the leader in school communication

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Communication Audit Report

Shaker Heights City School District

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Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Shaker Heights City School District (Shaker Heights Schools) 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 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/families 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, Shaker Heights Schools' communication program 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

- The Board of Education and superintendent are committed to improving communication, as evidenced by soliciting this audit.
- The Department of Communications is well-staffed by a highly competent team, offering a wide range of knowledge, skills and abilities.
- The Shaker Heights Schools community is appreciative of the professionalism and responsiveness of the communications staff.
- The district offers a robust communications infrastructure that allows for sending information through a wide variety of channels, including email, phone

calls, text messages and apps. It also has a strong social media presence.

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

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- Parents, staff and community members are, on average, mostly undecided about their level of trust in communication from the district and/or the school where they work or that their child attends.
- Engagement and two-way communication opportunities were cited by multiple stakeholders as gaps in the Shaker Heights Schools communication program.
- The Department of Communications and the Family and Community Engagement Center are separate entities, making it difficult to effectively coordinate and integrate two-way communication and engagement activities.
- Many parents and employees experience information overload because of the amount of information sent and the number of platforms used to send it.
- Social media and the pervasiveness of mobile devices are contributing to mis/disinformation about the district.
- There are concerns among stakeholders that there are barriers to online access of information for marginalized stakeholders.
- Some community stakeholders say they feel disconnected from the district, while being asked to support higher property taxes for schools.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing the Shaker Heights Schools 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. Implement strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication program.
2. Formalize collaboration between the district's communication and engagement functions, and create shared support structures.
3. Increase transparency and participation in decision-making processes across the district, departments and schools.
4. Nurture a culture of two-way communication with employees.
5. Expand the communication methods used to engage external stakeholders.
6. Strengthen communication infrastructure by developing and consistently implementing processes and procedures.
7. Prepare to correct and prevent the spread of false information.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in Shaker Heights Schools, not just the Department of Communications. *It is generally not feasible to address more than two to three recommendations each year.* But while some report recommendations may require major investments of time, this report also offers opportunities to rethink existing practices or to make quick improvements without a significant investment of resources.

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. The following section provides this background.

About the District

The Shaker Heights City School District (Shaker Heights Schools) encompasses approximately 7.5 miles and serves the city of Shaker Heights, Ohio, along with a small portion of Cleveland. A decade ago, enrollment was 5,280. Since that time, approximately 100 students have left the district each year. Today, 4,354 students make up the Pre-K-12 student body, who learn in eight school facilities.

Recognized for its aesthetically pleasing architecture and green spaces, the Shaker Heights community is widely recognized as an idyllic place to live. Not far from Cleveland's universities and world-renowned medical facilities, the community's population totals around 29,000 residents.

Shaker Heights Schools is one of eight districts across North America to be recognized as a Pre-K-12 International Baccalaureate District. The district offers numerous high-level honors courses and has produced graduates who became Ivy League scholars, Broadway stars, Pulitzer Prize winners, successful entrepreneurs and athletes. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce rates Shaker Heights Schools with four out of five stars, indicating the district exceeds state standards.

The area has a rich history that continues to shape contemporary perceptions. The area was settled in the 1820s by the North Union Shaker Community, who believed in a Utopian community, the abolition of slavery and the rights of Native Americans. The colony disbanded, and the land was virtually abandoned until the early 1900s when the Van Sweringen brothers developed a "garden city" suburb with strict zoning and design guidelines, most of which contributed to targeting prosperous clientele and discouraging diversity.

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Van Sweringens, the population was overwhelmingly white until an organized effort to promote integration began in the 1950s. There has been an even more deliberate focus on encouraging diversity over the last forty years, and in 2012, there were equal percentages of black and white residents. Currently, the community makeup is 35.6 percent Black and 54.3 percent white. Generally speaking, residents in the district are well-educated and relatively affluent, with 70.1 percent of the population having a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income (in 2022 dollars) was $96,494.

Currently, the student population is 45.4 percent Black, 38.7 percent white, 8.9 percent multiracial, 4.1 percent Hispanic, and 3.1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. The percentage of students with disabilities is 15.6, and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students is 35.9.

Since 2020, the school district has placed even greater attention on racial equity by

being the first district in Ohio to create an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and ending academic tracking of students, giving all students access to advanced classes and creating inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms. In March 2020, the Shaker Heights Schools Board of Education adopted the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, "built on the foundation of two bedrock principles: Educational Equity and the International Baccalaureate Programme."

Residents have consistently voted to support Shaker Heights Schools. Most recently, voters approved a bond issue in November 2023, allowing the Shaker Heights Schools to implement a plan to modernize and update its buildings and expand its Pre-K program.

About the Department of Communications

Shaker Heights Schools' Department of Communications manages the district's mass communication channels, including news releases, crisis communications, website content, weekly newsletters, calendars, social media, direct mail and more. Additional services provided by the department include management of large-scale events, communications training and strategy development, writing and graphics services, videography, photography and branding support. The Ohio School Public Relations Association recently recognized the department with top awards for video production, social media campaigns, special purpose publications, the annual report and the district website.

The department is led by Scott Stephens, who serves as the executive director of communications and engagement. He has been in the position since July 2015, and he has more than 30 years of communications experience. Previously he served as executive director of strategic communications for Chicago Public Schools and as assistant director of public affairs for the American Federation of Teachers.

Stephens reports to the superintendent and has two direct reports, Kristen Miller, the assistant director of communications, and Kristen Cash, the communications specialist.

Stephens leads, manages and directs the district's external and internal communications. He supports and promotes the agenda of the superintendent, is the media spokesperson, and oversees the creation and execution of the strategic communication plan. He serves as an advisor to district leaders, facilitates the superintendent's student advisory meetings, and participates in meetings of the *Forward Together* initiative—a collaboration between the schools, city and library. He also submits articles about Shaker Heights Schools to *Shaker Life*, a quarterly, full-color features magazine published by the City of Shaker Heights.

Miller, who joined the district nine years ago, helps to lead, manage and direct the district's external and internal communications, and counsels the superintendent, cabinet and school principals on communication issues. In the executive director's absence, Miller serves as the district spokesperson and media contact for routine and crisis communications on behalf of the superintendent and school district. She supervises the communications specialist and coordinates the work of freelancers, consultants and contractors. Due to her background, she serves as the graphic designer and created a district branding guide. She also oversees the district website, facilitates teacher advisory meetings, coordinates videotaping and live streaming of board meetings, and produces videos.

Cash, who joined the district three years ago, has grown the specialist position significantly from its original job description. Today she serves as a writer, photographer and videographer for the department and district while also overseeing the district's social media platforms. She is the administrative liaison for the Facilities Planning Committee and facilitates monthly meetings of district PTO leaders.

She also provides editorial, technical and administrative support for the executive and assistant directors. She is heavily involved in the coordination of staff, family and community engagement events such as kindergarten kickoffs, convocations, the district's back-to-school BBQ, panel discussion events for parents and more, along with Miller and Stephens.

Miller and Cash developed a Strategic Communications Plan (2023-2026) for the department that includes the following goals:

- GOAL 1: Use data and metrics to build upon internal and external communication practices to ensure a high level of communication at all times.
- GOAL 2: Cultivate relationships and two-way communications with internal and external stakeholders, including staff, families and students with an emphasis on communities that have traditionally been marginalized.
- GOAL 3: Highlight the district's commitment to Inclusive Excellence in alignment with the district's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan.
- GOAL 4: Highlight the district's commitment to the International Baccalaureate Programme in alignment with the district's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan.

The department has also created a crisis communications plan and uses tabletop scenarios to practice its efficacy.

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 section.

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 these customized recommendations are accompanied by practical, realistic action steps grounded in today's public relations and communications best practices, as reflected within NSPRA's 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 considering the district's mission, vision and core values.

Mission: The district will nurture, educate and graduate students who are civic-minded and prepared to make ethical decisions; who are confident, competent communicators, skillful in problem solving, capable of creative thinking,

who have a career motivation and a knowledge of our global and multicultural society.

Vision: Shaker is the first-choice school district for all students.

Core Values:

- Every student is valued;
- Every student must succeed;
- Diversity makes us stronger;
- Breadth of experience is vital;
- Fiscal responsibility is essential; and
- We are all accountable.

As a result of this extensive audit process, this report provides Shaker Heights Schools with a comprehensive set of recommendations and action steps to improve and enhance 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 Department of Communications submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *Measuring What Matters* #ShakerRising, the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, the 2023 Annual Report, *Shaker eNews, Shaker Life*, etc.). The auditor rigorously reviewed these materials as well as 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 the online School Communications Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked survey was conducted for Shaker Heights Schools from Jan. 26 - Feb. 9, 2024. It included questions regarding:

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

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

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

- Parent Survey:
  - 502 surveys completed
  - 4.4 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Faculty/Staff Survey:
  - 299 surveys completed
  - 5.7 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)
- Community survey:

- 139 surveys completed
- 8.3 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target met)

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 Shaker Heights Schools SCOPE Survey results with the results of other districts who 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, the executive director of communications and engagement, the assistant director of communications and the communications specialist on March 4 - 5, 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 and interviews included the following:

- Administrative assistants
- Support personnel
- Principals (elementary and secondary)
- Community members (business, civic, faith-based, Realtors)
- Parents
- Superintendent's Leadership Team
- Board members
- Students
- Teachers
- District partners

Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

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

- Consultant Auditor Elise Shelton
- Audit Assistant Shawn McKillop, APR
- Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR
- Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR
- Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR

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 Superintendent Dr. David Glasner, the Shaker Heights City School District Board of Education and the executive director of communications and engagement, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

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 in this report are those the auditor believes are best suited to enhancing the Shaker Heights Schools communication program.

When reviewing the report, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Department of Communications** by suggesting options for strengthening the overall communication program.
- **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 inclination is natural and, in fact, aligns with one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that Shaker Heights Schools would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the school district and its work through the perceptions of others.
- **Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held** by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.
- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditor's analysis**, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the communication audit report is issued.

Next Steps

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

Implementing the Recommendations

- It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year while maintaining all current communication programs and services.
- The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Department 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 Department 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 Department of Communications and still pay quick dividends are noted as "quick wins"

with the symbol shown to the right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task or process that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders' feedback and the auditor's analysis. These are noted with the symbol at 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. NSPRA recommends that Shaker Heights Schools share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward, given their high level of interest and the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility.

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

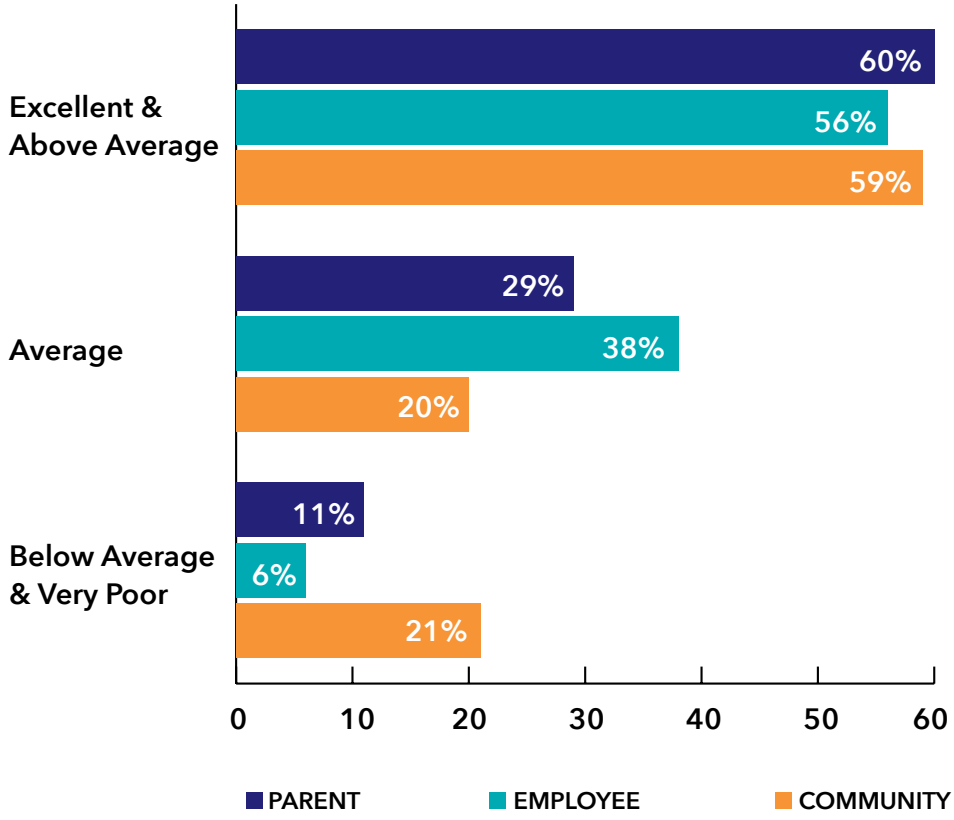
NSPRA's staff auditing team can provide suggestions and examples for how this report could be effectively shared with various constituencies as well as the public.

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the SCOPE Survey, focus group discussions, interviews with district leaders and review of district materials. This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district's image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders, while the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals. 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**, 60 percent of parents, 56 percent of employees and 59 percent of community members rated the district as excellent or above average.



As shown on the SCOPE Scorecard, when these results are translated to a five-point scale to compare them with the results of districts nationwide who have participated in the SCOPE Survey, local perceptions are at or above national averages among parents, staff and community members.

Overall Perception of District	Shaker Heights School	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	**3.6**	**3.6**	**2.6**	**4.3**
Employees	**3.6**	**3.6**	**2.3**	**4.2**
Community	**3.4**	**3.3**	**2.1**	**4.3**

- **The perception of many focus group participants, especially those from staff, board members and parent groups, is that Shaker Heights Schools offers an exceptional education and has an overall positive image, but one that could be in jeopardy and has experienced some tarnish recently.** Specifically, concerns were shared regarding student discipline, declining academic achievement, decreasing enrollment, negative media coverage, issues around detracking and problems with an administrator. As one participant stated, "We have a strong and mostly positive image. Over the past few years as things changed, the image isn't as positive as it once was. Or at least we are hearing more about it due to social media."

