent saying they felt extremely or very informed in these areas.
  - Community members had comparatively lower levels of feeling extremely or very informed in every area, but they were at least moderately informed in most areas, giving the highest marks to school safety and district successes. A majority of community members indicated they felt extremely, very or moderately informed about school safety (77 percent) and extremely, very or moderately informed about district successes and achievements (76 percent).
  - All three stakeholder groups rated district goals and plans, leader decisions, district facilities and district finances as the areas where they feel the least informed, with 60 percent of community members, 58 percent of parents, and 37 percent of employees saying they are only slightly informed or not at all informed about district finances.

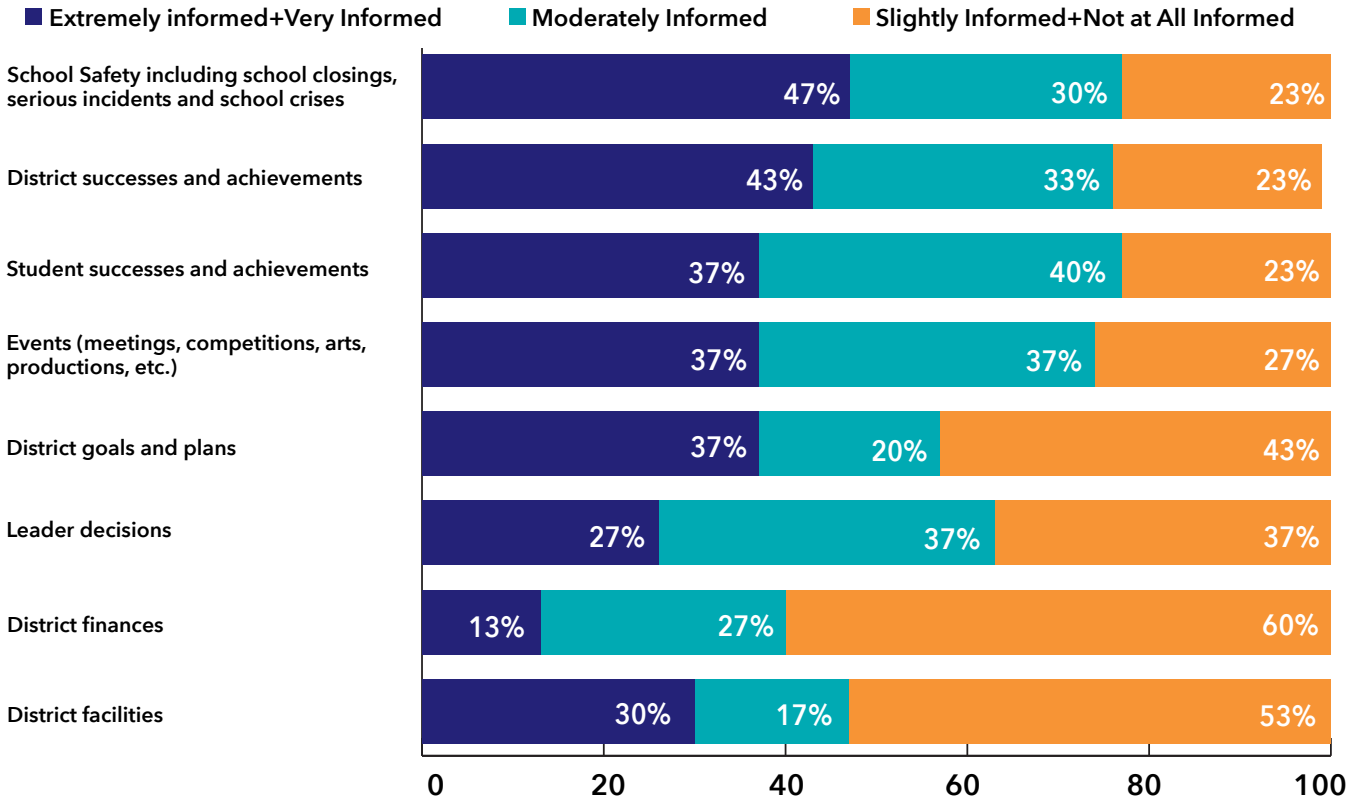
How informed you are on these eight topics – *Parents*



How informed you are on these eight topics – *Employees*

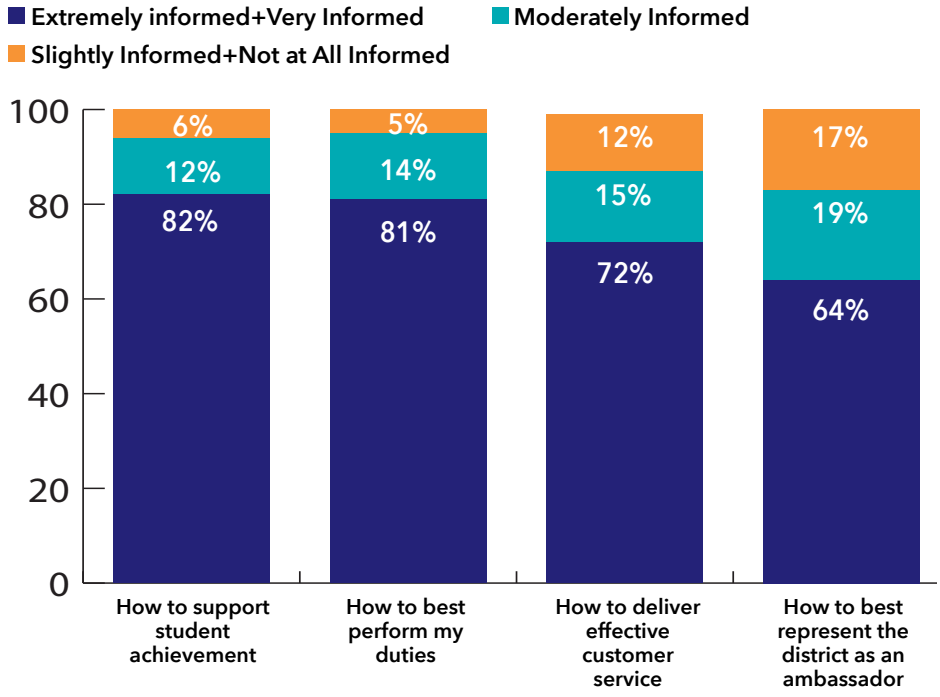


How informed you are on these eight topics – *Community*

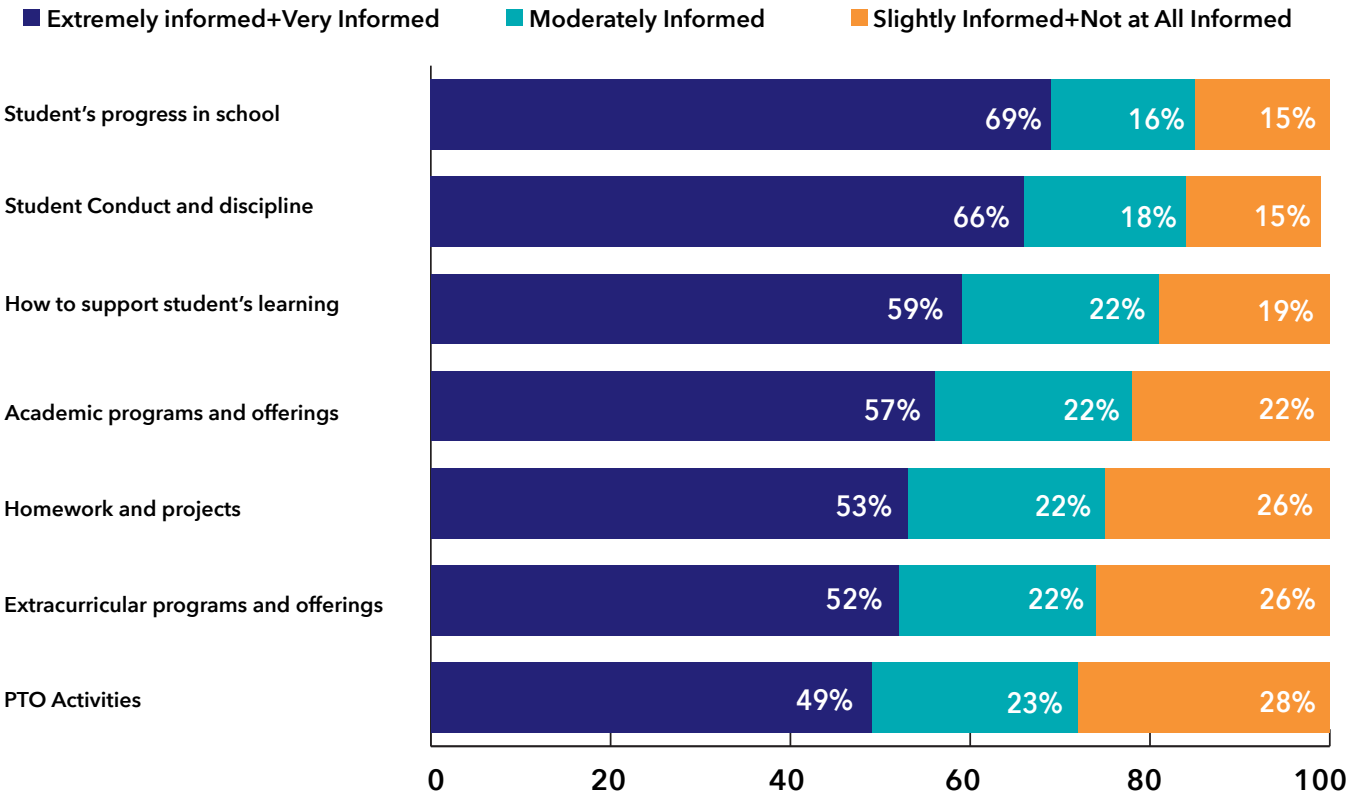


- **When staff were asked how informed they feel on topics pertaining to their role as an employee**, the highest ratings were given for "about how I can support student achievement" and "about how to best perform my duties."
- **When parents were asked how informed they feel on topics pertaining to their role as a parent**, the highest ratings were given for "about my student's progress in school" and "about student conduct and discipline," followed by "about how I can support my students learning."

How informed you are in the following areas pertaining to your role as an employee



How informed you are in the following areas pertaining to your role as a parent



- **In the SCOPE Survey, parents, employees and community members were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements related to the quality of communication in DCSD**, with the results shown on the next page. When converted to a five-point scale to compare DCSD's results with those of districts nationwide that have participated in the SCOPE Survey, these results find:
  - DCSD rated at or above the national average on every measure.
  - All three groups had the highest level of agreement with the statement, "Communications are easy for me to understand" and the lowest level of agreement with the statement, "My input and opinion are welcome and valued."
- **DCSD's ratings on the SCOPE Survey regarding the timeliness of information were slightly above national averages but lower than other areas of communication for all three stakeholder groups.** Out of nine factors, parents rated timeliness fourth, employees rated it sixth, and community members rated it seventh.
- Parents most often mentioned concerns about timeliness in connection with announcements about weather-related school closures. A representative statement from a parent was, "I feel that the district often waits too long to make decisions that could clearly be made earlier. They then wait to give parents the information about school closings, which can make it difficult for child care."
- Auditors noted that timeliness was noted more often by employees than parents or community, with employees consistently mentioning it as a concern in focus groups and in the SCOPE Survey. Comments such as these were typical:
  - "Sometimes I feel the communication about things pertaining to our jobs is late getting to us from our supervisors. Usually, we hear through the grapevine before we ever hear from our directors/supervisors. This gives the perception that we are not well informed or at least not in a timely manner."
  - "The release of information is sometimes withheld until a decision is made, but it trickles out. Then when a decision is made, it seems like it is happening all of a sudden and time just runs out before there is any communication."
- **Comments on the SCOPE Survey suggest some stakeholders view transparency as an area of concern, even though parents, employees and community members rated DCSD above the national average**. Representative statements follow:
  - "People don't feel like they've had input. They are told what is going to happen. Even the 'engagement' sessions are meant to explain what has already been decided" (business leader)
  - "It would make us feel better if we got the results of surveys." (employee)
  - "There is a sense of secrecy from leadership that does not allow staff and the community to know what is going on." (employee)
  - During focus groups with employees, the perception of secrecy and lack of transparency was perceived by some to be the result of fear of providing incorrect information causing information to be delayed and an approval process for news that slows down the release of information.

Quality of Communication Agreement with statements about the quality of communication		DCSD	National Average
PARENTS/FAMILIES	Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.2	4.0
	Information is accurate.	4.0	3.8
	I trust the communication I receive.	4.0	3.8
	I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	3.8	3.6
	Communications are timely.	3.8	3.7
	Communications are open and transparent.	3.8	3.5
	My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.7	3.5
	I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.7	3.7
	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.5	3.3
EMPLOYEES	Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.2	4.0
	I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	4.0	3.9
	Information is accurate.	4.0	3.8
	I trust the communication I receive.	4.0	3.7
	I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.9	3.9
	Communications are timely.	3.8	3.7
	Communications are open and transparent.	3.8	3.4
	My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.7	3.5
	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.5	3.3
COMMUNITY	Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.0	3.7
	I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.8	3.6
	I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	3.7	3.5
	Information is accurate.	3.7	3.4
	I trust the communication I receive.	3.7	3.4
	Communications are timely.	3.5	3.3
	Communications are open and transparent.	3.5	3.1
	My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.4	3.1
	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.2	2.9

5 = Strongly agree **4** = Agree **3** = Undecided **2** = Disagree **1** = Strongly disagree

- **Auditors heard feedback from various employee focus groups that the flow of internal communication—information that the Office of Communications does not have responsibility for disseminating—can be improved.** Typical comments include:
  - "Some central office departments are not responsive."
  - "Communication between the district office departments is not always good. Even people within the same department are not always on the same page."
  - "Some things are going to be last minute, but there should be a long-range plan for those things that can be anticipated."
- **Employees expressed a lack of clarity about who is supposed to communicate information:**
  - "We sometimes have to ask, 'What role are we supposed to take in communicating this?'"
  - "One department is in charge of an event, but other departments are impacted by it, and the lack of communication across departments has unintended consequences. The departments don't talk to each other. They don't seem to know/consider who else needs to know."

Digital Communication Tools

District/School Websites

Site Management Overview

- The DCSD district website (https://www.dcsdschools.org/) and school websites were redesigned last spring using the Finalsite content management system and launched in July 2023.
- Individual departments and each school has a web administrator who manages content for their pages, and the communications manager provides support to the 60+ employees who have access to edit pages.
- Beginning in the 2024-25 school year, new school communication liaisons will receive a stipend and training in developing content for school web pages and social media.

General Use

- According to analytics provided by DCSD, the pages visited most often on the DCSD website are the home page, the breakfast and lunch menus, the calendar and the staff portal. The top three searches were for early dismissal information, PowerSchool and the parent portal.

Observations and Suggestions

- The overall design, organization of content and navigability of the website is good, and the website did not emerge in either focus groups or in open-ended comments on the SCOPE Survey as an area of concern. Based on industry best practices, the auditor offers the following observations and suggestions:
  - **First Impressions.** The home page has a clean, professional appearance and features videos and graphic elements that draw the visitor in. Consideration might be given to the following:
    - The video featured at the top of the home page is attractive and engaging but is focused on only one of the many programs offered within DCSD. Consider expanding the content to show more programming and student age ranges. Pictures of younger students are particularly important to engage parents choosing a school system for the first time.

- Increase the superintendent's visibility on the website by making the Superintendent's Office page more prominent. It is currently under Departments, which may not be where people intuitively look for it. Consider putting it in the About Us section along with the School and District Leadership and Board of Education links. Also, link the superintendent's In the Know videos on the Superintendent's Office page instead of on the Office of Communications page.
- The homepage does not include a place for community members to subscribe to district information.

- **Content Quality and Branding.** DCSD's website includes clear branding, with the logo prominently featured in the upper left corner, and the appearance of the district and school sites is consistent. Consideration might be given to the following:
  - Add photos to the About Us section to help tell the district's story as you might in a district brochure.
  - The school websites generally have very little unique content beyond photos of the building or students and a letter from the principal. Consider giving schools the opportunity to more prominently showcase their students, staff and unique programming.
- **News Coverage.** A variety of timely, well-written news stories are easily accessible as a visitor scrolls down the home page. The stories are professional and written in a clean, journalistic style. However, the news stories are primarily announcements of staff appointments and student/employee achievements. At the time of the audit, the website did not feature stories that show the full depth of the student experience in DCSD schools and help visitors understand how students learn in the district.
- **Accessibility.** A scan of DCSD's website homepage using the WebAIM website accessibility tool showed relatively few accessibility issues on the homepage. Only three significant errors and four low-contrast errors were identified. In addition, the tool identified 13 alerts, which are less serious than errors and call attention to structural issues that, if corrected, could make navigating the site easier for those with accessibility issues. The full report can be viewed at https://wave.webaim.org/report#/https://www.dcsdschools.org/.

  Maintaining the accessibility of the district and school websites should remain a priority for DCSD. In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice released updated regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. They require local government entities (like school districts) to make all of their web- and mobile app-based content—including text, images, sounds, videos, controls, animations and electronic documents— readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities within the next three years. The new regulations align with accessibility standards outlined in the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1.

  The district's communications and technology staff should become familiar with these updated regulations and ensure that the website platform and all website content are able to meet the WCAG 2.1 standards. Otherwise, the district is vulnerable

to complaints being filed with the Office of Civil Rights on behalf of users with visual or hearing disabilities. Additionally, many U.S. adults today access online content through tablets and smartphones as well as computers; greater content accessibility improves their user experience as well.

District/School Social Media

Overview

- DCSD provides content on Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, with the strongest activity evident on Facebook and Instagram. All pages are clearly branded with the district's identity.
- The DCSD Board policy JICJA provides guidance on how the board may act on information posted by students, parents/legal guardians and community members, but it does not have a policy directed at district-generated content or photos.

Facebook

- DCSD posts nearly daily on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/DarlingtonCountySchoolDistrict/), and its page has 15,000 followers.
- Analytics data provided by the district reflect the following:
  - The district's Facebook page had 130,000 visits from April 2023 to April 2024, up 78 percent from the year before, and a reach of 301,808, up 7.5 percent from the year before.
  - DCSD Facebook posts had 27,000 interactions from April 2023 to April 2024, up 15 percent from the previous year.
- Using industry formulas for determining engagement rates through publicly available post data (e.g., reactions/likes, comments, shares), the auditor found DCSD's Facebook page had an average engagement rate of 0.08 percent during a typical week of posts from May 6-10, 2024. The average engagement rate per post for Facebook across industries in 2022 was 0.15 percent.
- Many of DCSD's posts are reposts from individual schools and typically garner about 5-20 reactions. On some days, DCSD reposts as many as 5-10 posts from its schools.

Instagram

- DCSD has published 102 posts since launching its Instagram page (https://www.instagram.com/dcsdschools) in 2015 and has 1,100 followers.
- The district posts much less frequently on Instagram than on Facebook, with three posts during April 2024.
- Analytics data provided by the district showed that the district's Instagram page had 748 visits from April 2023 to April 2024, up 141 percent from the previous year, and a reach of 3,764, up 258 percent from the year before.
- DCSD's Instagram posts had 186 interactions and 44 clicks from April 2023 to April 2024, up 100 percent from the previous year.
- In a review of a typical week of posts from May 6-10, 2024, the auditor found only two posts, yielding an engagement rate of 0.12 percent, compared to the average engagement rate per post for Instagram across industries in 2022 of 0.60 percent.

X/Twitter

- DCSD's X (aka, Twitter) page has 1,621 followers (https://x.com/DCSD_SC) and is linked on the district homepage, but no posts have appeared since a weather closure announcement in January 2024. It does not appear to be active at this time.

District/School Video Channels

YouTube

- DCSD's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/c/DarlingtonCountySchooldistrict) shows 210 videos posted since it was created in 2014, and it has 568 subscribers. A review of the channel over a one-year period from April 2023 to April 2024 showed that the district averaged 1.75 videos per month. During the months of February and March 2024, the auditor found four video posts, yielding an average engagement rate of 0.41 percent, which is lower than the average engagement rate on YouTube in 2022 of 1.64 percent.
- DCSD live streams its Board of Education meetings, which can be viewed from the district website (https://www.dcsdschools.org/about-us/board-of-education) or the district's YouTube channel. School board meetings are also videotaped and available for viewing on the School Board section of the district website: https://www.dcsdschools.org/about-us/board-of-education/board-meeting-videos
- The district posts a video update from the superintendent, In the Know, on its YouTube channel after each board meeting. These segments were noted favorably by numerous focus group participants and commenters on the SCOPE Survey.

Word that Best Describes the District: Faculty/Staff



Word that Best Describes the District: Parents/Families



Word that Best Describes the District: Community Members



SWOT Analysis

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

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
INTERNAL	• A highly competent and caring communications team keeps parents, employees and the community well-informed. • DCSD is known for its caring, skilled teachers who are laser-focused on student academic performance. • DCSD offers students a wide breadth of opportunities and high quality education programming, from the earliest grades until high school, to build skills for college, vocations and the workforce. • DCSD has numerous new, modernized learning facilities.	• The current communication plan is not tied to the district's overall strategic plan and could be more closely tied to research findings. • Communication considerations are not incorporated into aspects of district operations beyond those handled by the communications team. • Approval protocols for releasing information leads to delays and perceptions that information is not shared in a timely manner. • DCSD lacks a strong brand identity to distinguish it from neighboring districts and local private and charter schools.
	OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
EXTERNAL	• Darlington County offers high-paying jobs at Sunoco, Duke Energy and Nucor Steel, among others. • Historic towns, a rural setting, a friendly, small-town atmosphere and a lower cost of living than nearby urban areas may be attractive to young families who are able to work remotely.	• High regional poverty, recent crime and concerns about safety spill into perceptions of the schools. • The regional population is declining, and a shortage of attractive housing options is an obstacle to attracting young professionals raising families. • Social, cultural and political conflicts in the wider community are contributing to negative perceptions of public schools. • Charter schools and private schools are marketing effectively to local employers and new residents.

Benchmarking of Results

National Benchmark: SCOPE Survey Scores

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted the online School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and community members. The auditor used this data to identify strengths and weaknesses of DCSD communication program, and many of these data points are included in the Key Findings section of this report.

An additional value the SCOPE Survey brings to our clients is the ability to compare their SCOPE Survey results on issues that matter most in school communication with the results of surveys conducted by districts and educational service agencies, large and small, across the United States. This data is presented in the SCOPE Scorecards on the following three pages.

Please note that NSPRA began benchmarking additional questions in early 2023. Therefore, the questions at the top of each chart show DCSD results compared to the 100+ districts that have participated in the SCOPE Survey since its inception. The second group of questions shows DCSD's results compared to the 30+ districts that have participated in the survey since the number of benchmarked questions was expanded.