- **There is a strong awareness that Shaker Heights Schools has made a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion through its "Excellence for All" initiative.** Following are comments representative of what the auditor heard in this regard:
  - "The community is passionate about trying to do education right with equity and diversity."
  - "We have an equity policy which is important. There is a history of focus on equity. It's an important story to tell. I think we connect equity to all of the things we continue to do."

- **In focus groups with parents and employees, both dominant and marginalized voices expressed some concerns about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts**, sharing frustrations and a perceived lack of progress. The following are representative comments from focus group and SCOPE Survey participants:
  - "It feels that we're really open about DEI, but we have the same conversation over and over again. Why does it feel like we're not getting there? What are we missing? What are we not doing to move the needle?"
  - "Too much focus on diversity and inclusion can backfire and may already be backfiring in Shaker. Stop making race such a thing and dedicating so many resources to this singular topic. The majority of us living in Shaker are here because we value diversity and we already 'get it.'"
  - "There's another level of leaning into the deep complexities of power, privilege and race and how we got here. Sometimes Shaker pats itself on the back too much."

- **Throughout focus groups and in the SCOPE survey, stakeholders noted concerns about portions of the community who are perceived to be disconnected from the district due to not having students in the schools.**
  - Multiple participants specifically referred to this group as "the 70 percent."
  - The predominant perception is that this group either doesn't know how or is unable to access district information, which is mostly provided through online sources and directed to parents, employees, students and other groups with direct connection to the district.
  - As one participant stated, "There's a whole section of geography that isn't communicated with. A lot of elderly residents don't have computers, and social media is challenging."
  - Community leaders, Realtors, district partners and parents all mentioned in focus groups that the city of Shaker Heights has been effective in reaching this population using mechanisms other than online resources. Several participants made the suggestion

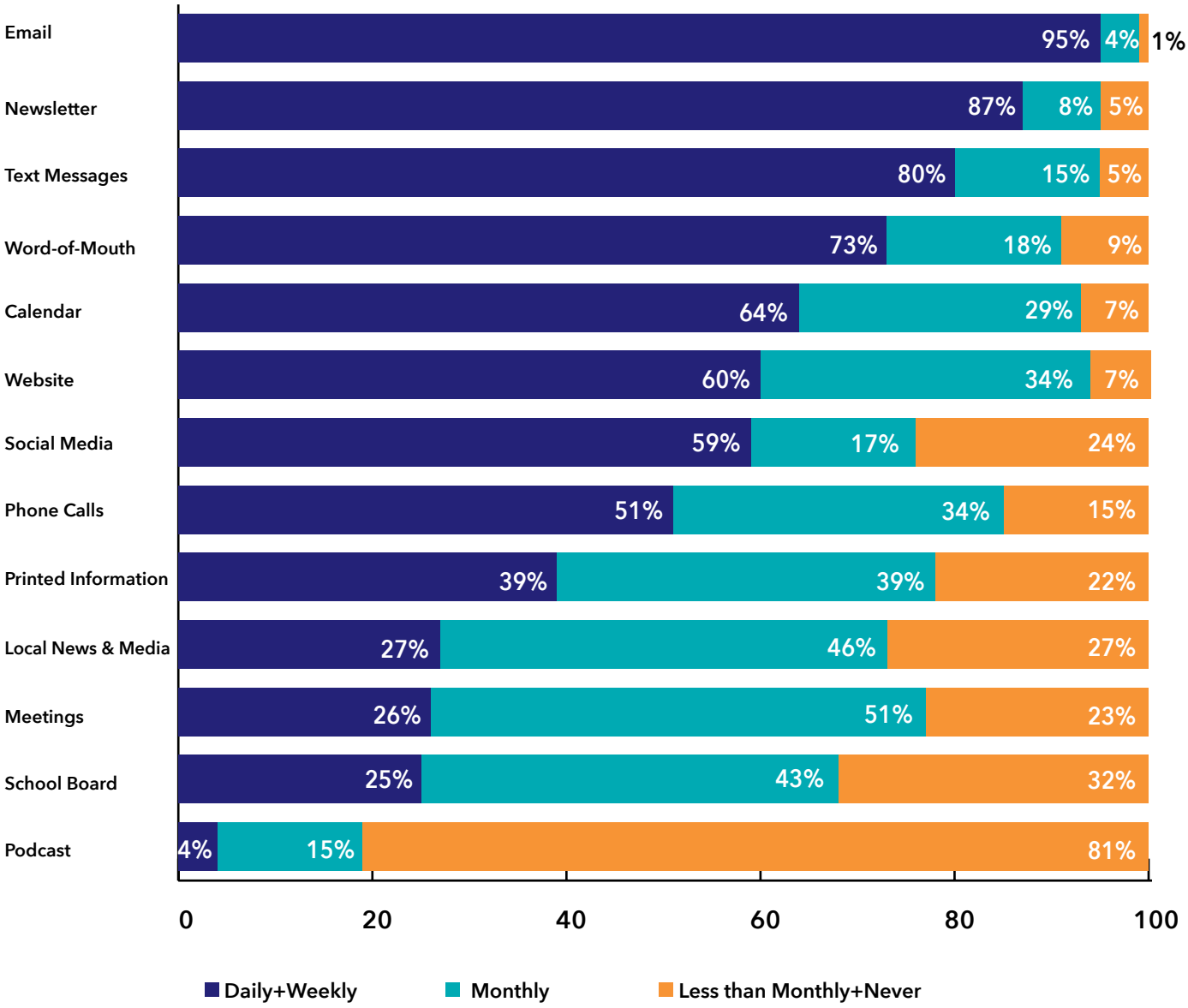
that the district explore partnerships with the city to communicate with this group.

- **Staff and parents shared a concern that there is a "digital divide" in Shaker Heights Schools that keeps some families from consistently receiving the information they need to support their students/children.**
  - There is concern among district leadership, staff and parents that, while all students are issued devices, it doesn't ensure that parents have the tools or capacity to access the information they need to monitor their student's progress and become engaged with the school.
  - In the Superintendent's Leadership Team focus group, concern was expressed that changes in the district's demographics, such as an increase in students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and the number of homeless students, has correspondingly increased the number of families without access to or competency in the use of technology.
- **Multiple participants in focus groups and on the SCOPE Survey shared a belief that significant changes get made in Shaker Heights Schools without input from or conversation with the stakeholders who are affected by the change.** Examples they provided include:
  - The district announcing the decision to end the practice of tracking students in honors and core-level classes when schools were remote in 2020. (Note: "Detracking" is a practice intended to create more inclusive classrooms that deliver the same academic content standards with universally high expectations and to increase the number of students who are prepared for high school course pathways.)
  - Changing the start and stop times for elementary and middle schools. (During the completion of the audit, this issue was revisited and amended because of stakeholder input after the change was announced.)
  - Making adjustments to next year's high school schedule.
- **Recent books, articles, and media attention have focused on Shaker Heights and the school district because of its history and issues surrounding equity.** The publications and media coverage don't always put the district in a favorable light.

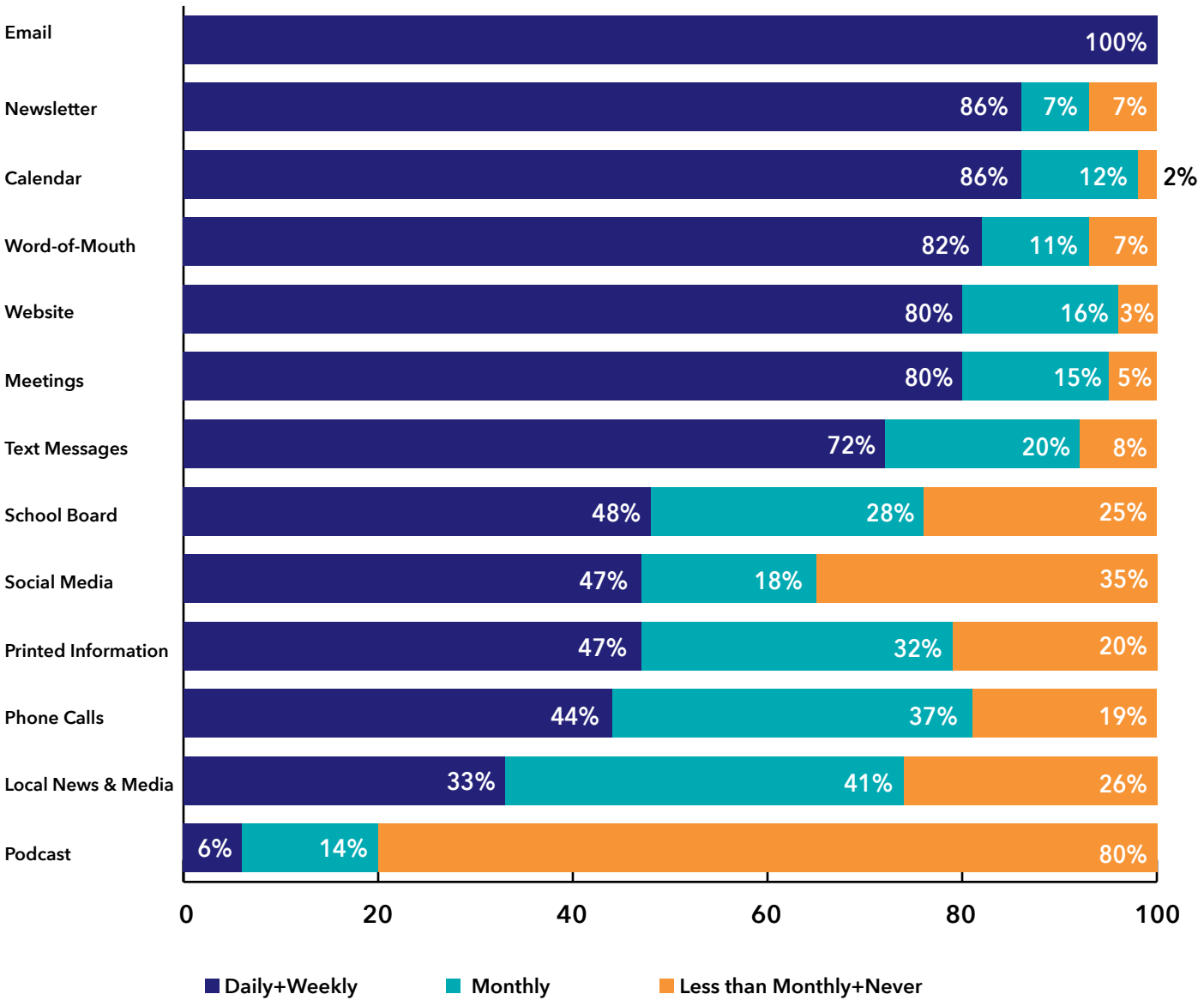
Communication Sources and Preferences

- **Shaker Heights Schools has a robust communications infrastructure** that allows for sending information through a wide variety of channels, including email, phone calls, text messages, and printed and online materials.
- **On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked how often they relied on various sources for information about Shaker Heights Schools.** As shown on pages 16-18, both parents and employees rely most heavily on email and newsletters for their information. For community members, word-of-mouth and social media are the two most often used sources of information.

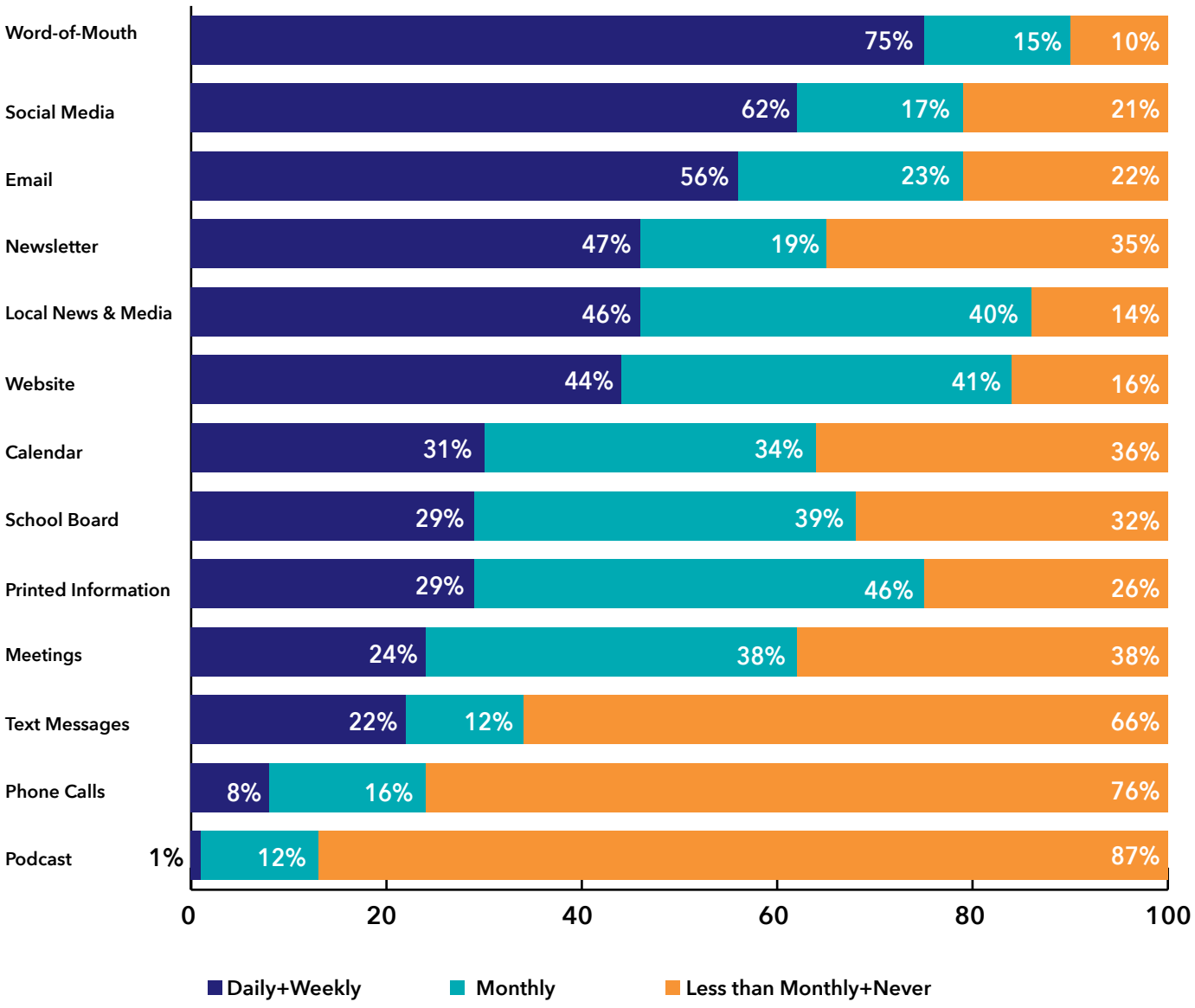
Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District – *Parents*