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

1. **When participants were asked to rate *how informed they feel* on specific topics, they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Extremely informed
   - 4 = Very informed
   - 3 = Moderately Informed
   - 2 = Slightly informed
   - 1 = Not at all informed
2. **When participants were asked to rate *their level of agreement with* specific statements, they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Strongly agree
   - 4 = Agree
   - 3 = Undecided
   - 2 = Disagree
   - 1 = Strongly disagree
3. **When participants were asked to provide ratings about their *perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications,* they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Excellent
   - 4 = Above average
   - 3 = Average
   - 2 = Below average
   - 1 = Very poor

SCOPE Scorecard - *Parents*

	DCSD	NATIONAL		
		Average	Highest	Lowest
National Benchmarks 100+ Districts				
General Perceptions (3)				
Please give an overall rating for your perception of the district.	3.8	3.7	4.3	2.6
Please give an overall rating for your satisfaction with communication from the district.	4.1	3.8	4.2	3.1
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.).	3.5	3.3	4.1	2.5
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises.	3.9	3.5	4.1	3.0
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I trust the communication I receive.	4.0	3.8	4.4	3.1
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About my student's progress in school.	3.9	3.8	4.4	3.1
About how I can support my student's learning.	3.6	3.4	4.1	2.4
Agreement with statements about school communication (2)				
I trust the communication I receive (from my child's school).	4.0	4.1	4.5	3.4
Expanded Benchmarks 30+ Districts				
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About district successes and achievements.	3.4	3.2	4.0	2.5
About leader decisions.	3.0	2.8	3.3	2.2
About district goals and plans.	3.1	2.8	3.4	2.2
About district finances.	2.4	2.4	3.0	1.8
About district facilities.	2.9	2.7	3.4	2.2
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	3.8	3.6	4.1	3.2
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.5	3.2	3.8	2.7
My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.7	3.5	3.9	3.0
Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.2	4.0	4.3	3.6
Information is accurate.	4.0	3.8	4.2	3.3
Communications are timely.	3.8	3.7	4.1	3.0
Communications are open and transparent.	3.8	3.5	4.0	2.9
I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.7	3.7	4.2	3.0

SCOPE Scorecard - *Parents*

Expanded Benchmarks 30+ Districts (continued)	DCSD	NATIONAL Average	NATIONAL Highest	NATIONAL Lowest
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About homework and projects	3.4	3.2	4.0	2.8
About academic programs and offerings.	3.6	3.1	4.2	3.0
About programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.).	3.4	3.2	3.8	2.5
About student conduct and discipline.	3.8	3.2	3.8	2.8
About PTA/PTO Activities.	3.3	3.3	3.9	2.4
Agreement with statements about school communication (2)				
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	3.9	3.8	4.2	3.2
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.6	3.5	4.0	3.1
My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.8	3.7	4.1	3.2
Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.2	4.0	4.3	3.7
Information is accurate.	4.1	3.8	4.2	3.5
Communications are timely.	3.9	3.7	4.1	3.3
Communications are open and transparent.	3.9	3.7	4.1	3.3
I see people who look like me/my family in school communication images.	3.8	3.8	4.3	3.2

SCOPE Scorecard - *Employees*

	DCSD	NATIONAL		
		Average	Highest	Lowest
National Benchmarks 100+ Districts				
General Perceptions (3)				
Please give an overall rating for your perception of the district.	3.9	3.6	4.2	2.3
Please give an overall rating for your satisfaction with communication from the district.	3.9	3.6	4.2	2.6
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises.	3.9	3.4	4.0	2.8
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I trust the communication I receive.	4.0	3.7	4.3	2.7
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About how I can support student achievement.	4.1	3.7	4.4	3.0
About how I can best represent the district as an ambassador.	3.6	3.2	3.8	2.4
I receive communication that makes me feel valued as an employee.	3.9	3.2	4.0	2.3
I trust the communication I receive (from my workplace).	4.1	4.0	4.5	3.3
Expanded Benchmarks 30+ Districts				
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About district successes and achievements.	3.9	3.6	4.2	2.8
About student successes and achievement.	3.9	3.5	4.2	3.0
About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.).	3.7	3.3	3.9	0.0
About leader decisions.	3.4	3.0	3.4	2.4
About district goals and plans.	3.5	3.2	3.6	2.4
About district finances.	2.9	2.7	3.1	1.9
About district facilities.	3.3	3.0	3.6	2.2
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	4.0	3.9	4.2	3.5
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.5	3.3	3.7	2.6
My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.7	3.5	4.0	2.9
Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.2	4.0	4.2	3.5
Information is accurate.	4.0	3.8	4.1	3.2
Communications are timely.	3.8	3.7	4.1	2.9
Communications are open and transparent.	3.8	3.4	3.9	2.7
I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.9	3.79	4.2	3.2

SCOPE Scorecard - *Employees*

Expanded Benchmarks 30+ Districts (continued)	DCSD	NATIONAL Average	NATIONAL Highest	NATIONAL Lowest
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About how to best perform my duties.	**4.2**	**3.9**	**4.3**	**3.1**
About how I can best represent the district as an ambassador.	**3.9**	**3.6**	**4.0**	**3.0**
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	**4.2**	**4.1**	**4.4**	**3.8**
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	**3.8**	**3.6**	**3.9**	**3.1**
My involvement is welcome and valued.	**4.0**	**3.8**	**4.0**	**3.3**
Communications are easy for me to understand.	**4.3**	**4.2**	**4.4**	**3.8**
Information is accurate.	**4.2**	**3.9**	**4.2**	**3.3**
Communications are timely.	**4.0**	**3.8**	**4.1**	**3.0**
Communications are open and transparent.	**4.0**	**3.7**	**4.0**	**3.0**

SCOPE Scorecard - *Community*

	DCSD	NATIONAL		
		Average	Highest	Lowest
National Benchmarks 100+ Districts				
General Perceptions (3)				
Please give an overall rating for your perception of the district.	3.4	3.3	4.3	2.1
Please give an overall rating for your satisfaction with communication from the district.	3.5	3.2	4.1	2.0
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About student successes and achievement.	3.2	2.9	4.2	2.0
About district finances.	2.3	2.5	3.6	1.7
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises.	3.3	2.9	4.0	1.7
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I trust the communication I receive.	3.7	3.4	4.3	2.2
Expanded Benchmarks 30+ Districts				
Level of feeling informed (1)				
About district successes and achievements.	3.2	3.1	3.7	2.5
About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.).	3.1	2.9	3.8	2.4
About leader decisions.	2.8	2.5	3.2	2.1
About district goals and plans.	2.8	2.6	3.1	2.2
About district facilities.	2.6	2.6	3.1	2.0
Agreement with statements about district communication (2)				
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	3.7	3.4	4.3	2.9
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.2	2.9	3.6	2.3
My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.4	3.1	3.9	2.6
Communications are easy for me to understand.	4.0	3.7	4.3	3.1
Information is accurate.	3.7	3.4	4.2	2.5
Communications are timely.	3.5	3.3	4.2	2.5
Communications are open and transparent.	3.5	3.1	3.8	2.3
I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	3.8	3.6	4.4	3.1

National Benchmark: *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that members can use to assess their programs. To accomplish this, NSPRA sought to identify the characteristics that define a district's communication program as "emerging," "established" or "exemplary" in seven critical function areas.

As of June 2023, rubrics have been completed for the following critical function areas:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Marketing/Branding Communications
- Crisis Communication
- Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns
- Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications

Within each critical function area (CFA), research teams of award-winning, accredited association members identified top performers in school systems across the United States and Canada. Top performers' best practices—as demonstrated through essential program components identified for each area—provide a benchmarking framework for school communicators to assess whether their communication programs are emerging, established or exemplary.

Benchmarking against the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures© - Fifth Edition* differs from other parts of the communication audit process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on survey results, what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews, or discovered in district materials. **Instead, it addresses how DCSD's communication program compares to national, benchmarked standards of excellence in school public relations.**

Benchmarked Areas

CFA 1: Comprehensive Professional Communication Program is the basis for all communications deployed from a school district and is rooted in the communications function residing at the executive management level. Communications are systematic, transparent, two-way and comprehensive. They align with and support the district's goals and objectives. Ultimately, the foster dialogue, collaboration, understanding, engagement and trust to support student achievement.

CFA 2: Internal Communications recognizes the invaluable role of all personnel as representatives of the district. It includes having a proactive program for providing staff with the skills, information and resources they need to effectively serve as ambassadors.

CFA 3: Parent/Family Communications recognizes the relationship between family involvement/engagement and student success. It includes a proactive communications program to keep parents/caregivers informed about and involved in their children's education with the ultimate goal of building collaboration and trust to support student learning.

CFA 4: Marketing/Branding Communications acknowledges that increased competition, declining resources, changing demographics, news media scrutiny and the importance of public perceptions are just a few of the reasons districts need an effective marketing program. Having a well-defined and authentically experienced brand promise as part of the marketing strategy helps position a district in the community and supports the district vision.

CFA 5: Crisis Communication demonstrates that no better opportunity exists for districts to show the effectiveness of their leadership and communication than during a crisis. All eyes attention are focused on how a district handles and responds to crises at hand.

CFA 6: Bond-Finance Election Plans and Campaigns addresses specific instances in which districts must receive voter approval before spending the district's existing funds and/or levying a tax to raise funds for specific purposes. Before residents vote, there are foundational steps for building informed consent through communications on a district's operating budget, capital project proposal, millage increase or other bond/finance election campaign.

CFA 7: Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications recognizes that implementing effective, equitable communications and engagement strategies—for daily communication efforts as well as for formal diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives—creates a respectful, inclusive culture that encourages individuals to share their thoughts and experiences without fear of backlash.

Benchmarking Scale

As noted previously, each benchmarked area is assessed on a progressive scale:

- **Emerging.** The program is in the early stages of development and largely responsive to immediate needs or problems, with minimal proactive planning. Goals, if articulated, are loosely defined with minimal alignment with district goals and objectives.
- **Established.** The program includes a series of defined approaches based on some research. Strategies, tactics and goals are defined. The program aligns with district goals and objectives. Some evaluation may occur.
- **Exemplary.** The program is conducted according to an articulated plan following the four-step strategic public relations planning process, a model of communications known by the acronym RPIE (Research, Plan, Implement, Evaluate). The program is aligned with and integrated into district strategic plans. It is supported through policy, training and resources. Ongoing evaluation to improve progress is embedded into operations.

DCSD and the *Rubrics of Practice*

When considering the DCSD communication program in light of this benchmarking scale and the essential program components of each benchmarked area, as detailed in the *Rubrics of Practice*, auditors found the district to be Exemplary in CFA's 3 and 5, Established in CFA's 1, 6 and 7, and Emerging in CFA's 2 and 4.

The Recommendations in this report provide insight and advice that will help the DCSD communication program continue to enhance its efforts in each benchmarked area. However, the Office of Communications staff can regularly use the *Rubrics of Practice* to make comparisons against national benchmarks. That might involve including self-assessment via the rubrics as an evaluation measure in DCSD's strategic communication plan, for example.

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

Recommendations

The Key Findings of this report suggest that the DCSD communications team has earned high respect from many parents and employees for its members' dedication and professional skills. Parents of enrolled students and employees generally expressed positive views of the district and were enthusiastic in their praise of the communication they receive about district news, updates and student successes.

Those who have no direct connection to DCSD schools seemed less aware, though, of what parents and employees largely perceived to be caring teachers, a wide breadth of programs, a student-centered philosophy and recent increases in test scores. Many of the areas of challenge noted by the audit team suggest a need to expand strategic communication planning to not only ensure communication activities are aligned with district goals and objectives but also to incorporate enhanced branding, marketing and engagement efforts that will build stronger connections between the community and its schools.

On the SCOPE Survey, DCSD received higher than average scores in the areas of trust, timeliness and transparency of information, but comments made in focus groups and on the SCOPE Survey suggest opportunities to continue to strengthen in these areas, especially with employees. The audit team also noted a tendency among staff to underestimate their own roles as communicators and ambassadors for the district. One of the most impactful outcomes of the audit process would be to create a shared sense of ownership among all employees for building trust and relationships through communications, and to increase their awareness that the Office of Communication cannot accomplish this alone.

The following recommendations offer ideas for addressing the research findings in this report based on industry best practices, award-winning strategies and innovative approaches to communications. They are listed in a suggested order of priority, but DCSD may choose to address them in a different order and through tactics other than the action steps outlined here. Generally speaking, a district should not try to address more than two to three recommendations each school year, while also continuing to deliver existing programs and services. This is a long-term effort, and new communication components will need to be introduced as budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Update and enhance DCSD's communication plan.
2. Elevate the perception of DCSD schools through branding, marketing and storytelling.
3. Expand communications and outreach efforts that build community awareness of DCSD's accomplishments.
4. Strategically engage families and the wider community through enhanced social media content.
5. Evaluate, strengthen and expand the district's internal communications infrastructure.
6. Increase transparency and trust by focusing on two-way communication in decision-making.

Recommendation 1:

Update and enhance DCSD's communication plan.

The audit team commends DCSD for having a communication plan that defines goals and establishes a process for effective communication to foster relationships with stakeholders. The existing plan includes many thoughtful strategies and tactics, and it will serve as a good foundation for the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan informed by the findings of the NSPRA Communication Audit.

Now is an ideal time to review and update the communication plan. Doing so will ensure the district's communication efforts are grounded in best practices that are data-driven and mission-oriented. As strategies and tactics newly added to the plan, the recommendations and action steps in this report can help DCSD integrate strategic communications into every aspect of the district's work.

NSPRA recommends that the plan follow the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE (Research, Plan, Implement, Evaluate). This structure empowers a communications team to address topics proactively, to prioritize its work based on stakeholder research, and to maintain stakeholders' trust in their schools.

Action Step 1.1

Add a research section to the DCSD plan.