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

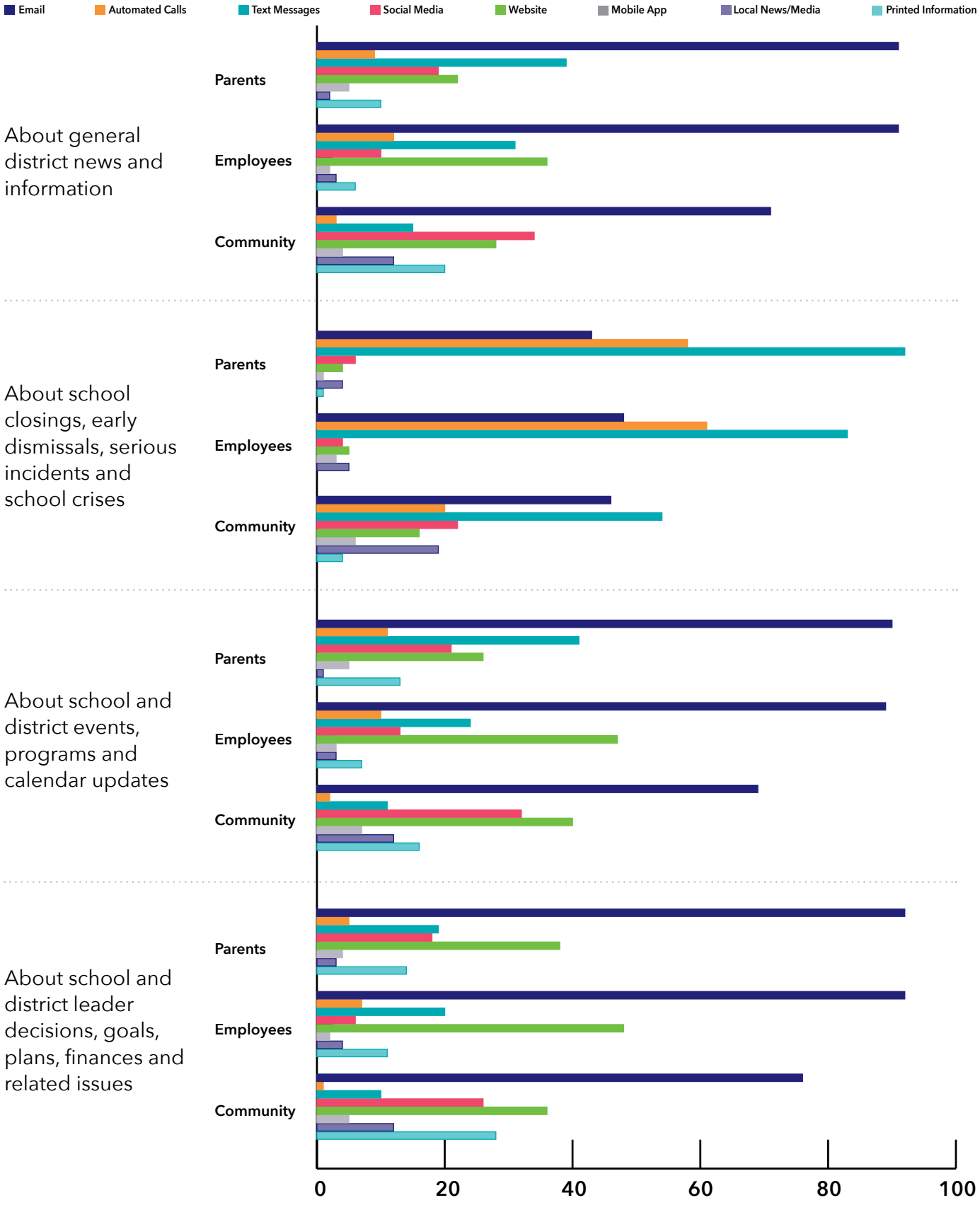


Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District – *Community*



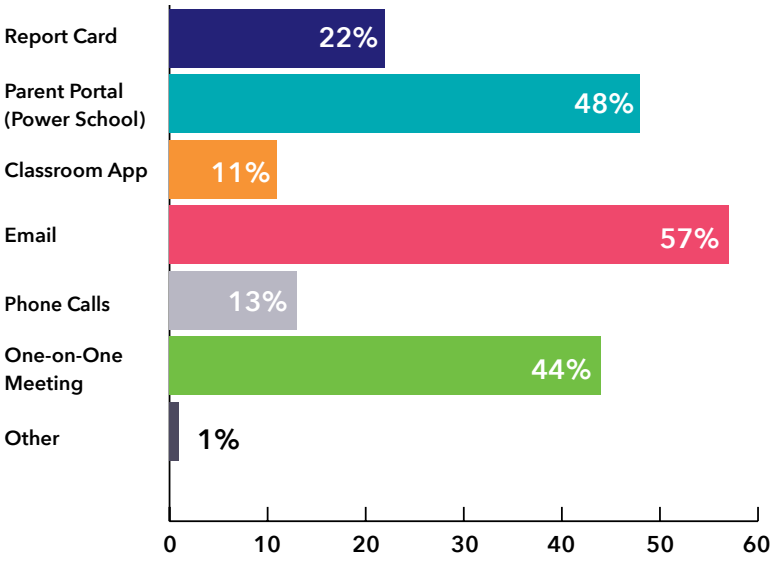
- **SCOPE Survey data shows that parents, employees and community members by far prefer email for receiving all types of information, except for emergency communications** as shown in the chart on page 19. For that, all audiences prefer text messages. For information about school and district events, as well as district decisions, goals and plans, the website is also a preferred source, particularly for employees and community members.

Preferred methods of communication for different types of information

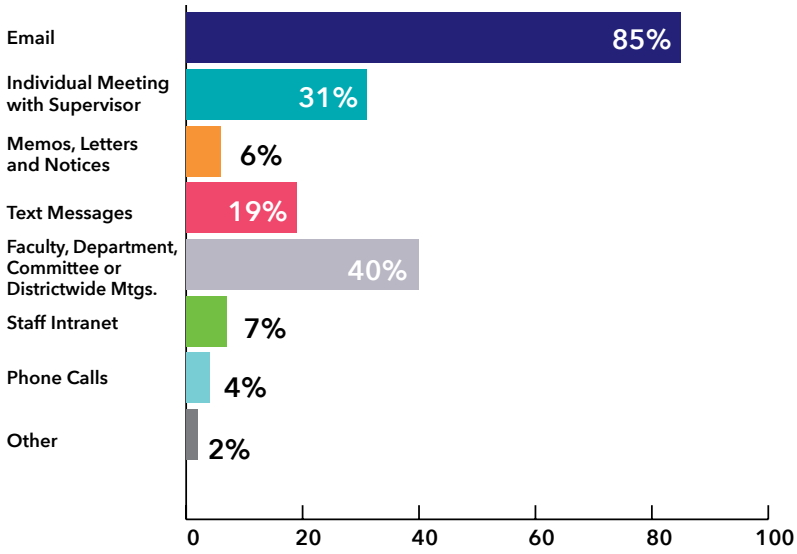


- **Email is the preferred method of communication for parents for information about their child's progress in school**, followed by PowerSchool (parent portal) as shown on the upper right.
- **For information intended to help employees perform their duties and support student learning, staff by far prefer email**, followed by in-person meetings as shown on the lower right.
- **Parents and employees expressed concerns about the volume of communications they receive as well as the number of "layers" and "clicks" required within those communications to find information.** They also expressed a desire for communications to be more mobile-friendly. The following are representative comments:
  - "Newsletters are way too long. Digital newsletters should be quickly and easily scanned by the reader, who is likely on a phone. Short blurbs with links to more information should be used to convey information. The *Shaker Weekly eNews* asks families to read through multiple pages of information. Families with children in more than one school might be required to scroll through 20-30 pages on a weekly basis. People don't have the time (or the desire) to read all this, which is why they end up feeling uninformed."
  - "I wish we had a mobile app that was easy to navigate and had links to updated district and individual school websites

Preferred methods of communication for information on student progress



Preferred methods of communication for information related to employees duties



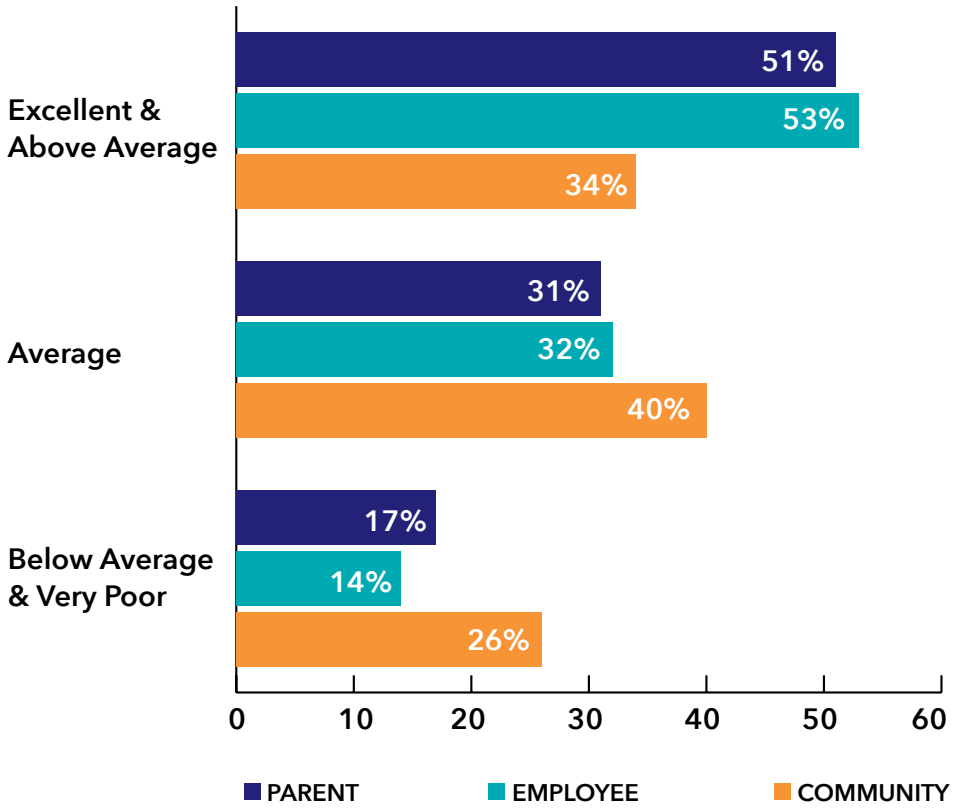
that have a broad range of information readily available."

- "Trying to figure out the calendar and links on the website from a phone is cumbersome."
- "The details are frequently buried in links that require multiple clicks and then downloads. Board meeting notes and agendas are examples of what I consider to be hidden behind a wall of clicks. In addition, I do most of my reading (and this survey) on my phone. The district is not mobile friendly with many of their communications."

- **Parents voiced concerns about the district's use of numerous apps and communication tools.** Among those identified by focus group participants were SeeSaw, Remind, Here Comes the Bus, *Shaker Weekly eNews*, PTO newsletters, Constant Contact, SchoolMessenger, Smore flyers, Google Classroom, PowerSchool, school-issued weekly newsletters, and teacher newsletters. The following are representative comments:
  - "There are too many different apps being used by individual schools and classes, which can get overwhelming—especially for parents with kids at more than one district school."
  - "There are so many different kinds of information that come our way: middle school team info, band app info, school-wide info and district info. It is overwhelming to keep up with all of it."
  - "There are also, frankly, too many voices sharing information, which leads to contradictory or confusing information being shared."
- **Parents also shared frustrations regarding inconsistent use of PowerSchool.**
  - "PowerSchool is often not up-to-date, so it is very hard for me to tell if a bad grade displayed on the app is truly my daughter's current grade."
  - "My daughter's homework is posted in Google Classroom, PowerSchool and/or the running homework Google Doc. The three sources never match, and I can't keep track of what she's supposed to be doing, so how is she supposed to? It shouldn't be this hard. All teachers should be required to list homework in one place."
- **Both focus group and SCOPE Survey participants expressed their desire for a summary of Board of Education meeting highlights.**
  - As described by a survey participant, "Communications are wordy or just point to a long board meeting video to watch. I do not want to sit and watch a video. It would be much more considerate if a summary of the board meeting or any other meeting could be communicated in bullet points."
  - The Board of Education meeting agendas and the meeting management system are located on BoardDocs. Minutes are found by clicking on a link on the Board of Education's webpage, which takes the user to a Google folder with minutes compiled chronologically by year and usually posted a month or more after the board approves them.
- **Communications staff and some board members expressed interest in the district using podcasts to share its messages and education stories with families**, though survey and focus group results did not yield any specific requests among stakeholders for district podcasts.

Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their **overall satisfaction with district communications**. As shown on the right, slightly over half of parents and employees view district communications as excellent or above average.