DCSD's current communication plan does not include a designated research section, but it is likely informed by observational and informal research on the part of district leaders. Now that this NSPRA Communication Audit Report, including the SCOPE Survey data, is available, the plan should be updated to include a section that highlights research relevant to how the goals and priorities for the plan were identified.

Communication plan research identifies challenges and opportunities for a strategic communication program and makes it possible to set goals that are measurable within a time frame. For example, this report provides an understanding of how stakeholders perceive the district, how they currently access information, how they prefer to receive information, and how they feel about the communications they receive. When revising the current plan, summarize the most relevant, top-line research findings from the SCOPE Survey and focus groups in bullet points in a new research section of the plan.

Following are additional data types to consider including as part of communications team research when updating the plan:

- **Reports specific to the school system:** enrollment, student poverty, access to technology, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by news media and specialized websites, etc.
- **Local community demographics:** National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/), the U.S. Census Bureau (https://data.census.gov/) and local county/city/town websites
- **National public opinion on schools:** PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (https://pdkpoll.org/), Gallup polls on education (https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx) and EdChoice Schooling in America Poll (https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/schooling-in-america-polling-dashboard-2/)

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

When putting together the research section, consider incorporating a summary of ongoing communication, public relations, marketing and engagement activities within DCSD. The summary might include activities and strategies such as managing website content, newsletters, social media updates, emergency notifications to parents and staff, letters and videos from the superintendent, news releases, annual reports and crisis communication.

It may be helpful to also identify efforts made by other departments/staff to cultivate relationships with internal and external stakeholders. Developing a comprehensive approach to communications should include an awareness of activities such as parent conferences, open house programs, participation in advisory groups, efforts to cultivate business partnerships, efforts to manage relations with the news media, involvement in community organizations, etc.

This additional research should provide a detailed picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations as well as of the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the formal communications function.

Action Step 1.2

Enhance the planning components in the DCSD plan.

The Office of Communications engages in detailed communication planning, but these suggested enhancements will increase the practicality and usefulness of the plan:

#1

Update and enhance DCSD's communication plan

- **Narrow down the six goals to three broad, long-term desired outcomes** for the district to result from the communication team's efforts. For example, goals 2-4 might be consolidated to, "Have all employees, parents/families, the business community and local taxpayers feel a sense of connection to and engagement with the district and local schools" or to, "Eliminate the gap in perception between internal and external stakeholders about the quality of DCSD schools."
- **Create shorter-term measurable objectives** for communication and engagement based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. In the current plan, objectives and strategies appear to be intermingled, and most objectives are not structured for the easy ability to measure achievement. Measurable objectives that are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) establish accountability for a communications team. For example, the SMART structure might change the current objective to "Initiate external communications audit to acquire best practices" into, "To have an audit of the district's communication program that identifies stakeholders' communication needs and best practices conducted by July 2024." The SCOPE Survey also provides data points that establish benchmarks for use in creating more measurable objective.

- **Delineate strategies and tactics.** Many of the first-tier sub-items under each of the existing goals are strategies, but the second-tier sub-items are a mix of strategies and tactics. A strategy should state what will be done to achieve a desired measurable outcome, while tactics should describe how that strategy will be implemented; tactics describe the specific elements (e.g., tools, activities, timing) that will be done to implement the strategy. Carefully sorting the goals and objectives from the strategies, organizing strategies under the measurable objectives and sorting the strategies from the tactics will make the plan easier to understand, particularly for district and department leaders in other functional areas. It will also make it easier for the communications team to implement the plan and evaluate it for effectiveness. Following is an example strategy and some tactics:
  - Sample Strategy: Elevate the perception of DCSD schools through branding, marketing and storytelling. (See Recommendation 2)
  - Tactics: Define DCSD's brand, redesign the district logo
- **Review the target publics in your existing plan.** A strategic communication plan often has a unique set of strategies, tactics and key messages for each stakeholder group. The auditor has reviewed the current list of audiences and finds that they align with common target audiences in school districts. You may consider adjusting the audiences after reviewing the findings of the NSPRA Communication Audit to ensure it includes all who are interested in and/or impacted by the district and its initiatives.
- **Create key messages.** For each target public identified in your communication plan, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the communications, and use that information to build targeted key messages. People's attention span and time are limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed.
  - For the strategy in the prior bullet, the following is an example key message for a parent audience: "DCSD schools are making great strides in increasing the number of students reaching proficiency, with all state proficiency measures increasing by 3.7 - 5.3 percent between 2017 and 2020."
- **Identify the best tactics to use for each stakeholder group**. For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. Social media was the top-rated source of information for community members in the SCOPE Survey, so when attempting to increase their awareness of rising test scores, consider the development of a series of infographics to share via social media with links to a website page for more information.
- **Consider the resources required to implement the plan**. Areas to be considered for expenditures might include:
  - Equipment, software and subscriptions
  - Materials and supplies
  - Printing and duplicating
  - Print and digital advertising
  - Professional development
- **Set timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for strategies and actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal

evaluation comes after implementation, be sure to identify key times to take stock and see if the plan needs modification.

- **Assign responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the communications team; other departments and employees may need designated roles to reach communication goals.

As DCSD works through the planning process, address the following questions for every major initiative the district undertakes:

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know?
- When do they need to know?
- How are we going to tell them?
- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
- How will we track and measure what they have learned and done due to our communication efforts? How will we measure success?

Action Step 1.3

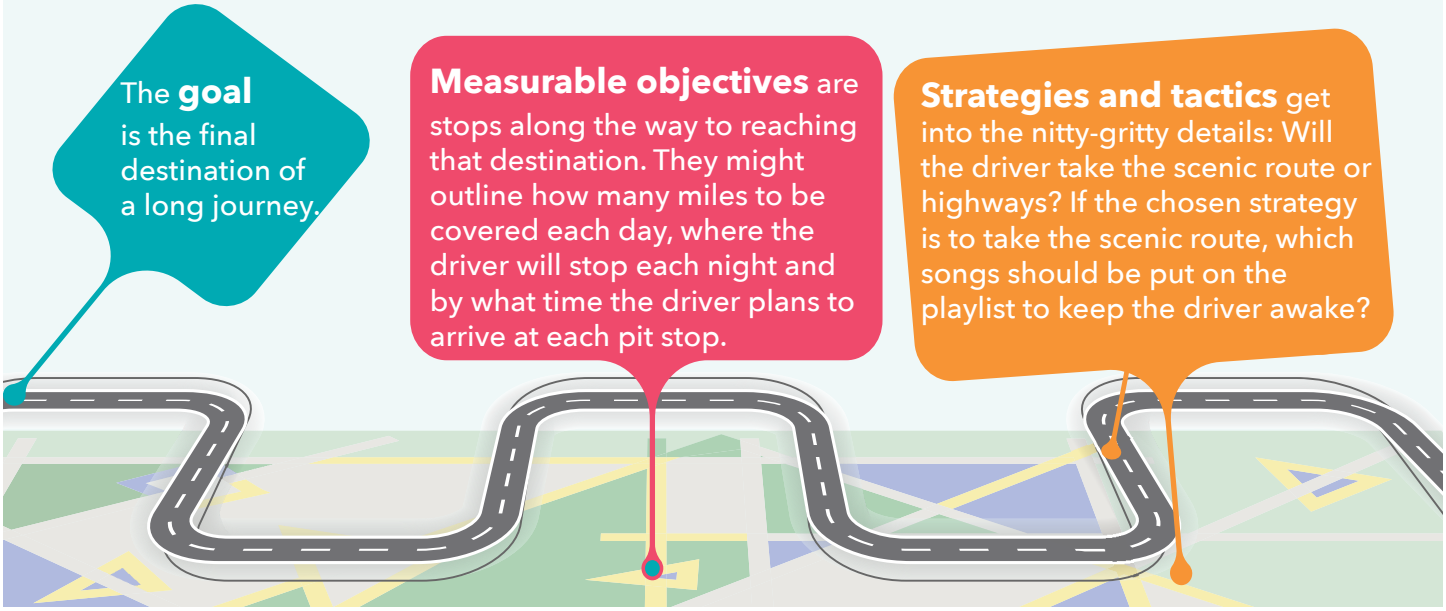
Add an evaluation section to the DCSD plan.

QUICK WIN

DCSD's current communication plan does not include a designated evaluation section, so consider adding a brief area at the conclusion

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

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



of the plan specifying what steps will be taken to determine success in achieving the plan goals. It is easiest to do this by identifying evaluative measures for each SMART objective to be used later to determine DCSD's success in achieving the desired outcomes. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, vote results, user analytics, etc.

This data can be the basis of research findings to inform future updates to the strategic communication plan. The SCOPE Survey data can be used as a baseline for future measurement and evaluation, and DCSD might consider the possibility of conducting a follow-up SCOPE Survey with NSPRA in another year or two as a planned future evaluation component.

Recommendation 2:

Elevate the perception of DCSD schools through branding, marketing and storytelling.

As noted in the Key Findings, the audit team heard parents of enrolled students and district employees speak positively in the focus groups of the high quality of education in DCSD schools, but they also observed that newer residents, local business leaders and senior citizens seem unaware of the reality experienced by these parents and employees. Most employees and parents also rated DCSD as excellent or above average on the SCOPE Survey, but less than half of the community respondents did the same. When these results are considered together, it is understandable that district leaders expressed a strong desire to tell positive stories that improve the perception of district schools, halt the enrollment decline of the last few years and attract new students.

Many factors outside of a school district's control influence the perception of its schools and enrollment. These include:

- **Broad societal migration trends.** DCSD is not alone in experiencing enrollment decline. A March 2024 report by the Brookings Institute, Breaking Down Enrollment Declines in Public Schools, says that approximately 59 percent of small schools, 69 percent of medium-sized schools and 69 percent of large schools saw their enrollment decline between 2019–20 and 2022–23. The study also finds that rural schools and high schools are among those with the most substantial enrollment losses.

  Other national data suggests a potential opportunity for DCSD in coming years. A 2023 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture says that "the U.S. rural (nonmetro) population is growing again after a decade of overall population loss, with growth of about a quarter percent from July 2020 through June 2022." A recent migration trends report from the National Association of Realtors provides similar data, citing the share of inbound moves for rural areas as 54.6 percent, compared to 48.5 percent for urban areas. While DCSD schools may not be experiencing growth now, enhancing marketing efforts will position the district well to take advantage of changes in the future as migration patterns continue to evolve in the post-pandemic era.

- **A general decline in the perception of public schools due to negative coverage by some national media outlets.** DCSD can benefit by proactively sharing information that shows that the issues covered by non-local news outlets do not pertain to local schools.

- **The influence on prospective families of school rating websites** such as GreatSchools.org and Niche.com, which are featured prominently in real estate listings. School administrators are often unaware of how much these rating systems influence parent choice, especially for incoming elementary students. Chalkbeat, an educational news organization, ran an in-depth and still relevant article in 2019 about a study conducted by Duke University researcher Sharique Hasan that analyzed the influence of school rating sites. "As parents decide on where to live, these scores really were on the top of the list of almost all of the parents that I talked to," said Hasan in the article. "They wanted to be in a school district with schools that were rated a 9 or a 10."

GreatSchools.org provides information pages for individual schools, such as this page for Brockington Elementary, and includes links at the bottom of the page to higher-performing nearby schools, so a family moving into the area may be directed to schools outside the district by clicking on a link to higher-rated schools in a nearby district.

- Real estate listings name public schools close to the home and the school's GreatSchools.org rating. In May, for example, a home priced at $389,000 in Hartsville includes a GreatSchools.org rating of 5 out of 10 for DCSD's North Hartsville Elementary, while a similarly priced home in the neighboring district of Florence 1 Schools includes a GreatSchools.com rating of 7 of 10 for Delmae Elementary School. School information pages on GreatSchools.org also include links to real estate listings, so that a family moving into the area may search for the highest-ranked schools and then click on the homes within that school's boundary.

While DCSD cannot control all the outside factors influencing parents' choice of schools for their students, NSPRA's experience with member districts suggests that districts can shape perceptions positively. The action steps that follow are designed to elevate the perceptions of DCSD district by building a stronger brand identity, telling stories of what happens in DCSD classrooms every day and increasing awareness through outreach.

Action Step 2.1

Define DCSD's desired brand.



The first step in this process is clearly defining the district's brand, which is the reputation it wants to be known for and how it is perceived by others. The district's brand is not a logo or tagline, although both elements are part of communicating a brand identity. A brand is the combination of design, words and symbols that are used to create an image or reputation that describes DCSD schools and differentiates them from other districts.

#2

Elevate the perception of DCSD schools through branding, marketing and story-telling.

The following are activities to help identify and define the district's brand:

- **Identify the district's value proposition.** A school district's value proposition is the promise to its audience. What are the benefits to students attending the schools and to their parents? What about the schools sets them apart from the competition? Think about the district's unique identity: Does it offer something that no other schools in the area can provide? The district should be able to give its value proposition in one concise sentence, called a "tagline" such as the one developed by Montville Township Public Schools in their rebranding effort: "Educate. Inspire. Empower." Once you define a tagline for the district, use it consistently in district-branded materials.
- **Identify the district's brand identity.** A brand identity is crafted based on an organization's value proposition, how it wishes to be perceived by others and how it is perceived. Start the process by reviewing district goals, using this report to define the strengths and weaknesses of

the district image, and determining whether DCSD schools meet the expectations of students, families and employees.

- **Evaluate the degree to which the desired brand is infused into current brand identity elements and district communications.** The brand identity elements should help create a memorable and positive experience for anyone researching the district and should be consistently infused into communication from the district and its schools. Consider whether the district's current identity elements (logo, colors, fonts, etc.) and existing print and digital communication materials reflect the desired brand.

You will find extensive resources related to branding in NSPRA's members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on Marketing/Branding at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Marketing-Branding. Of particular relevance may be:

- The 2019 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning rebranding efforts of Troup County School System, a district of 12,000 students in Georgia that experienced the closure of four neighborhood schools, declining student enrollment, budget cuts and waning community trust.
- A presentation at the NSPRA 2022 National Seminar on "Defining Your District's Identity: Building Brand Loyalty" by members of the communications team from Park Hill School District in Missouri.

Action Step 2.2

Align the district's logo with its desired brand.

As DCSD leaders reflect on the desired brand for the district today, it may emerge that the current district logo does not align well with that brand. A school community's sense of identity can be deeply rooted in its school and district logos, which often grace websites, letterhead, business cards, clothing, buildings and signage. Therefore a thoughtful process is needed when engaging in a logo redesign. If such a process begins in DCSD, the audit team offers a few considerations based on best practices gleaned from other NSPRA members:

- Ensure any design work is informed by the desired brand (Action Step 2.1), the results of this report related to the district image and the unique characteristics of Darlington County and its local heritage.
- Invest in a professional graphic designer with experience in branding and logo design, preferably one with experience creating logos for educational institutions.
- Keep it simple. A simple design is easier to recognize and reproduce.
  - Strive for a versatile design that will work well in various formats and sizes, from large printed banners to small social media icons.
  - Make sure any fonts used in conjunction with the logo are clear and legible, avoiding overly stylized or complex typefaces.
  - Choose colors that reflect the district's identity and are culturally appropriate, keeping in mind that colors can convey different emotions and meanings. It should be easily reproducible in black and white as well as in color.
- Be mindful of cultural sensitivity and avoid any imagery that could be interpreted as offensive or exclusionary.
- Throughout the design process, gather feedback from various stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and community members. Be prepared to refine and adjust the design based on feedback and testing.

- Ensure the logo is original and does not infringe on any existing trademarks or copyrights. Consider trademarking the logo to protect it legally.

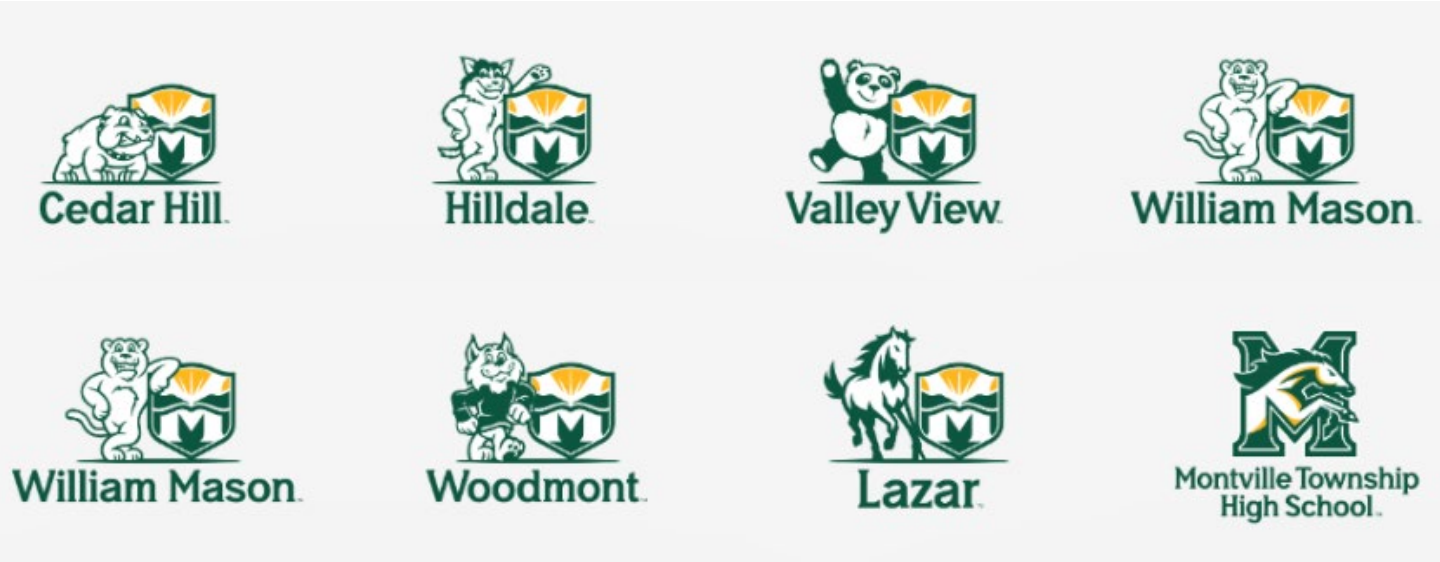
An approach worth considering is that taken by Montville Township Public Schools (MPTS) in New Jersey, a PK-12 suburban school system of 3,500 students with a one-person public relations department. MPTS recently gave a presentation at the New Jersey School Public Relations Association (NJSPRA) Conference on "Implementing Brand Identity to Unite District, School and Community" about the process they used to create a brand and new logos for the district and schools that represent their culture and values, provide a consistent identity between the district and the schools, and honor the identity of individual schools. The process led to a novel and highly effective way to showcase beloved school mascots within the new logo design.

These steps that MTPS took may provide inspiration for DCSD:

- Develop a "brain trust" of community members with expertise in marketing/ branding to help inform the work and secure discounted rates for professional design services.
- Form a branding committee that includes a board member, the superintendent, a communications professional and several parents, students, teachers and administrators.
- Create a cohesive brand identity for each school that allows it to keep its unique mascot and colors while appearing cohesive with district branding and other schools. See the graphic below that shows how the individual school mascots were incorporated into the new district logo. Individual schools retained their colors for use on school webpages and school communications.

Learn more about this unique campaign:

- Presentation given at the NJSPRA conference in March 2024: https://www.canva.com/design/DAF_LNYN_e8/gGXft1t_UyMz862XYU7nsA/view?utm_content=DAF_LNYN_e8&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=viewer.
- Video explaining the new logo: https://youtu.be/W3i6uOe3UJo?si=yVwn9UkRinjjbbbC&t=23



Action Step 2.3

Develop a tagline to be used in conjunction with DCSD's logo.

A tagline is a short, memorable phrase that captures the brand identity of an organization. It should communicate the brand's promise and personality, and resonate with key stakeholders. An oft-cited example of an effective tagline is Nike's "Just Do It." This simple phrase conveys the brand's culture of empowerment, motivation, and athletic excellence.

As part of DCSD's branding efforts, the auditor recommends the development of a distinctive and compelling tagline to accompany the district logo, drawing on the work described in Action Step 2.1. A successful tagline will convey the spirit and mission of DCSD in just a few words, use memorable phrasing and foster community pride.

Questions to reflect on as a team while developing a tagline:

- What phrase will help stakeholders quickly understand what our district stands for and what sets us apart?
- What is a phrase that can be used across communication channels that reinforces DCSD's identity and values?
- What words will inspire pride, loyalty and a sense of belonging among students, parents and staff?
- What are DCSD's unique strengths, attributes that differentiate DCSD from private and charter schools, and neighboring districts?
- Is the phrase general enough to be used in a wide variety of contexts?

A few tagline examples from NSPRA members that may be helpful:

- Ascension Public Schools in Louisiana adopted the tagline "Excellence. Ascending Together" when they rebranded a few years ago and use the phrase repeatedly in their district communications (https://www.ascensionschools.org/).
- Redwood City School District in California began using the tagline "Meet, Choose, Love RCSD" as part of an enrollment marketing campaign, even before redesigning their logo in a rebranding campaign several years later. They continue to use the tagline with the new logo (https://www.rcsdk8.net/).

Action Step 2.4

Build an archive of professional-quality student photos that tell the DCSD story.



The adage "a picture paints a thousand words" is particularly true for schools. High-quality photos capturing a kindergarten reading circle, a third-grade art lesson, a middle school orchestra practice and a high school science lab tell a story about the quality of education occurring at schools in a way that is faster than words. In addition to candid shots captured on a mobile device for social media posts, create an archive of high-resolution, artful photos that show a student or students' faces engaged in an activity, such as these samples taken by NSPRA professional partner and education photographer Rebecca Leroux of B43 Productions.

Following are some of the ways an archive of high-quality photos can be used to enhance district storytelling:

- As regularly updated feature images on district and school website home pages

- In printed materials and marketing pieces for local employers and Realtors
- As a wall of matted and framed photos in the board meeting room or a hallway in the district office
- As a "Meet DCSD" photo exhibit, inviting community members and business leaders to learn about the opportunities available in DCSD

Creating an extensive and varied archive requires advance planning, which includes coordinating with school sites to identify activities and times when particularly interesting shots might be obtained, if possible hiring a professional photographer to capture the shots, and setting up a tight schedule that allows the photographer to obtain a wide variety of useful shots in a day.

Schools and districts often worry about using photos of students who have graduated or moved on. This should not be a concern: Businesses often use purchased "stock" photos. This archive is a similar concept, but the photos feature your own students, past and present, to illustrate the work going on in your schools.

Action Step 2.5

Claim and update the DCSD pages on GreatSchools.org and Niche.com.



Independent school rating websites grade or rate schools and districts based on state test data and other factors such as student progress, college readiness, equity, safety, teacher quality, etc., using proprietary methodologies. While state data heavily influences the ratings, reviews of a school from local parents, teachers, students and community members can hold more sway with parents of prospective students. Positive reviews from parents who are pleased with their child's education or from staff who can provide testimonials about the atmosphere and rigor at a school can be powerful antidotes to a lower-than-desired rating. These sites also allow an official representative of a school to claim its online profile and provide more detailed information about the academic and extracurricular programs at the school.

- Only two of DCSD's 10 elementary school profiles on GreatSchools.org have been claimed by a school representative, and only one school has parent or staff reviews more recent than 2020.
- The district page on Niche.com has not been claimed, none of the schools pages have been claimed, and no reviews have been posted by any of the schools.

The auditor suggests the following strategies to ensure that visitors to those sites are getting a more holistic picture of DCSD schools:

- Communications staff should regularly monitor DCSD's ratings on these sites and support the school leaders in positioning their schools as positively as possible. Teach principals how to "claim" their school and add general information that will help demonstrate what makes their school special. Alternatively, the communications team can claim all pages and work with site administrators to provide content on each profile.
- Invite engaged and involved parents to post reviews describing their own experiences at the schools. Based on what auditors heard in focus groups, DCSD has many parents who are very satisfied with their child's education and will happily write a review, if invited!
- Consider sharing this information with parent-teacher organization leaders, who may want to promote review writing at their social events to demonstrate and build pride in their children's schools.

In reviewing the GreatSchools.org pages for DCSD elementary schools, the auditor noted that every DCSD elementary school is rated higher for academic progress than the overall summary rating, stating: "Students at this school are making more academic progress from one grade to the next compared to students at other schools in the state." This is something that should be touted.