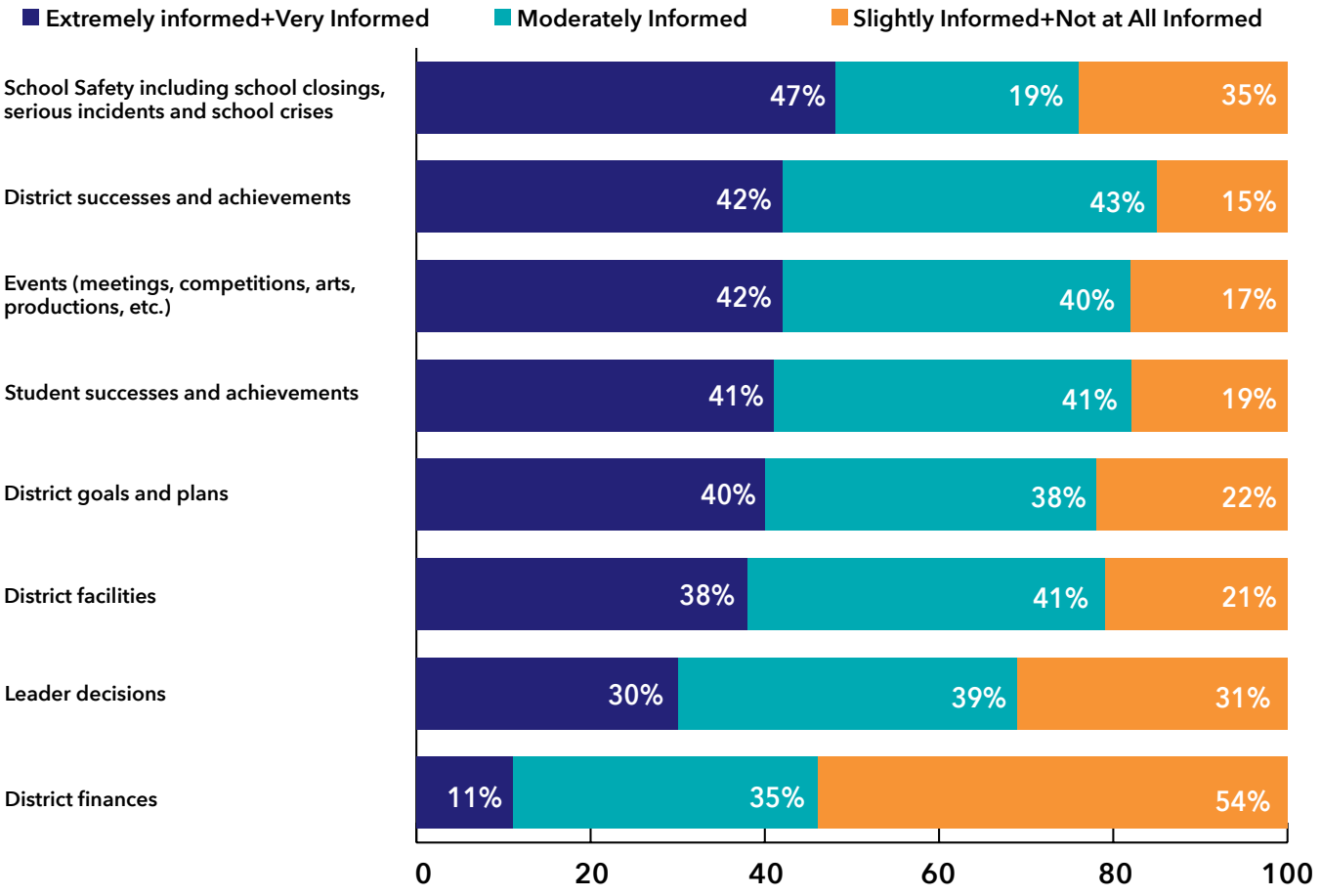


As shown on the SCOPE Scorecard, when these responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with SCOPE Survey results of districts nationwide, Shaker Heights Schools' overall ratings on satisfaction with communication are at or near the national average for employees and community members but a bit below the national average for parents.

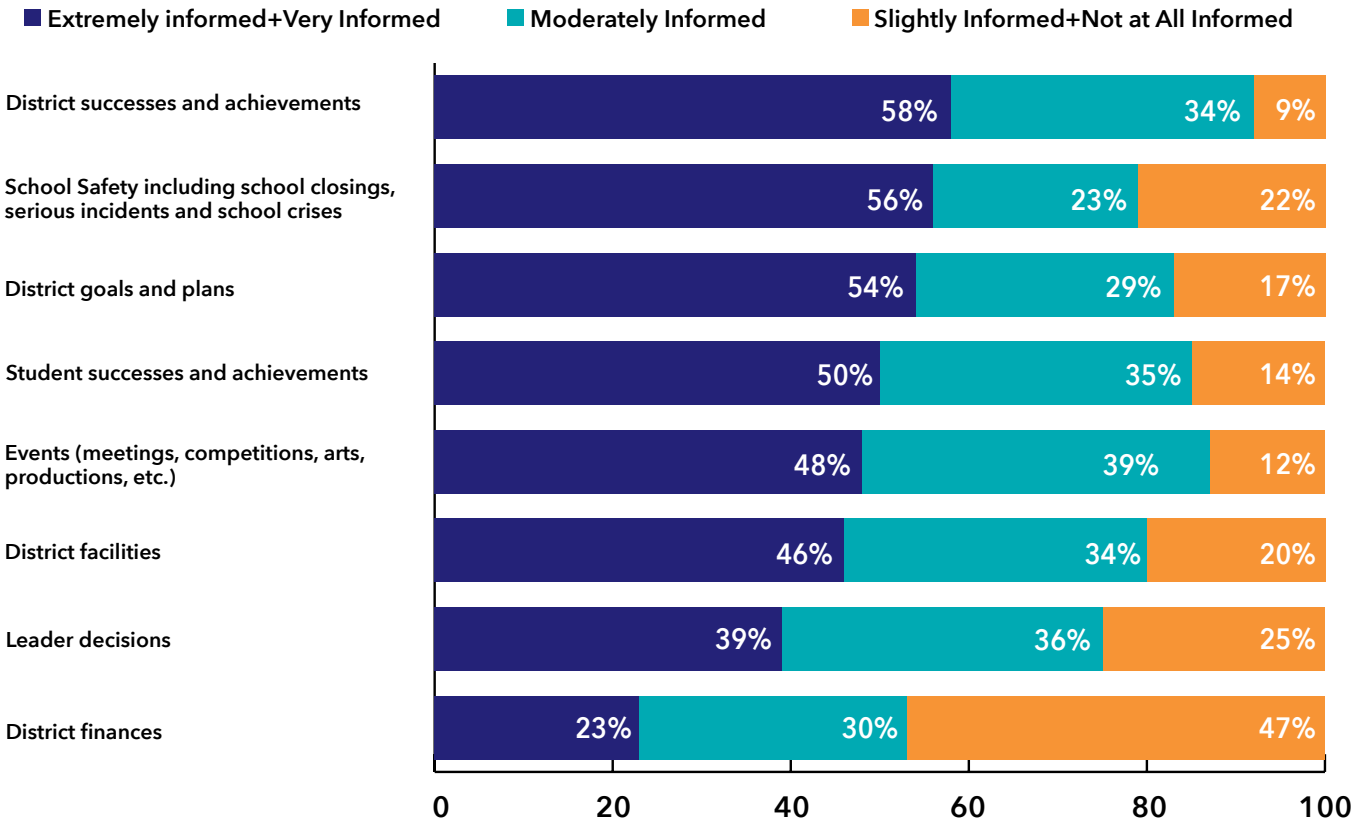
Overall Perception of District Communications	Shaker Heights School	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	**3.4**	**3.8**	**3.1**	**4.2**
Employees	**3.6**	**3.6**	**2.6**	**4.2**
Community	**3.1**	**3.2**	**2.0**	**4.1**

- **Participants in the parent and employee focus groups, as well those who provided open-ended comments on the SCOPE Survey, often praised the Department of Communications for its accomplishments.** The following are representative comments:
  - "Shaker has an extraordinarily effective communications department. I have worked with and/or for multiple other school districts, and I have never experienced the frequency, timeliness, transparency and professionalism of communications that comes near what we receive here in Shaker."
  - "The polish and depth the Communications Department brings to the district is impressive. I've never been a part of an organization that communicates to that degree."
  - "The current communication team never says 'no' and are always pushing the envelope on what we can do."
  - District leaders acknowledged that the department's individual skill sets save the district money by reducing the need to outsource.
- **As shown below and on page 24, when asked to rate how informed they are on eight different topics, parents and employees gave the highest marks to their level of knowledge about school safety, and district successes and achievements.** Community members feel most informed about district and student successes.

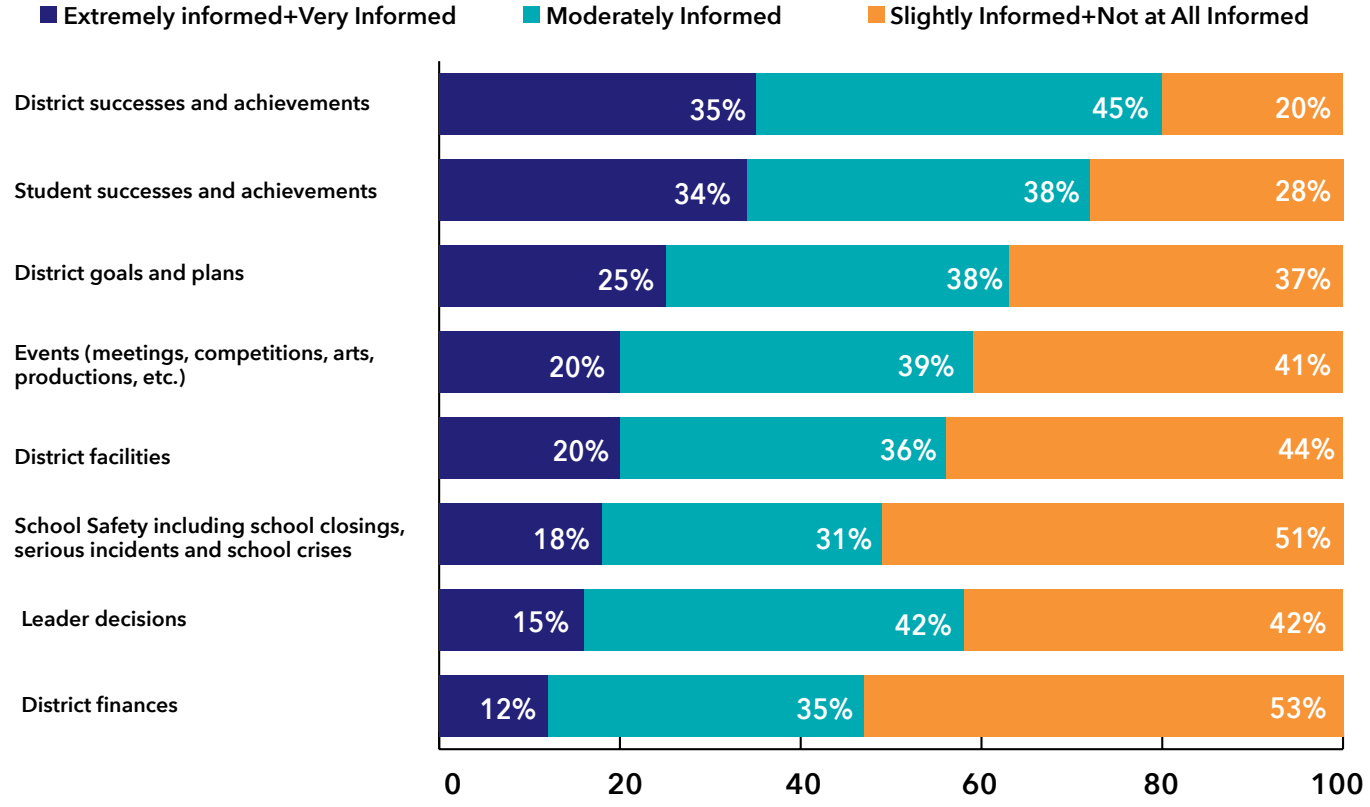
How informed you are on these eight topics – ***Parents***



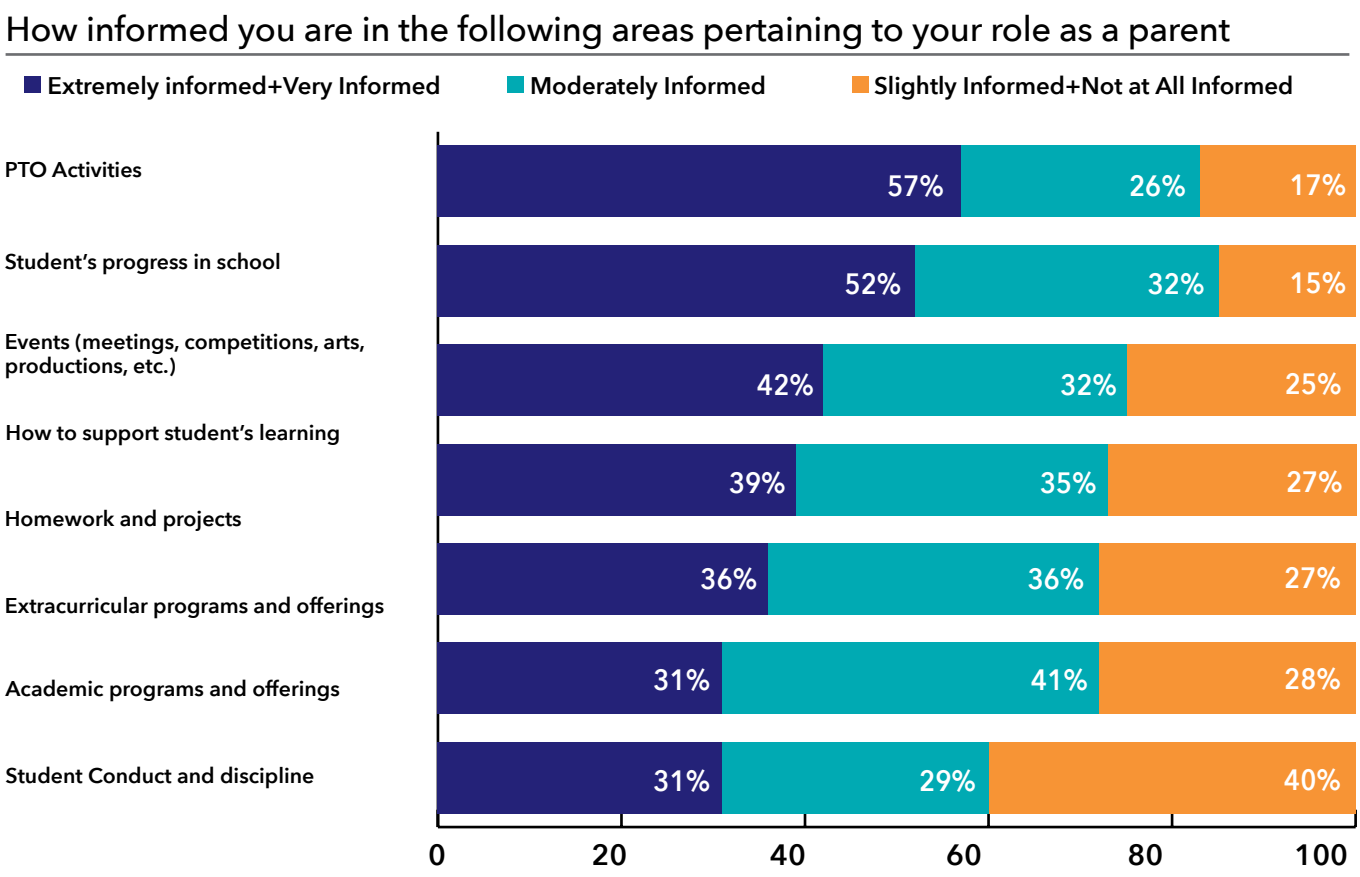
How informed you are on these eight topics – *Employees*