A key finding of a 2018 study from Stanford University concluded that "the truly important measure for school effectiveness was the rate at which students were making improvements on test scores." A *Business Insider* article about the study summarizes the arguments of Stanford sociologist Sean Riordan, who authored the report: "Parents can use the information to better select schools for their kids. Instead of focusing on how high the test scores are or how big the school's budget is, they can focus on the test score improvement rate – the students' trajectory – to gauge whether a school is effective. Districts can do their part by providing that information to parents. They can become better advocates for lower-income schools if those schools can boast high growth rates."

Action Step 2.6

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

Video is an effective, engaging way of elevating stories about student achievement, district issues and fun or informative events. Many districts regularly use videos during school board meetings and special events, on social media and at local community meetings to show what is happening in their schools.

In Darlington, the use of video is one of the tactics to support achievement of goal 2 in the current communication plan. As the communication plan is reviewed and refined (Recommendation 1), consider adding specific video-based marketing and storytelling strategies in support of measurable objectives and goals for DCSD's communication program.

DCSD is fortunate to have a communications staff member who has video production skills, and the district can also expand video production capacity by considering the following alternatives:

- **Establish a budget and process for contracted video services**. Outsourcing when in-house staff time is limited can speed up turnaround times while ensuring a professional product. With the communications manager serving as producer, look for freelance videographers or producers who can take a project from start to finish. There are many NSPRA members who provide this service as consultants or through their educational service agencies.
- **Collaborate with college broadcast and film programs for video production**. High school video classes may also be used for some projects, but the timing and quality control can sometimes be challenging.

Videos can share visual stories about specific topics with current families and staff, whether it is educating viewers about an issue, showcasing an innovative classroom practice or celebrating a school, student or staff achievement. Videos allow others to see, hear and feel the enthusiasm of staff and students for the district and their schools. The medium is particularly effective as a tool for communicating a district's brand and value proposition to potential families and prospective employees.

Following are some potential strategic uses of video in support of wider communication goals and objectives:

- Link video segments in *A Glimpse Inside* and the district *Digest* newsletter.

- Post videos of testimonials and students engaged in learning activities on the DCSD website and social media.
- Share videos at the beginning of board and other meetings to highlight recent events or unique learning opportunities.
- Have the superintendent and other district leaders kick off meetings with the community with a video that frames the topic for discussion.

For inspiration, watch these award-winning video projects that other districts used to highlight their students, schools and district:

- Superintendent's feature: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7wSYzKpXvs&list=PLOmpI-FEr01Sj5W8KXp5cWJyq8aiMjLzm&index=3&t=16s
- Teacher recruitment: (https://vimeo.com/showcase/9421722)
- Enrollment promotion in unique programs/magnet schools: (https://youtu.be/LaFmEcR3BNA)
- High school graduate success story: (https://youtu.be/HhwTQqUX3cg)
- Spotlights on special-interest populations such as military families or special education students: (https://www.dropbox.com/s/uqdg9v4mt5ufcre/Kaleigha_team_final.mp4?dl=0)
- Orientation of new families and staff: (https://youtu.be/AL940eU4xxU)
- Employee feature story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czO5xo7ONdc

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

Action Step 2.7

Create printed marketing materials to tell the DCSD education story.

Many districts, including DCSD, have shifted away from print publications in favor of faster and more cost-effective digital communications, but there are instances where printed materials remain an effective way to deliver targeted messages to specific audiences. Marketing, with a multi-pronged approach, is one of them.

Consider creating a district marketing brochure/welcome package that can be distributed to prospective families visiting the schools or newly arriving to work for a local company, to new parents in maternity wards and to the human resource offices of larger employers in the area. Such a brochure should highlight the district's value proposition and brand (see Action Step 2.1) along with the district's educational philosophy, unique programs and services, extracurricular offerings and student demographics. Feature a QR code to a corresponding webpage on the district website, something that goes beyond standard enrollment information to share why families and students should choose DCSD schools.

The Marketing Materials and Publications categories of NSPRA's annual Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards include a variety of district, school and special program marketing samples that can offer inspiration (https://www.nspra.org/Awards/Award-Winners/Publications-and-Digital-Media-Excellence-Winners). For district-level examples, check out these 2023 winners:

- District 191 Overview Brochure, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School district 191, Burnsville, Minn. – https://bit.ly/42KW4GE
- Richland One Fact Sheet, Richland County School district One, Columbia, S.C. – https://bit.ly/3XaY9ul

Action Step 2.8

Create a visually engaging, branded version of DCSD's strategic plan.



A participant in the business leaders focus group told the audit team that they don't see a strategy behind the district's work, and another from the same group commented that information needs to be digestible and not "read like a law that is going to be passed through the statehouse."

An opportunity for making public-facing documents more engaging exists with DCSD's strategic plan. While satisfying the district's internal needs and fulfilling state requirements, it is not inviting for non-educators interested in learning more about the district and its priorities. Creating a version oriented to lay readers that highlights key elements and incorporates graphic elements will allow DCSD to showcase the district's strong commitment to student achievement and the many opportunities available to its students.

Several examples from NSPRA member districts may provide inspiration:

- Ascension Public Schools in Ascension Parish, Louisiana created a series of executive summaries of the strategic plans for each of several divisions of its district.
- Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School district created an annual report-style publication that pairs its strategic plan with attractive photos illustrating the district's work: Heights 2020: The Path To Student Success Strategic Plan.

Other examples of how districts have presented their strategic plans can be found on NSPRA's Samples and Resources section: https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Plan-district-Communications

Recommendation 3:

Expand communications and outreach efforts that build community awareness of DCSD's accomplishments.

In the DCSD focus groups, multiple parents, teachers and community leaders expressed a belief that community members with no affiliation to the district form opinions of DCSD based on national media coverage of public schools in general and have low awareness of what is actually happening in local schools. There was a relatively low level of participation among community members in the SCOPE Survey, but the survey results also suggest unaffiliated community members have less positive perceptions of their local schools. Together, these findings spotlight a knowledge gap for some community members that could be filled through communications.

NSPRA researchers have observed many districts nationwide that struggle to communicate with and engage citizens who have no personal connections to or experiences with their local schools. The following action steps are offered to help DCSD deliver information about the good work going on to support local students to more of these types of local residents.

Action Step 3.1

Issue an annual report to Darlington County residents

Many school systems send mailers when a bond or ballot measure is being considered, but some also consistently update community members about their school system with attractive print and digital publications sent periodically throughout the year or annually. Topics often include recent key district achievements, student academic data and athletic accomplishments, financial information, features on school board members, and photos and stories of students engaged in innovative learning experiences.

One effective way of extending the division's messaging to external audiences is to create an annual report that is shared by mail (and digitally) with the entire Darlington County community. For inspiration, the following are a few larger school systems that earned 2023 NSPRA Publications and Digital Media Excellence awards for their annual reports:

- Annual Report 2021-22, Downington Area School District in Pennsylvania (13,000 students) - https://bit.ly/3CpanWN
- 2022 Report to the Community, Battle Ground Public Schools in Washington (12,000 students) - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oDRHsJmT2aRf8zWCvc7xSCxeW0HeRmnj/view
- Gearing Up for Future Success: 2021-22 Annual Report, Avon Grove School District in Pennsylvania (5,000 students) - https://bit.ly/3CpaoKl

Action Step 3.2

Build a coordinated outreach program for real estate agents.

DCSD Schools should build strong relationships with area real estate agents. They are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community, allowing them to influence initial impressions of local schools.

Real estate agents are subject to the Fair Housing Act when sharing information about a school district with prospective home

buyers. This federal law protects people from discrimination because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability or familial status during housing-related activities such as buying or renting a home. In short, it means agents can't tell parents one neighborhood has better schools than another or that one home is in a more desirable district. However, as noted in Action Step 2.5, agents can provide families with third-party tools that empower them to decide on their own whether a home and its schools are a good fit.

This is where the district can work to promote its value proposition for potential families. Following are some ideas on how the district can be a third-party source for information:

- Invite local agents to an annual informational meeting with refreshments and a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Find an example program from the NSPRA 2019 Golden Achievement Award winner Fayette County (Ga.) Public School System at https://www.fcboe.org/site/Default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&PageID=1&ViewID=6446ee88-d30c-497e-9316-3f8874b3e108&FlexDataID=12539.
- Provide agents with information packets, a checklist of information that is available on the district website and a link to a special district webpage set up just for prospective families.
- Contact the county real estate group and large, multi-agent companies to see if the superintendent could speak during a monthly meeting.
- Invite a couple of well-known local real estate agents from different companies to participate in a podcast discussion with the superintendent on housing and enrollment trends in the community.

#3

Expand communications and outreach efforts that build community awareness of DCSD's accomplishments.

Action Step 3.3

Add more personalization to opportunities for connection between the superintendent and the business community.

During focus group conversations, the audit team heard a strong desire from several business leaders to have a one-on-one relationship with the superintendent.

That level of personal connection appears to exist with some business leaders, but it can be challenging to maintain on a wider scale in such a large community. DCSD currently invites more than 100 business leaders to participate in a business cabinet, where participants engage in conversations, hear from the superintendent and get to ask questions. The group typically has fewer than 20 participants, though, and mostly the same individuals on a regular basis.

To expand the circle of those who feel closely connected with DCSD leadership, the auditor suggests adding a personal component to this effort. Consider having the superintendent set aside a block of time each month for calling up to 10 of the invited business leaders who haven't yet attended a business cabinet meeting. Extend a personal, verbal invitation to attend the next meeting, but also pre-plan 2-3 questions to ask the business leaders during the

calls if their time allows. One question should be about what topic/content would make the meeting a must-attend for them, but the other question(s) should be structured to give Dr. Newman quick insights into the perceptions and immediate concerns of local business leaders.

These personal calls are intended as relationship-builders, but the feedback can also help to guide decisions and inform the district about issues that should be addressed more broadly throughout the community.

As engagement in the business cabinet grows, spotlight those businesses who regularly participate in the cabinet and actively support school programs in ways such as stories on social media and the website or awards programs. For inspiration, check out these winners in NSPRA's 2024 Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards contest:

- CTE Month Business Partners Recognition on Facebook, Ingham Intermediate School District, Michigan - https://www.facebook.com/WilsonTalentCenter/posts/pfbid02MCnh3pGA4pydF9GwMgUUr4oaN4hqt5Hdf8dRJ3hzL3Ajs8wA5LvuE7AukUyQUXKzl
- Business Partner of the Year Video, Socorro Independent School District, Texas - https://youtu.be/NpoHYO5S990?si=oNnanXO06kIkPz3u
- Construction Students Experience Hands-On Learning with Local Businesses Video, Papillion La Vista Community Schools, Nebraska - https://youtu.be/ChiWWZIqxaI?si=hQZbfA4CBQH06KCt

Action Step 3.4

Expand on programs that increase senior citizens' engagement in schools.

DCSD reports great success engaging senior citizens through its Red Apple Pass program, which allows residents aged 60+ to attend most school-sponsored athletic, music, dramatic and/or band events free of charge. Such programs give less-affiliated residents an exciting reason to welcome a first-hand look at DCSD's educational and extracurricular programs. The programs build good will and also create personal connections to local schools that otherwise might not exist.

Following are two other program ideas with similar aims worth considering:

- Matinee Receptions—A one-hour brunch event exclusively for senior citizens held before the matinee of an annual high school musical, where they can hear the director talk about the performance.
- Technology Help Days—Technophile high school students host senior citizens for one-on-one help with questions about computers, mobile devices and software.

Action Step 3.5

Leverage employees' positive perceptions about DCSD by increasing their ability to serve as ambassadors.



As shown in the Key Findings, 71 percent of DCSD employees who participated in the SCOPE Survey rate their perception of the district as excellent or above average, and 64

percent indicated they are extremely or very informed about how they can best represent the district as an ambassador. Both of these ratings are higher than the national averages. These are very positive findings that can be used to empower employees to serve as ambassadors for the organization during work hours and after hours, if they choose, in their real and virtual communities.

Further, DCSD employees are interacting with many stakeholders each week, creating ample opportunities to leave a positive impression and share what is happening in the district. When DCSD employees were asked to estimate the typical number of interactions they have with parents or community members weekly, 63 percent indicated they have 1-15 interactions a week, while another 16 percent have 16 or more interactions a week. For this survey sample of 358 employees, that represents 3,000-7,227 interactions per week. When extended to the entire staff of 1,750, this represents a potential of up to 36,000 interactions per week. For these person-to-person interactions to be meaningful and positive for the district, employees must first see themselves as district ambassadors and have the information they need to interact effectively with external stakeholders.

To begin, develop an ambassador tool kit for school system employees. An ambassador tool kit is designed to help employees see themselves as representatives for their school system when out in the community. It gives them the information they need to understand how the school system operates and how their work supports the organization's mission.

Employee ambassador kits can be delivered in a print, virtual or video format and should contain basic facts and information such as:

- The information included in the About Us section of the district website
- Strategic goals and highlights and the district's progress in achieving them
- Student enrollment and demographics
- Number of staff employed
- Revenue sources
- Brief summaries of special initiatives, programs and services
- Branding elements for employee use (e.g.,logos, taglines) and where to find and download graphics files
- Ways to engage with the district online

The content should be written with an employee reader in mind. Think: "What would employees want to know if they were asked to talk about our school system?"

The tool kit should be part of the orientation process for new employees and revisited at least annually with existing employees. This reminds them of their daily roles as representatives of an educational community. Also, in remarks to employees throughout the school year, leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as ambassadors for schools and public education.

Once the ambassador program is established, recognize and reward outstanding employee ambassadors to keep employees motivated and engaged. Invite employees to anonymously recognize each other for representing and promoting the school system in an exceptional way. Highlight an ambassador of the month (or year) on social media, the website, in digital or print publications and at school board meetings.

To empower employees to serve as ambassadors, some districts implement formal programs such as the brand ambassadors program of Santa Ana Unified School District in California (https://socialschool4edu.com/podcast/135/) or develop helpful materials such as the award-winning pocket guide produced by Orange County Public Schools in Florida (https://cdnsm5-ss15.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_54619/File/

Departments/Marketing%20and%20Events/PocketGuide2019-20.pdf).

Action Step 3.6

Update the Office of Communications website to widen the circle of DCSD communicators.



The audit team heard repeatedly that the staff in DCSD's Office of Communications are highly respected throughout the district. Build on the goodwill generated by the communications team by sharing all of the work they do to keep the community informed and inviting parents and employees to join in as volunteer communicators.

For inspiration, turn to the Communications team webpage for Sun Prairie Area School District in Wisconsin, an NSPRA Golden Achievement Award winner. They created an effective webpage for their department that outlines the work they do, includes a link for stakeholders to share stories, and invites community members to sign up to become key communicators. Their invitation: "Join our email list to get updates from the district so you can stay informed and answer questions you may get while out and about in the community."

Action Step 3.7

Provide district and school leaders with access to brief, branded presentations for use when speaking with community groups.

Consider having the communications team create a few brief, branded presentations for a community audience with content focused on areas related to district operations that are also important to community members such as academics, career and technical programs, school safety and student wellness. These ready-to-use presentations could be delivered by the superintendent and district leaders when they are invited to speak with business and community groups, providing an opportunity to turn the conversation toward student learning and district goals.

Having quick access to branded presentations on topics of interest will make it easier for the superintendent and other district leaders to serve regularly as ambassadors for DCSD outside of the regular work environment (e.g., booster groups, service organizations, recreational clubs) and to create new personal connections with the schools.

Recommendation 4:

Strategically engage families and the wider community through enhanced social media content.

Social media and video use is high among U.S. adults and teens today. Among all adults, 83 percent use YouTube, 68 percent use Facebook, 47 percent use Instagram and 22 percent use Twitter, according to the Pew Research Center. The center found that young adult usage patterns differ slightly, with 93 percent using YouTube, 78 percent using Instagram, 67 percent using Facebook and 42 percent using Twitter. A 2023 survey from Gallup shows similar usage patterns, with 76 percent of U.S. adults saying they use Facebook and 89 percent saying they use YouTube.

Social media is a frequent source of information about the district for many parents, staff and community members, as shown on pages 15-17 of the Key Findings. As shown on page 18, among stakeholders who frequently use social media for information about the district, 96 percent of employees and parents, and 88 percent of community members use Facebook. The high percentages of DCSD stakeholders who regularly use social media to find or learn information about the district indicate that social media presents an opportunity to further strengthen engagement with families and the community, in particular.

As the Office of Communications updates its strategic communication plan (Recommendation 1), consideration should be given to the strategic role social media will play in DCSD's communication program. The following action steps provide some ideas.

Action Step 4.1

Prioritize platforms and develop post content more strategically.

The DCSD Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube accounts are professional in appearance and easy to read. All that is needed is a more strategic approach to developing content. Incorporate the following best practices to enhance current posting practices:

- **Focus on Facebook, which has the highest reach among DCSD stakeholders**, and continue posting on Instagram, which has a moderate reach. Since very few stakeholders are learning about the district from X/Twitter, consider modifying the account bio to indicate that it is no longer actively maintained and de-prioritizing or eliminating posting there. Be sure to remove the Twitter bird icon from the district webpage footer, too.
- **Focus on customization and avoid sharing identical post content across platforms.** While it is efficient and logical to carry posts across platforms, DCSD should also take into account the differences in the intended audiences. For example, photos are good for both Facebook and Instagram, but Facebook carries a lot of its message content within the text of a post, while Instagram users take more meaning from the images themselves and hashtags. Try using short-form video Reels on Instagram to increase engagement, and adjust the tone of posts for the more typical audiences on each platform (e.g., teens on Instagram, parents on Facebook).
- **Add commentary when reposting messages from the schools.** It is a good strategy to repost messages from individual schools, but adding supportive

comments when reposting to the district feed can make them more engaging and lets students, parents and staff know that the district is truly paying attention to what is going on in their school communities.

- **Depict learning taking place that highlights district goals in action.** For example, post a series of photos or short-form video about high schoolers preparing for the rigorous Advanced Placement exams, or quote the teaching philosophies of award-winning teachers rather than just showing recognition photos of the winners.

Action Step 4.2

Enhance opportunities for engagement on the DCSD Facebook page.

Social media platforms are intended to be engaging spaces where people interact with other users and organizations. The more overall comments, shares and reactions you receive on posts, the more likely that existing followers will see your content in their news feeds due to how algorithms work. With that in mind, focus on maintaining the district's Facebook page as a space stakeholders regularly visit for news and conversations about local schools.

To give people more reasons to click, comment and share, continue to use and/or newly introduce these best practices:

- **Continue to encourage user-generated content**, as is often shared on the first day of school, throughout the year:
  - Ask high school sports fans to post selfies with the school mascots.
  - Ask alumni to share their old high school prom photos as current students prepare for the big day.
  - Ask recent graduates to post selfies from their colleges, giving a shout-out to their high schools, in the lead up to graduation for current seniors.
  - Run trivia contests with prizes around the holidays or an enrollment push.
- **Share posts from other sources that compliment or highlight school programs**. Acknowledgment by outsiders sends a positive message to parents, students and staff. It also gives DCSD an opportunity to highlight its civic and business partnerships in the community.

#4

Strategically engage families and the wider community through enhanced social media content.

Action Step 4.3

Use more video in social media posts.

Social media posts that include a video generate 1,200 percent more shares than text and image content combined. Instagram's chief also shared recently that the number of sends (aka, shares) correlates more strongly with overall reach on the platform.

Action Step 2.6 outlines a number of ideas for creating informative and engaging videos, which can be used on Facebook and Instagram as well as on YouTube and the website. Post longer-form videos on Facebook as needed, but stick with shorter-form videos on Instagram. Be sure to post native video files within a social media platform over YouTube video links whenever possible.

Recommendation 5:

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

DCSD's average ratings by employees for communications being open and transparent, and for their input, opinions and involvement being welcome and valued were above national averages on the SCOPE Survey, though they fell within the "undecided" rating response option. Adding more insight on this topic, feedback from employees in the focus groups and survey comments conveyed room for improvement on intra-district communication outside of what is handled by the Office of Communications, including department-to-department communication, communication from departments to school sites and communication between schools.

The following themes in the feedback on internal communications in DCSD point to challenges that are common in many school districts across the country:

- Employees generally want more advance notice about changes and decisions, and they want to hear news before parents and the community. They report that information is sometimes learned from secondary sources before the district or schools release it, leading parents to know before employees do.
- Some employees perceive a lack of transparency from leaders about decisions and announcements, and that changes are communicated too shortly before implementation leaving little time for them to prepare.
- Internal messaging across departments and schools is reportedly inconsistent in timing and content.
- Some employees believe that while input is allowed, it is not always considered. They are not confident their individual feedback will be kept confidential, and they have found that the overall results of surveys and focus groups are rarely relayed back to those who provided input.

Communication within a school community is not just the responsibility of formal communications staff, the superintendent, principals or other administrators. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with internal colleagues, which in turn improves communication with external stakeholders and increases timeliness. In other words, if employees don't have a clear understanding of an issue or a pending decision, it results in inconsistency in the content and timing of information being shared formally and informally with parents and community members.

The following action steps are offered as ways to maintain a districtwide culture of regular, effective internal communications. This can help increase staff trust that they will be provided with the information they need to do their jobs well and increase their confidence in their schools and district.

Action Step 5.1

Consistently take an employees-first approach to disseminating information.



Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. NSPRA auditors have found that when employees feel they are the last to know and that information comes to them first through non-official channels (e.g, non-district social media, parent conversations),

they feel less valued and experience barriers to serving as district and school ambassadors. In addition, when staff must rely on second-hand sources of information, the district's ability to disseminate accurate information is hampered. SCOPE Survey results indicated that social media is parents' fourth most frequently used source of information about the district, and the fifth is "what other people tell me." The people they most often turn to are students and school or district employees, as detailed on page 20 of the Key Findings.

By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and by supporting them in that role with timely information, key messages and training, the district can expand the reach of its communications. To develop an employees-first communication process:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Employees are frontline communicators and should receive important information—particularly about issues that affect their jobs and workplaces—before families and the media whenever possible. Try to allow enough time for employees to receive and read the information before public distribution; scheduling communications for times where most staff are likely to have access to email is also helpful.
- **Be sure to include administrative secretaries and office managers in the communication loop**, particularly during crisis situations. These employees become a trusted source of information because they interact with most employees at their school/worksite and often communicate with departments. As the first point of contact for many staff, as well as parents and visitors, they can influence communications and the climate of a building as much as a principal or department administrator.

#5

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

- **Use the most effective tools to communicate** based on the urgency of the message, timing considerations and audit data on employees' communication preferences for different situations. A wide array of communication tools are available to push out information to keep employees informed and engaged, but if it doesn't already exist, consider also creating a centralized location for urgent employee information in the staff portal.
- **When possible, share information in settings that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the topic**. Unless employees understand the rationale and the process used to address an issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates. Following are additional benefits to sharing information in interactive settings:
  - Complex decisions are better shared in a staff meeting where questions can be asked and answered for an entire group rather than in one-off emails.
  - Staff may provide valuable feedback on how to implement a change that can help the district avoid negative unintended consequences.
  - A personal visit to a staff meeting explaining that there will be administrative changes gives leaders opportunities to explain why some details are not being shared.

Action Step 5.2

Establish and follow a consistent process for how key information is to be shared with staff.



Throughout the focus group sessions, employees reported a fragmented approach to how information is disseminated, with confusion about who is responsible for sharing news. Similarly, an employee's survey comment observed, "At times it is as though the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing," while another comment noted that people in the same department are not always on the same page. This inconsistency in communications and knowledge appears to be damaging trust and negatively affecting the way decisions are perceived.

Central office employees described a somewhat recent change in how they are expected to communicate from one department to another. They report that to get information from someone from another department, they must go to their supervisor, who will communicate the question or request to the head of the other department, who will discuss it with the person in their department with direct knowledge of the issue. Theoretically, the information then flows back in the opposite direction. They referred to this as the "up, over and down" rule and perceived that this process causes information to bottleneck and not flow efficiently throughout the district.

To clarify and improve the process for internal communications, have the senior leadership and central office leadership teams work with the director of communications to create a list of which tools for staff communications are preferred for which situations and set expectations for the timeliness of releases to staff, relative to announcements with other stakeholders. This information should be shared and reviewed with district administrators and school principals at least annually.