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

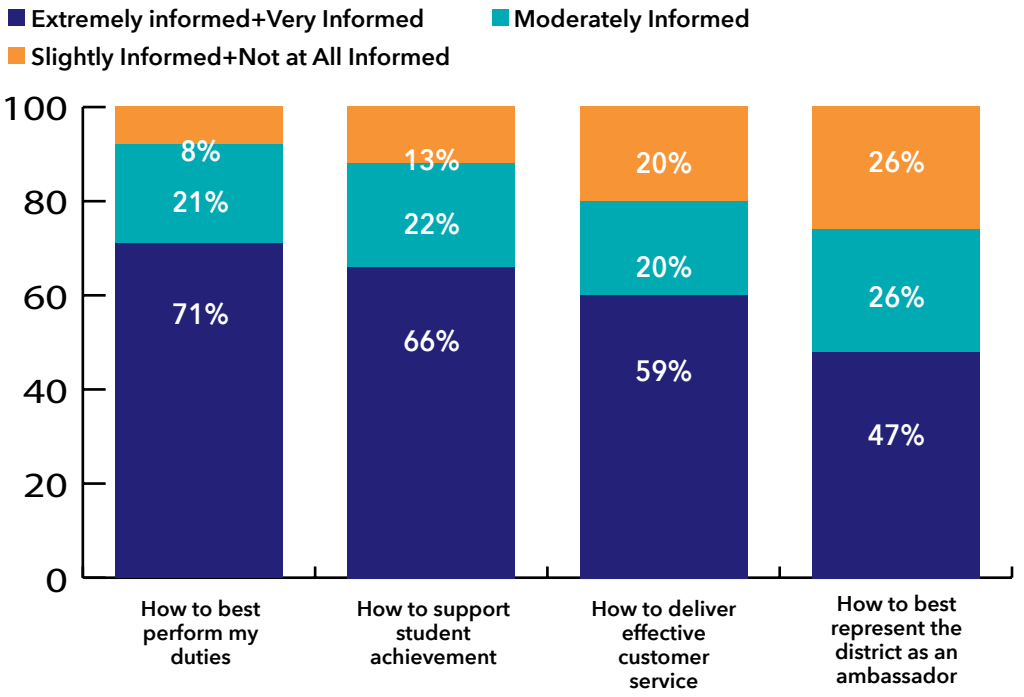


- **Stakeholders specifically praised communications around the District Facilities Plan.** From the monthly Facilities Committee, with 30 stakeholders representing different community groups, to webinars and a dedicated Facilities page, focus group participants and SCOPE Survey respondents shared positive feedback. As can be seen on pages 23 and 24, when SCOPE Survey participants were asked how informed they feel about district finances, 79 percent of parents, 80 percent of employees and 56 percent of community members said they were at least moderately informed.
- **When asked how informed they felt in areas pertaining to their role as a parent, parents' highest ratings were for areas related to PTA/PTO activities and "about my student's progress in school"** as shown below.



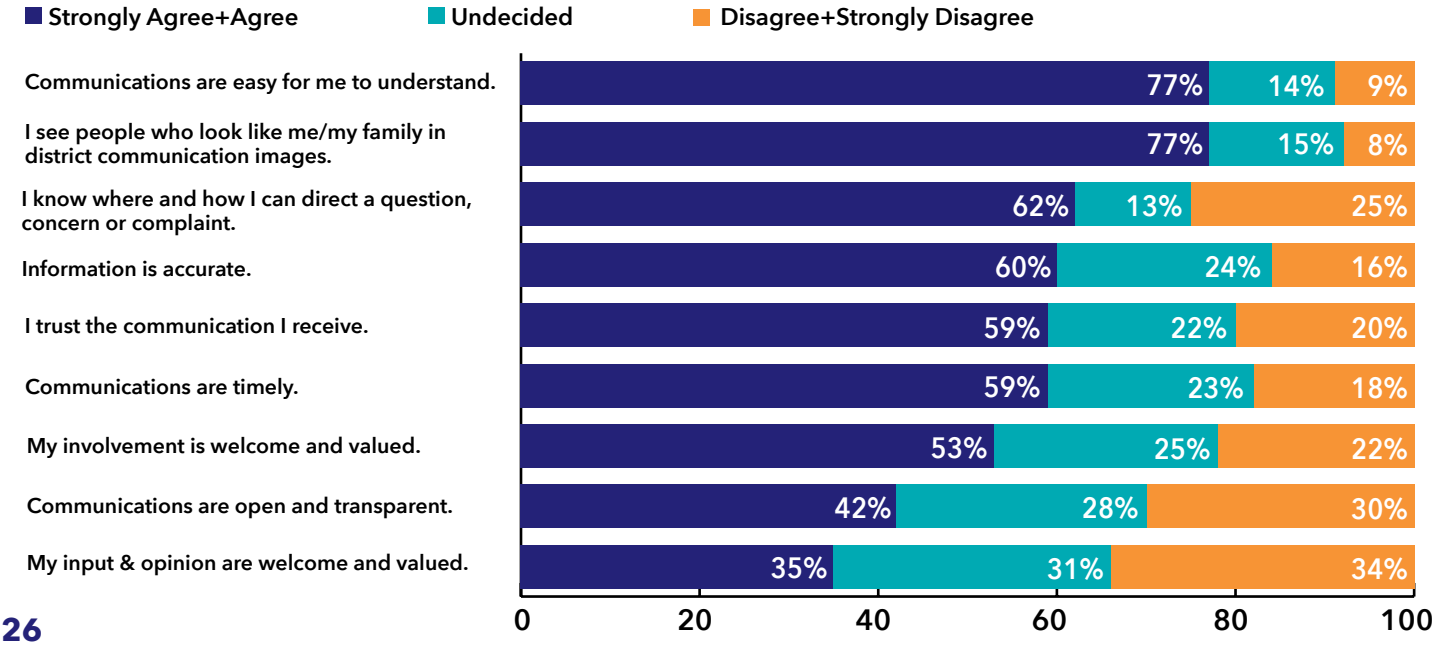
- When employees were asked **how informed they felt in areas pertaining to their role as an employee**, the highest ratings were for "about how to best perform my duties" and "about how I can support student achievement."

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

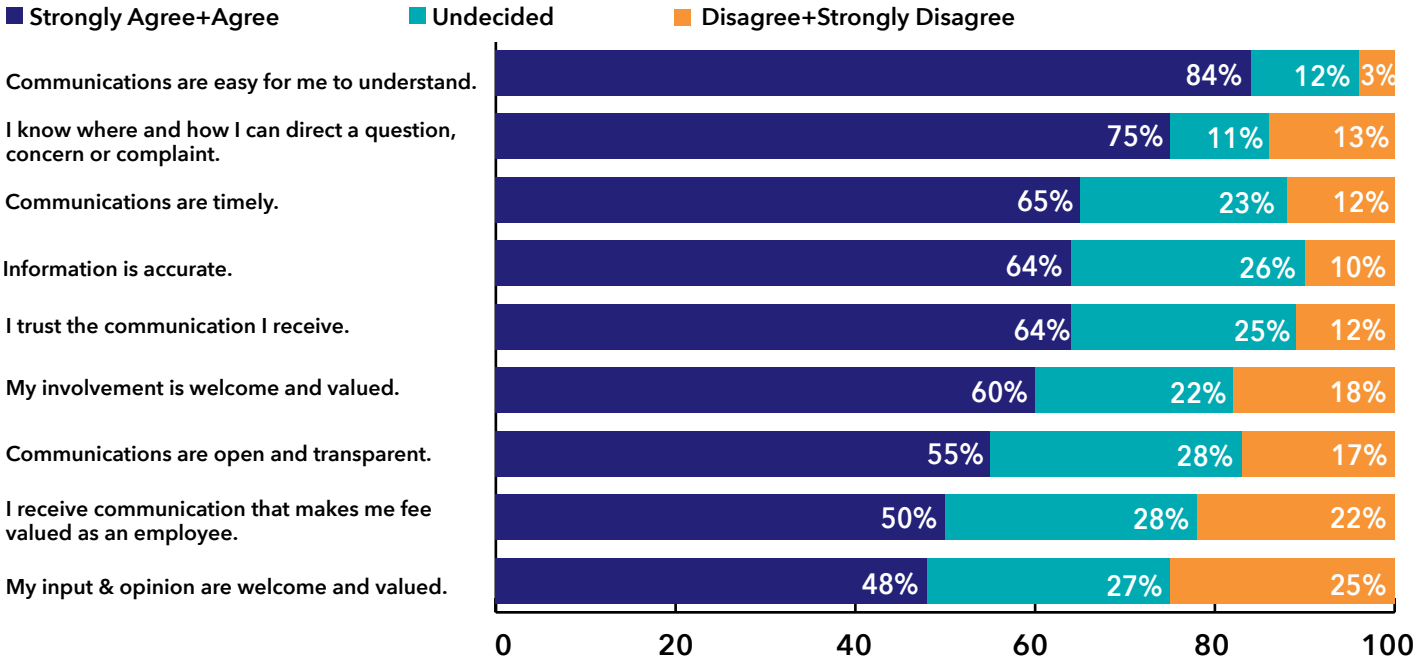


- As shown below and on page 27, the SCOPE Survey also asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements about the **quality of communication in key areas.**
  - "Communications are easy for me to understand" and "I see people who look like me/ my family in district communications images" are the two statements with which the most parents, employees and community members strongly agree or agree.
  - "I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern" and "information is accurate" are the next two most agreed-upon statements for all three groups.

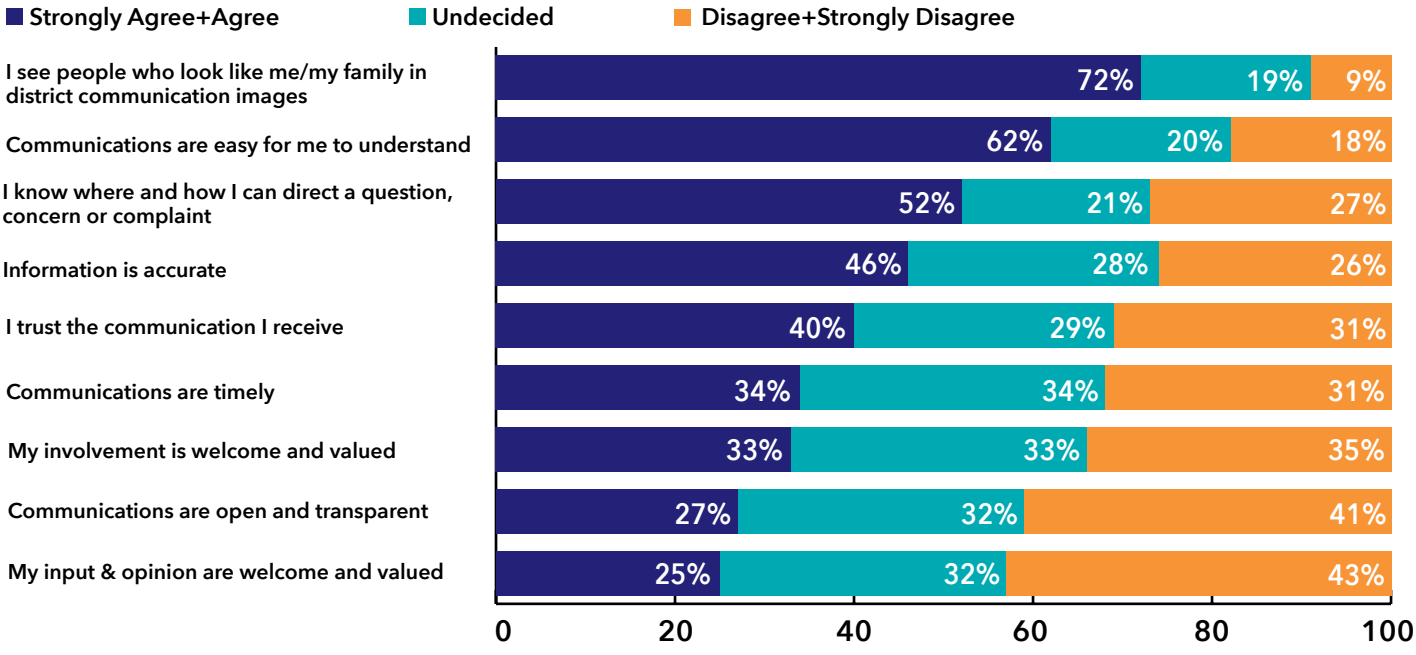
How much do you agree with the following statements about district communication-*Parents*