The guidance document outlining these expectations might include:

- **Guidelines for who will distribute various types of information and what channels are to be used.** All DCSD leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles. Consider using a chart like on pages 68-69 to clearly define communication roles and responsibilities for different administrators and departments.
- **Plans for issuing talking points for all major initiatives.** To ensure all staff receive the same information simultaneously, the district should utilize a consistent system of developing talking points around key issues, including what decision-making processes are being used and how decisions will impact employees, students and families. The points can be drafted by those responsible for the issues, but they should then be vetted through the director of communications for consistency of message, ease of understanding and coordinated distribution.
- **Expectations regarding the timing of communications.** This will create consistencies and help alleviate anxiety about when information can be expected. Following are types of expectations that should be considered:
  - Staff should receive important information at least 30 minutes before parents and the community so that they can serve as front-line communicators for the schools.
  - Information employees need to know will be delivered at least 48 hours before they need to act on it.
  - The district office and individual departments will respond to staff inquiries within 48 hours.

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Office of Communications	District-level updates on: • Routine matters that impact more than one school • Urgent matters that impact any school • Major division-wide initiatives • Staff and student stories that illustrate the district's mission, vision and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media • Videos • News releases to media • Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Administrative Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/ action briefs Board policy changes	Board webpages
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Chief Financial Officer	Budget and finance updates Bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Director of Human Resource	Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items	HR webpages Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Board meetings
Principals	School-level updates on: • School-specific routine matters • School-specific urgent matters • Major district-wide initiatives (using tool kit provided)	School-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media

- **Dedication of time for key announcements during leadership and faculty meetings**. These meetings should always include an agenda item for sharing updates on and answering questions about current district initiatives and issues. As critical information sources for the rest of the staff, leaders also must be informed in a reliable, timely and thorough way.

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://bit.ly/3uoCe8J
- **Communication Guide for SchoolBased Administrators**, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools–https://bit.ly/4a0z0ZF

Action Step 5.3

Develop a support and training program for district, department and school leaders who are responsible for communicating.

The SCOPE Survey data about communication preferences and levels of feeling informed provide an excellent opportunity for the district to provide enhanced communications training to leaders who are responsible for conveying information, both veterans and new hires.

An at least annual communication training event could provide strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help leaders in their communications with staff, families and other stakeholders. This training would also strengthen their partnerships with the director of communications, who can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments in support of greater consistency in communications districtwide.

Following are some recommendations for how to structure such trainings:

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to use them). Review the SCOPE Survey data, as well as local and national research, to determine what families and community members want to know from their schools and districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and websites. Provide opportunities for mock on-camera media interviews and a self-reflection exercise based on where they are as the "chief communicator" for their school, department or district area.
- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from one of the district's schools or a department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group discussions on current communication practices, challenges and ways they might overcome them.
- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review the goals and objectives of the DCSD Strategic Plan. Lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) the achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.

Consider offering a similar type of training for frontline communicators in department and school offices, who frequently receive staff and parent inquiries and greet visitors.

Recommendation 6:

Increase transparency and trust with stakeholders by focusing on two-way communication in decision-making processes.

DCSD's average ratings by parents, employees and the community for their trust in the communications they receive from the district and for communications being open and transparent were above national averages on the SCOPE Survey. At the same time, numerous comments on the survey suggest there is a perception among some stakeholders that the district operates in secrecy, and employee focus group participants noted that while the district asks for input frequently, the results of the input-gathering are rarely shared back with stakeholders.

NSPRA auditors frequently hear from parents and employees during focus groups that they feel like their feedback is neither wanted nor considered during decision-making processes, even when formally collected through surveys and community meetings. Increasing transparency around decision-making processes can help change these feelings. It is also a powerful way to build consent and trust in the work of a school system and its leaders.

Action Step 6.1

Create a common understanding of how it is decided whether and when to include stakeholders in decision-making processes.



Not all decisions require public input, so it is important to have a consistent understanding among district and school leaders of when public input will be sought. Setting—and sticking to—procedures for gathering input on major decisions will ultimately serve to strengthen trust and transparency throughout the district.

When a decision requires input on a broader scale, opinions and suggestions can be gathered through surveys, polls, crowd-sourcing applications (such as ThoughtExchange), virtual meetings or focus groups.

But before inviting feedback in a decision-making process, consider these points:

- **Do not ask for input if a decision has already been made.** When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, stakeholders can easily feel their input does not matter because the decision has already been made. Meetings could, however, be used to solicit staff ideas for implementing a new program or initiative or to get parent feedback about how well a change in procedures has worked for their family. This can provide the district with valuable input on ways to further refine the processes that have been or are going to be changed.
- **Give input appropriate consideration.** In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary but choose to seek input before finalizing it. When this is done and input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders must give the input due consideration. If it is not actionable, explain the reasons why and the rationale for the final decision.
- **Seek input from a variety of voices and perspectives.** It is tempting to go back to the same people who always respond when a request for input is made rather than to seek new and different voices from people that are less likely to get involved. Consider which stakeholders may be directly affected by the decision as well

as those who may perceive themselves or those they care about to be affected by it, directly or indirectly.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** In most cases, the school board or administrators seek input to gather information to make a better decision. Confusion may enter the process if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive that they are making the decision. To avoid such a situation, clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used, and who will make the actual decision.

Action Step 6.2

Use communication protocol questions during decision-making processes.



To make sharing information about decisions more systematic, incorporate communication protocol questions into discussions of major decisions during leadership meetings, department and school-level meetings, and committee meetings. 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 and how?** Identify the stakeholder groups directly or indirectly affected by the issue as primary or secondary target audiences for communications. Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect each group 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 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 and when will this issue be communicated?** Identify the strategies and tactics that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders and how their input will be sought and incorporated into the process. 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 staff, families, the news media and other stakeholders.

#6

Increase transparency and trust by focusing on two-way communication in decision-making processes.

Action Step 6.3

Go beyond surveys to get employee feedback during decision-making processes.

When DCSD leaders are considering decisions that directly impact staff members and the schools, seeking their input in advance whenever possible should be a priority. Gathering staff input not only lets

staff know that their input is valued, but it can also help identify concerns from the grassroots perspective of those charged with implementing decisions. This is particularly important as leaders make changes to the organization's established procedures.

Surveys are frequently used by districts to gather employee input, but it can be gathered in a number of ways: group conversations during staff meetings, one-on-one meetings with frontline staff, focus groups, staff roundtable conversations with administrators, and meetings with employee group leaders.

Rounding can be a relatively easy way to quickly gather employee input. Here's how rounding conversations work: The district's Senior Leadership Team is discussing an idea where staff input is needed to inform the decision, so it develops two or three questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue. The Senior Leadership Team then asks principals and department supervisors to each find five staff members in their building or department to answer the questions. Principals and supervisors later share the responses with the Senior Leadership Team for consideration in the decision-making process.

Action Step 6.4

Consistently share how stakeholder feedback influenced the outcome of a decision-making process.

DCSD aims to involve the public in decision-making, but some stakeholders feel there's little follow-through on their input, making them doubt its value. A representative survey comment: "I know where and how to direct concerns/complaints, but I feel like my opinion is not valued as decisions are made at the top no matter what."

The process of keeping stakeholders informed about a decision-making process begins as soon as the district determines there is a decision to be made, continues throughout the duration of the process and culminates with sharing the decision that was made along with the factors that were considered, including stakeholder input. The choice of communication channels, whether it be the website, newsletters, emails or social media, should be tailored to the nature of the decision and the communication preferences of affected stakeholders.

Consider adding "What We Heard" features in various school communications to highlight the status, results, and next steps regarding recent public input requests. These could be brief videos on websites and social media or encouraging principals, department heads and other system leaders to share "What We Heard" information in their staff meetings. In these updates, provide information about how stakeholders have been or can be involved in the decision-making process and how their input has been or will be utilized. Express appreciation for those who participated, remind them of the areas in which they gave feedback, share key findings, direct them to online summary results and outline the next steps in the decision-making process. Acknowledge that while not all input may result in immediate action, it remains valuable for understanding public concerns.

When making decisions, it's important to present the rationale and outcome. Explaining the reasoning behind specific actions and keeping stakeholders informed of the next steps and outcomes helps build trust and confidence in leadership. Providing all of this context for a decision may not always change stakeholders' support, but it fosters informed consent or a willingness to accept the decision, even if reluctantly. In addition, when stakeholders see their input valued, they are more likely to participate in future requests for input. As noted in Action Step 6.5, sharing the results of the communication audit report with

focus group participants is an important step in demonstrating the district's commitment to using public input effectively.

Following are two examples of districts that created and successfully implemented a plan to build informed consent for their decision-making process and for the resulting decision:

- Racine Unified School district earned a 2018 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for a school transformation campaign that engaged stakeholders in the decision-making process through focus groups, online surveys, a Kaizen event and more. Learn more about the campaign at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/Audits/racineusd_2018gmentry.pdf?ver=oKK1npXJ8nTQDm9-L9XVqw%3d%3d.
- Alexandria City Public Schools earned a 2019 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for its campaign to address high school capacity issues. The campaign involved capturing the voices of students, local business leaders and higher education leaders; surveying staff and the community; holding town hall meetings; and employing other strategies to engage stakeholders in the decision-making process. Find the award-winning campaign entry at https://bit.ly/3V9vsgN.

Action Step 6.5

Be transparent about the outcome of the communication audit process.



Sharing the outcome of the communication audit process is a good place to begin demonstrating that input truly matters to district leaders and impacts future activities.

Develop a plan for how the communication audit outcome will be communicated. Tactics might include having a presentation for the Board of Education, sending emails to focus group participants and to all staff, and posting information on the website for example. In the plan, include methods for telling stakeholders why the district had a communication audit conducted, how it is taking the findings to heart and what the district's next steps will be in response to those findings.

Beyond sharing news of the completion of the communication audit, the report findings could also become the basis for productive discussions about district and school communication practices and tools by sharing and discussing the results at department and school staff meetings and during parent-teacher association meetings.

This kind of transparency will demonstrate clearly that DCSD leaders prioritize two-way communications.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Participants

1. What is the current image of your school system in the community? How would you describe Darlington County School District to someone new to your community?
2. What do you perceive as DCSD's strengths? What are the areas needing improvement?
3. What does DCSD do well when it comes to communicating on important issues?
4. What are your perceptions about the trustworthiness of the district? Are there any areas where you would like to get more information or a different type of information?
5. What does DCSD do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis(e.g., bomb threat, student misbehavior, employee misconduct, COVID-19, social justice protests)? How might the school system improve on that?
6. When district leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel 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?
7. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing DCSD?

Additional Questions: Staff

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

Additional Questions: Board of Education

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

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to develop professionals to communicate strategically, build trust and foster positive relationships in support of their school communities. That mission is accomplished by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to association members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

NSPRA members:

- • **Connect and Grow:** This unique professional community includes the NSPRA Connect online forum, Mentor Match, APR Learning Cohort, and national leadership and service opportunities.
- • **Expand and Elevate:** Through digital e-newsletters and alerts, free PR Power Hour webinars on tactics, free Leaders Learn webinars on strategies, on-demand learning and National Seminar scholarships, members expand their knowledge and elevate their work.
- • **Share and Learn:** Members have access to best practices at www.nspra.org, which offers the online NSPRA Gold Mine; resources on topics such as crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.; salary and career surveys; and more.

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Audit Team Vitae

Naomi Hunter, APR

Auditor and NSPRA Communication Surveys Manager



As NSPRA's communication surveys manager, Naomi Hunter, APR, oversees the association's in-house SCOPE Survey service for communication audits and also serves as an auditor. She has 30 years of experience in strategic communications and public relations in the public, private and non-profit sectors.

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

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

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

Naomi earned her accreditation in public relations (APR) in 2010. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Northwestern University and a master's degree from Stanford University.

Mellissa Braham, APR

NSPRA Associate Director



Mellissa Braham, APR, has more than 25 years of experience in public relations, working primarily in the education and healthcare sectors. As NSPRA associate director since 2018, she is responsible for coordinating NSPRA's research services, managing staff, coordinating programming for the NSPRA National Seminar, overseeing chapter relations, contributing to member resources and developing association products. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR).

Learn more about Mellissa at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Associate-Director.

Alyssa Teribury

NSPRA Communication Research Manager



As communications research specialist, Alyssa plays a key role in NSPRA's research efforts such as developing communication audits, data reports and whitepapers. She joined NSPRA in 2023 after serving as a school public relations professional for 10 years—an award-winning career that included being named to NSPRA's 2022-23 Class of 35 Under 35.

Learn more about Alyssa at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Research-Manager.

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