How much do you agree with the following statements about district communication-*Employees*



How much do you agree with the following statements about district communication-*Community*



- **Trust in district communications is greater among parents and staff than among other community members.** As shown on the charts on pages 26 and 27, 59 percent of parents, 58 percent of employees and 40 percent of community members agree or strongly agree with the statement, "I trust the communication I receive." The district's average scores on the SCOPE Scorecard, though, are a bit below the national averages and suggest a certain level of uncertainty among stakeholders about the trustworthiness of district and school/department communications. Feedback from the focus groups and SCOPE Surveys, as illustrated in the following representative comments, offer potential causes for this uncertainty.
  - Some stakeholders perceive that the district and schools are more interested in "looking good than being good."
    - "The problems are less with how the district communicates than what the district communicates. As an alum, parent and employee, I have seen the decline over a number of years concerning transparency and honesty in communications."
    - "The information I receive from my child attending Shaker Heights Schools and what I witness as an employee do not align with the information I receive from the district."
    - "I often feel like the district tries to sugar coat some of the not so wonderful things that happen at the schools like fighting and bullying. For these reasons it makes me kind of leery of their communications about these matters."
  - Although parents' and employees' comments indicate awareness of the need to balance sharing information with the privacy rights of students and staff, some perceive that schools and the district are not as forthcoming with information as they could be when it involves serious incidents with students.
    - "The official communications from the school are delayed and include limited information. Fights, ambulances, police presence and injuries are extremely unsettling for students and parents. I would feel more confident that my child is safe if I received timely and comprehensive information about the extent of incidents, how we know our children are safe and what the follow up steps are."
    - "I receive routine messages from the principal, communications office and board that don't say anything substantive. They announce that situations occurred and that they are handling them without ever sharing details about what happened and what they are really doing."
  - Mistakes and retractions on school and district messages were noted as impacting trust by staff and parents.
    - Announcements of changed elementary and middle school start and stop times and changes in the high school schedule had some parent, student and employee focus group participants pointing to a lack of communication between district leadership and building administrators and staff.
    - "Sometimes there are typos or inconsistencies in communications. For example, one communication (e.g., newsletter) might say a certain event/activity starts at X

time, while another communication (e.g., paper that comes home in a backpack) states the same event starts at a different time."

- "Much of the district's communication comes off as haphazard and rushed."

- **Some of the shared concerns regarding trust and transparency seem to stem from stakeholders' perceptions about how decisions are made and communicated as well as a perceived lack of meaningful stakeholder involvement in decision-making.** As shown on pages 26 and 27, the statement "my input and opinion are welcome and valued" received the lowest level of agreement from all three stakeholder groups, with 35 percent of parents, 34 percent of employees and 25 percent of community members strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement. Following are representative comments:
  - "Decision-making by leadership is the opposite of transparent. This makes it difficult for me to trust communications about decisions or any consequential district information."
  - "Getting more information and input from residents before the district moves ahead would be appreciated."
  - "I feel that my input is asked for very regularly. The barrier I see is that my input doesn't seem to be taken into account at all. It seems like decisions are made already, before input is requested. The request for input feels like it checks a box—we got input from our stakeholders—check. But actually the input influences nothing. So then we receive communications about the decisions made, and they don't reflect what the community really wants."
  - "Engagement is an issue. The district is not listening."

- **Focus group participants and SCOPE Survey open-ended comments conveyed a sense that their engagement is only sought when an election is at stake.** Before and since the recent successful vote to improve facilities, a number of stakeholder engagement strategies were implemented and methods for staying up-to-date on the status of the project were created. However, focus group participants did not perceive that these types of efforts have taken place around other initiatives. As one survey respondent commented: "Communications outreach improved greatly with the introduction of the long-term facilities plans."

- **Responsibility for the district's engagement efforts—aka, attempts to involve stakeholders in their local schools—appears to be spread across multiple departments**.
  - Communications staff coordinate a variety of engagement efforts such as committee and advisory groups, kindergarten kickoff activities, staff convocations, the district's back-to-school BBQ, panel discussion events for parents and groundbreakings. They also support building-level engagement events.
  - The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and its Family and Community Engagement Center (FACE) has a mission to "collaborate with groups and organizations to develop outreach activities, programs and partnerships designed to foster student achievement and engage parents in the education process, promoting success for all students."
  - Discussions with district leaders and the focus group of district partners suggest there are opportunities for improved coordination between the Office of Diversity, Equity and

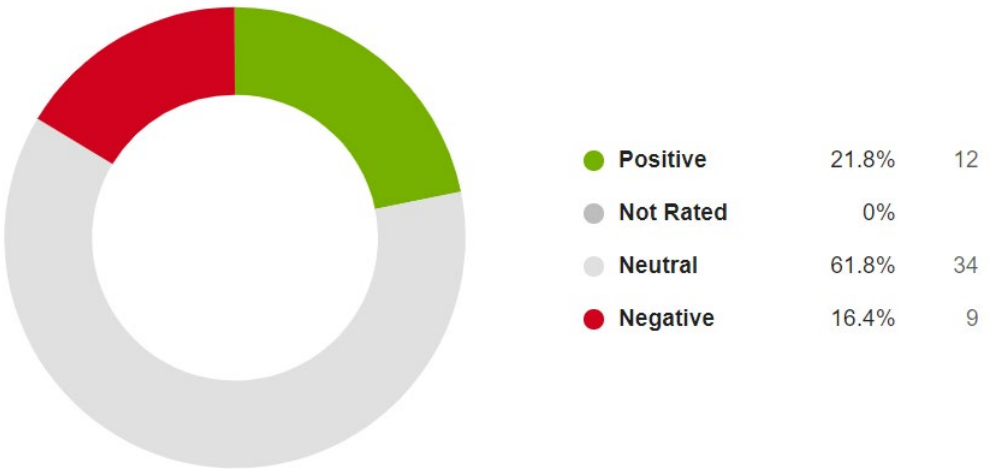
Inclusion and the Department of Communications. For example, a focus group participant shared that a committee on diversity engagement was exploring a "sustained dialogue" program, used by a local university, as a community feedback mechanism for the district, but information about it had not yet been shared with the Department of Communications.

  - As the communication audit was being completed, the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion shared that a 10-month audit had been approved in April with the intent to design a strategic plan for FACE.

- **The sentiment of news coverage of Shaker Heights Schools was largely neutral (61.8 percent) or positive (21.8 percent)** over a one-year period from February 2023 and February 2024. While the district receives a modest amount of media coverage, the outlets that more regularly cover Shaker Heights Schools include WOIO (channel 19 CBS), WKYC (channel 3 NBC), WEWS-TV (channel 5 ABC) and Cleveland.com.

- **Stakeholders in all focus groups perceive that social media and the pervasiveness of mobile devices create a constant threat of misinformation or disinformation, creating controversy and misunderstanding.** A communications staff member tries to monitor a multitude of non-district social media accounts that are frequent sources of misinformation and disinformation, but there appears to be no formal district strategy for responding to social media questions or inaccuracies. The auditor was unable to find an official district policy or guidance for employee interactions with social media.

Sentiment of News Coverage February 2023 - February 2024

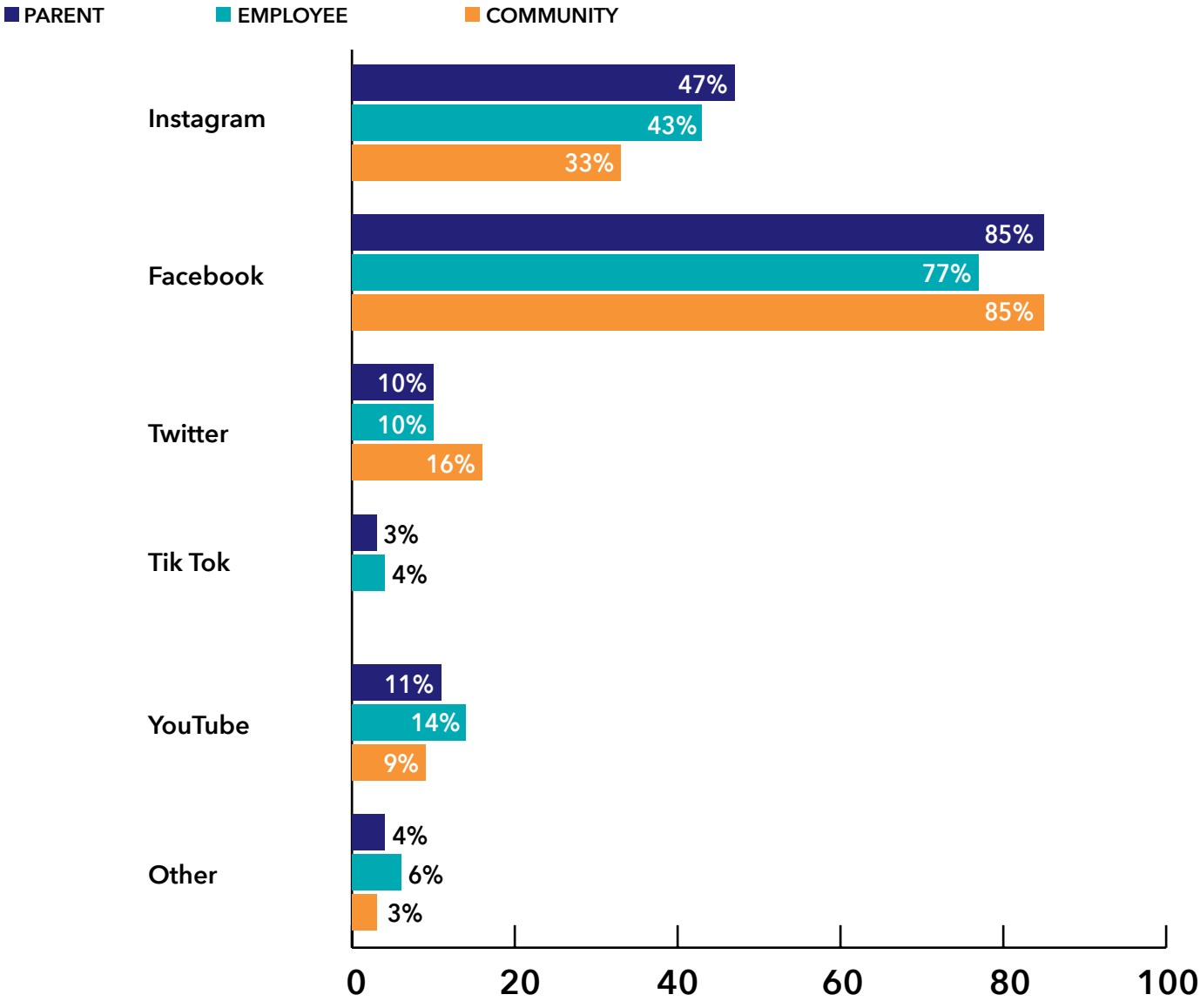


Digital Communication Tools

District/School Social Media

- As shown on pages 16-18, the reliance on social media varies widely by stakeholder group, with 59 percent of parents, 47 percent of employees and 75 percent of community members using it at least monthly to get information about the district. SCOPE Survey participants were asked to indicate how often they used 13 different sources of information. For parents, social media was the seventh most used; for employees, social media was the ninth most used; and for community members, social media was the second most used.
- As shown below, Facebook is used most often for district-related information, followed by Instagram.

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



- The Department of Communication tracks activity on its social media platforms on a monthly basis. The following is a snapshot of January 2024:
  - Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/ForShakerSchools)
    - Followers: 6,379
    - Total page reach: 29,783
    - Net growth from previous month: +65
    - Posts: 30
    - Median post engagement: 31
    - Top post: SHHS Student Chef of the Week (reach of 18,397)
  - Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/shaker_schools/)
    - Followers: 4,039
    - Total reach: 8,769
    - Posts: 18
    - Median post engagement: 145
    - Top post: District Hosts the Rev. Nontombi Naomi Tutu (reach of 1,242)
  - X/Twitter (https://twitter.com/ShakerSchools)
    - Followers: 3,145
    - Net growth from previous month: +7
    - Posts: 12
    - Daily impressions: 247
    - Total impressions: 7,662
  - LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/company/shaker-heights-schools/)
    - Followers: 1,517
    - Posts are for job listings
  - TikTok (https://www.tiktok.com/@shaker.heights.schools)
    - Followers: 921
    - Net growth from previous month: +29
    - Profile views: 381
    - Average video views: 7,000
    - Most viewed: District video highlighting Machine Gun Kelly's offer to Travis Kelce to give him, Cleveland Heights High School (Kelce's alma mater) and Shaker Heights High School (Kelly's alma mater) $500,000 each if Kelce played for the Cleveland Browns.
- **Many focus group and survey participants shared positive perspectives about social media postings, but there were also some concerns expressed.** Following are representative comments from parent focus group participants:
  - "I don't love social media and don't participate in a lot of it, so if something is solely communicated through socials, then I will likely miss it."
  - "Facebook and Instagram provide happy visuals."
  - "Social media is a PR tool without substance."
  - "It's valuable for things that have happened."

District/School Video Channels

- The district's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@shakerschoolsohio) has 871 subscribers and hosts webinars and videos on various topics.
  - A total of 295 videos are located on the channel, which was initiated 12 years ago. It is also heavily used by the Shaker Schools Foundation.
  - The most watched videos for the 2023-24 school year (as of this audit's review) were an overview of the programs sponsored by the Shaker Schools Foundation (809 views) and a video of a panel on detracking (468

views) from the superintendent's series on that topic. Monthly webinars on facilities updates began in January, when the highest viewership was 261. Viewership on this series has dropped since that time.

- Shaker Heights Schools Board of Education meetings are live streamed and archived on the website at https://www.shaker.org/BoardLive.aspx.

District/School Websites

The Department of Communications was in the process of redesigning the district and school websites to address website navigability, design concerns and function issues at the time of this communication audit, so the auditor did not do an extensive reflection on the current site design and content. *(Note: Launch of the new website was anticipated by early July.)* However, the following findings from the SCOPE Survey results and focus groups feedback, based on the current design, will be helpful to consider as the redesign process continues.

- Across all focus groups, both internal and external, participants described the current district website as being difficult to navigate, with poor search capability and content often out of date.
- As shown on page 19, all stakeholder groups cited websites (in addition to email) as one of the two preferred methods for getting information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues.
- For those who rely on websites on at least a monthly basis for information about the district, the district's website is the most relied upon site, with 58.5 percent of parents, 55.1 percent of employees and 78.7 percent of community respondents indicating they rely on it for information.
- Few members of the focus groups cited websites as primary sources of information, and websites are ranked fifth as a source of information by employees and sixth by parents and community members (see charts on pages 16-18).

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 Shaker Heights City School District 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	• Shaker Heights Schools is an academically high-performing district recognized as one of seven in North America to be International Baccalaureate (IB) certified Pre-K-12. • Shaker Heights Schools has highly qualified, dedicated and caring teachers who prepare students well for post-secondary education and careers. • Shaker Heights Schools has a well-qualified Department of Communications whose staff bring a wide array of knowledge, skills and abilities to the district's award-winning communication program. • Shaker Heights Schools became one of the first districts in Ohio to establish an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and is nationally recognized for its commitment to education equity. • The community recently passed its largest levy to support school operations and a comprehensive facilities improvement plan.	• Satisfaction with communications overall is low among parents, as reflected in comparisons with national averages and expressed in focus groups. • Trustworthiness of communications is low among all stakeholder groups, who provide a variety of reasons for this perspective. • Parents are overwhelmed by the amount of information they are sent over a wide variety of platforms that makes it difficult to monitor student progress as well as obtain general district and school information. • Parents, staff and community members want more involvement in and knowledge of the district's decision-making process. • The lack of collaboration between the Department of Communications and the Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion's Family and Community Engagement Center limits engagement opportunities between Shaker Heights Schools' and its communities.

EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	• Shaker Heights is one of the wealthiest communities in the United States, offering a strong base of highly educated residents who are willing to invest tax dollars to provide high-quality schools. • Community members express a keen interest in the success of the district and a desire to share their time and talents. • Stakeholders overwhelmingly identified diversity as a strength of the district and are supportive of efforts to ensure all students succeed.	• Lower levels of response among marginalized groups to district and school-level communications and engagement opportunities are being interpreted by some administrators and educators to mean that barriers to accessing and utilizing technology exist for marginalized groups. They perceive this to threaten the district's ability to communicate and engage with members of the marginalized groups. • Ongoing negative local media, national media and literary attention have put Shaker Heights and Shaker Heights Schools in the spotlight, which can erode community trust and confidence. • Social media has given more stakeholders a platform to share negative perspectives and misinformation.

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. This data was used by the auditor to identify strengths and weaknesses of Shaker Heights City School District communication program, and many of these key 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 the more than 100 surveys conducted by districts and educational service agencies, large and small, across the United States since 2015. This data is presented in the SCOPE Scorecard on the following page.

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

		Shaker Heights	NATIONAL		
			Avg.	Low	High
PARENTS/FAMILIES	**General Perceptions**				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.6	3.8	2.6	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.4	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About school and district events and programs (1)	3.3	3.3	2.5	4.1
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	3.4	3.5	3.0	4.1
	About my student's progress in school (1)	3.5	3.7	3.1	4.4
	About how I can support my student's learning (1)	3.2	3.4	2.4	4.1
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my school/department (2)	3.4	3.8	3.1	4.4
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	3.6	4.1	3.4	4.5
STAFF	**General Perceptions**				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.6	3.6	2.3	4.2
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.6	3.6	2.6	4.2
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	3.5	3.4	2.8	4
	About how I can support student achievement (1)	3.7	3.6	3.0	4.4
	About how I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador (1)	3.3	3.2	2.4	3.8
	About topics that make me feel valued as an employee (1)	3.4	3.1	2.3	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district (2)	3.5	3.7	2.7	4.3
	Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department (2)	3.7	4.0	3.3	4.5
COMMUNITY	**General perceptions:**				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.4	3.3	2.1	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.1	3.2	2.0	4.1
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About student success/achievements (1)	3.1	2.9	2.0	4.2
	About district finances and related issues (1)	2.4	2.5	1.7	3.6
	About school safety (1)	2.5	2.9	1.7	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district (2)	3.0	3.4	2.2	4.3

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 Shaker Heights Schools' 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/families 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.

Shaker Heights Schools and the *Rubrics of Practice*

When considering the Shaker Heights Schools communication program in light of this benchmarking scale and the essential program components of each benchmarked area, as detailed in the *Rubrics of Practice*, the auditor found the district to be well-established in all CFAs except CFA 6 (Bond-Finance Election Plans and Campaigns), where the auditor found the district to be exemplary.

The Recommendations in this report provide insight and advice that will help the Shaker Heights Schools communication program continue to enhance its efforts in each benchmarked area. However, making comparisons against national benchmarks is something that the Department of Communications staff can engage in themselves regularly using the *Rubrics of Practice*. That might involve including self-assessment via the rubrics as an evaluation measure in Shaker Heights Schools' strategic communication plan for example.

For more details on the national benchmarks established in the Rubrics of Practice, visit https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023.

Recommendations

Shaker Heights Schools leaders have shown they prioritize having a robust, two-way communication program through their support and staffing of the Department of Communications as well as in the decision to welcome a communication audit. The auditor's research found the district's communication program to be high functioning and high performing in many areas. Yet it also revealed opportunities to improve awareness, strengthen positive perceptions and promote greater engagement among parents, staff and the wider community, and that is the focus of the report recommendations.

Following are some of the challenges and opportunities that can be addressed through engaging, two-way communication efforts:

- To meet the significant and increasing demands of its stakeholders, those responsible for communicating in Shaker Heights Schools (including and in addition to the Department of Communications) will need to consistently and purposefully use proven strategies to support the district's goals effectively.
- The district benefits from a richly diverse community that enhances the cultural and educational experience of students, parents and the community. However, this diversity also presents challenges for Shaker Heights Schools, such as the need to ensure communications are effectively received across multiple audiences with varying degrees of access and involvement, and the importance of fostering authentic conversations about equity and inclusion.
- The district shows a strong commitment to community values, but there is a critical need for enhanced communication strategies that ensure transparency, community engagement and opportunity for input across all audiences. This is an area in which all district departments must collaborate on an ongoing basis to effectively change the perceptions of those who feel the district isn't listening to its constituents.
- Parents, in particular, are overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive and the multitude of platforms used to deliver it. With greater attention to establishing and consistently adhering to processes and protocols, the district can help to reduce the stress parents experience when trying to remain informed about their student(s), their school(s) and the district.
- As with most districts, Shaker Heights Schools struggles with addressing misinformation and disinformation, much of which arises from social media accounts not associated with the district. Now more than ever, districts must be proactive in how they respond in these instances.
- The district's Board of Education is eager to connect with the Shaker Heights Schools community in meaningful ways, which will require additional communications support to be effective.

Interviews with school board members, the superintendent, district leaders and members of the Department of Communications revealed a sincere desire to build on the district's communications strengths and improve in areas of challenge. But while the Department of Communications plays a fundamental role in ensuring the smooth outflow of accurate, transparent information, it is critical that all departments and staff take responsibility

for ensuring that Shaker Heights Schools continues to build trusted relationships with its stakeholders.

The recommendations that follow concentrate on areas for growth or improvement as identified in the Key Findings and are listed in a suggested order of priority, though progress on them may begin simultaneously in some cases or may be staggered across multiple school years. They are accompanied by action steps that provide tactical ideas for how these recommendations might be accomplished. However, the district may choose to address these recommendations in a different order and/or through tactics other than those outlined here as newer best practices emerge.

Some of these recommendations can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. **Generally, 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. Implement strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication program.
2. Formalize collaboration between the district's communication and engagement functions, and create shared support structures.
3. Increase transparency and participation in decision-making processes across the district, departments and schools.
4. Nurture a culture of two-way communication with employees.
5. Expand the communication methods used to engage external stakeholders.
6. Strengthen communication infrastructure by developing and consistently implementing processes and procedures.
7. Prepare to correct and prevent the spread of false information.

Recommendation 1:

Implement strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication program.

The auditor commends Shaker Heights Schools for its commitment to strategic communication and the Department of Communications for creating a Strategic Communications Plan (2023-2026) to guide its efforts. This existing, outward-facing plan demonstrates transparency about the district's communication program with the school community while allowing staff to report to district leaders on their progress in achieving departmental goals and objectives. It provides a strong foundation to ground all of the district's communication efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, cost effective and most likely to succeed in the Shaker Heights community.

To enhance the usefulness of the plan for staff, the first action step provides strategies to make it a more practical and robust guide for their individual contributions to achieving departmental goals. From there, strategies are provided to ensure day-to-day activities support the plan as well as the district's strategic plan. Following these steps will take Shaker Heights Schools to the next level in strengthening relationships, building trust, increasing understanding and solidifying support for the district's core values.

Action Step 1.1

Add to the comprehensive communication plan practical components to guide staff.

Team members from the Department of Communications conveyed a strong desire and intention to develop and implement a highly strategic and comprehensive communication plan focused on the district's broad goals. They realize that rising above reactive, tactical communication in any school district can be challenging, even for experienced practitioners who are strategically oriented, and that this type of plan will help them to keep time, energy and financial resources consistently focused on strategies designed to support the district's goals and objectives.

The following primary components of an effective strategic communication plan are already present in the existing plan:

- Goals, objectives and strategies have been articulated.
- The district's stakeholder groups have been defined.
- General key messages aligning with the district's core values have been created.
- The communication platforms available for use have been identified.

That level of detail is plenty for a strategic communication plan shared with the public, but there are additional components that when added to an internal-facing version could make it a more precise and practical guide for the work of communications staff. To enhance its usefulness as an internal guide, the auditor recommends the following:

- The current plan lists the general research used to inform strategies but includes little actual data. Incorporating specific data or links to relevant reports will help to make the plan more useful. For example, references in the plan to "communications audit" research might now be updated with links to data from this report in the version used by staff.
- Goals, objectives and strategies are listed, but audiences, key messages and platforms are outlined independently and

not associated with any particular strategy. Each objective and corresponding strategy should include the specific audiences, messages and platforms that will be used to implement them. One of the easiest ways to include this level of precise detail and to make the connections clearer for staff is with a chart. For an example, visit https://bit.ly/4bWGUDj to check out the bond communications plan created for Highline Public Schools in Washington.

- The plan does not include the specific tactics that will be used to address each strategy, who will be responsible for carrying them out or the anticipated timing for completion. These are essential to creating an actionable plan.
- Finally, include the specific evaluation criteria that will be used to measure success, when measurements will be taken and how results will be reported and used to revise future plans.

The Department of Communications team clearly understands the core components of a strategic communication plan, but for other school leaders who review this report and the plan, it is important to understand that the gold standard for professional communicators is the four-step strategic communication planning model often referred to by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement, evaluate). This planning model is foundational to strategic communications, earning accreditation in public relations and earning NSPRA's Gold Medallion and Golden Achievement awards.

The components of a comprehensive plan based on this model are outlined below.

Research

Research requires an analysis of the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. The public-facing communication plan mentions

#1

Implement strategies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communication program.

the department's use of a SWOT analysis, the communications audit, digital communications metrics and social media metrics as part of its research; all are excellent sources of useful communications data. It can be helpful for staff to have links to or a summary of any relevant findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan.

The following are some additional data types worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:

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

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

To get an accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations, determine all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in Shaker Heights Schools. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics: managing website content, the *Shaker eNews* newsletter, school-generated newsletters, social media, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, etc. The materials gathered and provided to the auditor for this audit is an excellent starting point.

Be sure to identify and include the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, open house programs, the FACE building ambassadors, business partnerships, news media relations and participation in community organizations.

When developing a strategic communication plan, the research phase is the ideal time to take a look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communications and public relations functions and to determine where (and if) they fit into the overall plan.

Research should be an ongoing tactic in a school district's communication strategies. When changing curriculum and instructional strategies, education leaders typically turn to research in best practices. It is recommended that district leaders do the same when developing and updating the communication plan to ensure it remains dynamic and timely.

Plan

Planning is at the heart of the process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications road map will begin to come to life. A communication plan is primarily used as a guide for communications staff, but it should align with and ultimately support the aims of the district's Strategic Plan. Following are suggested enhancements to the Department of Communications' current communication plan:

- **Review and fine tune objectives and strategies.** Review the objectives and strategies currently incorporated in the communications plan to ensure they address the desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Many current objectives are measurable, but make sure that all objectives are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). A SMART update to a current objective might be, for example, "Develop by August 2025 a data collection and reporting system for all official electronic communication platforms that establishes communications data benchmarks and identifies trends."

- **Organize tactics under each strategy.** Organizing tactics under each strategy will make the plan easier to implement and evaluate for effectiveness.

- **Identify which key messages are intended to be used for each strategy and audience.** For each target audience of a strategy, 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.

- **Identify the target audience for each strategy.** Identify the specific stakeholder groups who are impacted by or interested in each initiative (strategy) the district undertakes.

- **Establish tools and tactics.** For each strategy and its target audiences, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. Consider also any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned.
- **Set timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of the implementation process, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to determine if the plan requires modification.
- **Assign responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. This component in particular will make the plan a practical guide for the work of communications staff.

As the Department of Communications works through the planning process, be sure to reflect on the following questions and allow the answers to guide all communication efforts:

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

Implement

This may be the easiest and most enjoyable part of the process because the research and planning phases will have helped to identify what needs to be done, when, by whom and with what tools and resources, along with a timeline. Implementation is an important step in strategic communications, but it basically boils down to when and how a plan is rolled out. Consider including in the internal-facing strategic communication plan regular points at which staff will review and discuss their role in implementing plan elements.

Evaluate

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

NSPRA also offers a number of resources that will help Shaker Heights Schools enhance the practicality of its strategic communication plan and incorporate the findings of this report:

- Download a strategic communication plan template for audit clients at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/Com-Plan-Template-NSPRA.docx?ver=_uTy38UcQPNMSa8fuxJ16g%3d%3d.
- Watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on "Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan" available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans.

Action Step 1.2

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

To ensure staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it is important to know how much actual time is spent on each task and service by all staff members who have communication responsibilities. It is also important to view these tasks through the lens of how well they serve the district in meeting the goals of its strategic plan.

- **Time tracking** for staff working on communication projects can provide useful data and only needs to happen for a limited period of time, perhaps one quarter. (Some project management tools allow for staff to track their time on specific projects, though this could be done more informally in a spreadsheet.) Evaluation of the tracked data should include whether the communication vehicles and strategies that staff spent time on worked well for each target audience. This evaluation step is critical in determining whether the current infrastructure and capacity meets the district's communication needs.
- **Reflect on the strategic alignment** of all current communication programs, tasks and services handled by communications staff, and consider how well each task and service aligns with the district's and the department's strategic plans. For each item, ask these questions:
  - What strategic plan goal does the program, task or service support?
  - How critical is the program, task or service to meeting that goal?
  - If the program, task or service is eliminated:
    - How would district strategic goals be impacted?
    - How much staff time or resources would be freed up?

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

Action Step 1.3

Update the title and job description of the communications specialist position to align with current responsibilities.

The communications specialist position newly created three years ago appears to have grown significantly beyond the original job description. The auditor's review of job descriptions for the department found that the description for this position in particular was lagging behind the expectations for it today. Where much of the specialist role was first described in an assisting capacity—in a variety of areas such as digital content, print publications, speech writing and stakeholder engagement—today it includes oversight of interns and school-level communication ambassadors, providing communications training for staff, serving as a liaison for stakeholder groups such as those involved in facilities planning and other responsibilities of a higher level.

The communication landscape for schools has changed significantly in recent years, and many school districts are reviewing their communication roles to ensure their areas of focus match the information preferences and needs of staff, families and community members. (Association members can find more details on the school communication landscape in the 2022 Membership Profile Survey Report

at https://www.nspra.org/Membership/NSPRA-Member-Survey-Reports.)

The job description for the district's communications specialist position needs to be updated, but give consideration also to updating the position title to better align with the coordination and engagement efforts now falling within its scope of responsibilities. Something like communications coordinator or communications and engagement coordinator might be more accurate today. (Find sample job descriptions under "Staffing and Supporting Communications" in the members-only Samples and Resources section on the NSPRA website at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Staffing-and-Supporting-Communications.)

Action Step 1.4

Include proactive issues management as part of communication planning.

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

As noted in the Key Findings, focus group discussions revealed a number of areas in which stakeholders perceive there to be serious issues in Shaker Heights Schools. Examples include concerns about equity and racism, handling of disciplinary issues, and inconsistency in messaging. Consider adding to current Goal 2 about cultivating relationships an objective related to issues management.

The district already has systems for spotting trends through its community groups, various surveys, parent groups and FACE liaisons. The function of those systems could be expanded by equipping district leaders with talking points to start conversation about issues on the horizon and soliciting feedback. Using tools like this, the district can frame the conversation rather than allowing others to do so first.

Action Step 1.5

Incorporate communication planning and reviews into the daily work of staff.

With a more detailed, internal-facing strategic communication plan in place, the Department of Communications will have a practical guide to help staff work efficiently and effectively in supporting the goals of the district's strategic plan. To help ensure the communication work remains focused on an ongoing basis, the auditor recommends the following:

- **Monitor progress.** Utilize part of regular communications staff meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan.
- **Brainstorm strategies.** These discussions can also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind and avoid jumping to strategies and tactics that are most familiar. Encourage creativity in exploring new strategies that may be more effective.
- **Create project-specific plans.** In addition to the overall communication plan for the district, project-specific communication plans should continue to be developed whenever key issues or initiatives need to be addressed or implemented. While these issue or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, it is important to go through the same type of thoughtful planning around key issues and evaluation of communication efforts.

Recommendation 2:

Formalize collaboration between the communication and engagement functions and create shared support structures.

Communication is the act of exchanging information, while engagement is the act of attracting or motivating someone's involvement. Together these are key components for building and maintaining positive relationships between a school district and its staff, students, families and wider community. They are also vital for a school district to improve student outcomes and to maintain the support of stakeholders.

To be effective, these two functions—communication and engagement—should work in harmony. Communication efforts are more effective when informed by the act of listening to and engaging with stakeholders, and engagement efforts are more effective at attracting the interest of stakeholders when they use clear, targeted messages informed by communications research. This vital link has been demonstrated through research studies, surveys and the award-winning results of district campaigns. As a result, in many districts, these functions are integrated.

As shared in the Key Findings, responsibility for the district's current engagement efforts appears to be spread across multiple departments, specifically the Department of Communication and the Family and Community Engagement Center (FACE) in the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

To ensure greater collaboration between these two teams and to prioritize and clarify roles, the auditor offers the following suggestions.

Action Step 2.1

Create a formal alignment between the Department of Communications and FACE.

Districts of all sizes are vulnerable to working in silos, and the auditor's conversations with staff suggest that silos have become a barrier to effective community engagement in Shaker Heights Schools. While it is beyond the scope of this audit to address organizational structure overall, it is apparent that greater coordination and collaboration between the Department of Communications and FACE are necessary.

It is possible that the audit planned to design a strategic plan for FACE will identify this as an area for improvement, too. As that separate research process continues, consider how an increased level of collaboration could be achieved by creating formal structures for how the two departments will work together. Following are shorter-term and longer-term strategies to consider exploring.

- *Shorter-term strategy:*
  Create a formalized structure for how the Department of Communications and the Family and Community Engagement Center work together.
  - Begin by outlining each department's community engagement responsibilities and identifying all staff members responsible for fulfilling them.
  - Identify the overall community engagement goals of each department and any current or anticipated projects related to community engagement.
  - Determine each staff member's role in current plans and projects and how support and collaboration between departments will occur,

including establishing regular meeting times to review progress. For example, someone within FACE might be designated to collaborate with communications staff on projects involving equity work and communications about it.

- Decide how and when the evaluation of each project will occur and be reported, and based on the results, whether additional research may be needed to support future projects. For example, the departments might collaborate on door-to-door polling within neighborhoods where communication and engagement efforts have been less successful.

- *Longer-term strategy:* **Consider consolidating the departments into a comprehensive communications and community engagement department.** This unity would help ensure that all district communication efforts are planned strategically and collaboratively for maximum effectiveness in terms of staffing and the engagement of all stakeholders. It is also a natural fit for these two functional areas: In a 2022 survey of NSPRA members, 44 percent reported that community relations/public engagement was among their top responsibilities as school communicators.

  As budgets and staffing opportunities allow, consider creating a position that oversees all staff and functions pertaining to public information, public relations, marketing, media services, communications equity and community engagement. This position might be new or considered an expansion to the role of a current communications position.

#2

Formalize collaboration between the communication and engagement functions and create shared support structures.

Action Step 2.2

Collaborate with the Family and Community Engagement Center to develop the comprehensive strategic communication plan.

Action Step 1.1 calls for enhancing the Strategic Communications Plan (2023-2026) with practical components that make it a more comprehensive guide for communications staff. The auditor recommends that the Department of Communications staff confer with FACE staff as they develop the community engagement components of the plan. This will help ensure that the efforts of both departments are moving forward in alignment toward achieving common goals for stakeholder engagement.

As an example of a strategic communication plan that effectively incorporates engagement components, see this plan developed by the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, Canada, following a 2017 NSPRA Communication Audit: https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/about/media/strategic-%20communications-and-engagement-plan/

Recommendation 3

Increase transparency and participation in decision-making processes across the district, departments and schools.

When district, department or school leaders must make a decision that will impact multiple stakeholder groups, it is almost impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of all groups. They are simply too diverse. Knowing that universal happiness with a decision is unlikely, administrators, as well as school boards, are better served by aiming for public consent around the decision-making process; in other words, all stakeholders are aware of the process and believe it was fair and reasonable, even if they don't like the outcome.

It can be challenging to build public confidence in the decision-making process of a school district. The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer found that in a global survey, 71 percent of respondents trust educational organizations to do what is right. However, a Pew Research Center survey in November 2023 found that about half of U.S. adults (51 percent) say the country's public K-12 education system is generally going in the wrong direction. NSPRA auditors have also consistently heard from the parents, teachers and support staff of many districts that they feel their feedback is unwanted and not really considered, even when formally collected through surveys and community meetings.

Increasing transparency about decision-making processes is one powerful way to build consent and ultimately trust in the important work of a school system and its leaders. Once consent for the process is earned, supporters of the decision are more confident in their agreement and detractors are less motivated to fight the eventual outcome.

Building an environment of trust in the decision-making processes used by Shaker Heights Schools is not just a function of communications, though. All district, department and school leaders must be committed to it as well. The following strategies are advised to leaders at all levels, as well as to the Department of Communications, as they work to increase stakeholders' awareness of their decision-making processes.

Action Step 3.1

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. Set up a common understanding with this general guidance:

- **If a decision has already been made, do not ask for input from stakeholders.** Stakeholders feel like their input doesn't matter when it seems that leaders have already decided on an issue. Instead of feeling included in the decision-making process, it comes across as if they were asked to provide input only to create the appearance of transparency.
    - The more controversial a decision is likely to be, the more a school system needs to involve its stakeholders in the decision-making process.
    - If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to state mandates or budget constraints for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, the focus should be on building understanding around the situation that led to the particular

decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.

- When communicating a decision made without stakeholder input, provide details into what precipitated the decision, what factors were taken into account, who was involved in the decision-making process and how the change will be implemented.

- **Give public input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Asking for input and then appearing to ignore it is one of the quickest ways to cause stakeholders to disengage from a school system. Sometimes district or school leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, based on their professional expertise. But if they choose to seek input from stakeholders before finalizing the decision, and if that input favors a different solution or choice, they must truly listen to the input and consider the alternative options.
  - Respecting stakeholders and giving their input due consideration does not mean their suggestions must be followed. For example, their alternative ideas could be researched and feedback could be given regarding what those ideas would actually cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.
  - If the stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.
  - When reflecting on public input, always be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a relatively small or large portion of the community. Do not speak dismissively of input simply because few people agree with it.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. Administrators may gather the input to help make a more informed decision and may be considering a much wider scope of input beyond one particular group. To avoid confusion, clearly explain why the group's input is being sought, how it will be used and who ultimately will make the final decision. Defining these positions up front will make it less likely that those providing input misunderstand and become frustrated with their roles.

#3

Increase transparency and participation in decision-making processes across the district, departments and schools.

Action Step 3.2

Develop consistent systems for communicating key information about decisions.

The process of keeping stakeholders informed begins before the decision-making process has begun and continues during and after the decision is made. Therefore, it is important to have an intentional plan at the

beginning of a decision-making process for how information will be shared. This is true even in situations where public input is not sought but becomes even more important when it is. Having the proper context for a decision may or may not change a stakeholder's support for it, but understanding why the decision was made can create informed consent or the grudging willingness to go along with the idea. In other words: "I might not like it, but I get why it's necessary, so I won't fight you on it."

Depending on the nature of the decision being made, there are a number of ways the district can keep its communities apprised of progress in the decision-making process using established vehicles for communication such as the *Shaker Weekly eNews*, school-level newsletters, district and school websites and social media. Also 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 take the form of 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, include information on how stakeholders are, were or can be involved in the decision-making process as well as on how their input has been or will be used. Acknowledge and thank those who participated in the public input process, remind them of the general areas in which they provided feedback, share a few notable findings, tell them where to find summary results if they are available online and let them know what will happen next in the decision-making process. Acknowledge that not all input may be actionable, but it is still valuable in helping school system leaders understand the public's concerns.

If stakeholders actually see their input being valued—rather than simply being told that it is—the more they will be willing to answer future requests for input. Sharing the results of this communication audit report with all focus group participants is a great first step for the district to show it uses public input.

Following are two examples of school systems that created and successfully implemented a plan to build informed consent for their decision-making process and 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 a campaign that involved capturing the voices of students, local business leaders and higher education leaders; surveying staff and the community; holding town hall meetings; and other strategies to engage stakeholders in the decision-making process. Learn more about the campaign at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/Awards%20Section/Award%20Winners/School%20Comms%20Awards/Gold%20Medallion/gold-medallion-19_va-alexandria-city-public-schools.pdf?ver=ee1v6fFMQhcVHdztqwAimg%3d%3d.

Action Step 3.3

Institute protocol questions to guide communications regarding decision-making.

In order to make sharing information about decisions more systematic, consider incorporating communication protocol

questions into discussions of major decisions at the district, department and school levels. Communication-related protocol questions for administrators might include the following:

- What is the issue? Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- Who is affected by this issue? Identify the stakeholder groups that will be directly or indirectly affected by the issue as primary or secondary target audiences for communications.
- How does this issue affect stakeholders? Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district and community.
- How will the issue be framed? Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem, and how it will be presented to stakeholders to heighten awareness and understanding.
- What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue? Identify the key points stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.
- How will this issue be communicated? Identify the strategies and tactics that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders.
- What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue? Develop a timeline for implementing the strategies and tactics.
- Who is the main spokesperson on this issue? Identify who will represent the district in discussions with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

Recommendation 4

Nurture a culture of two-way communication with employees.

Shaker Heights Schools employees expressed a desire for more two-way communication and opportunities to give input into important decisions before implementation, especially when those decisions impact their work. They cited numerous examples when they felt this did not occur, including when decisions were made to eliminate tracking, change high school schedules and adjust the start times for the middle and elementary schools.

Whenever significant decisions are being made in a school system, communicating those decisions to employees first, along with the reasons behind them, should be a top priority and built into the decision-making schedule from the start. Not only are decisions likely to impact their work, but employees are also expected to be knowledgeable ambassadors of the district by external stakeholders. If they aren't able to answer questions about a district decision, the credibility of the district will suffer overall. Additionally, setting a procedure for gathering input on all major decisions that impact staff will serve to strengthen their trust and transparency throughout the district.

In addition to the steps outlined in the previous recommendation, consider the following steps for making sure there is two-way communication with employees regarding important initiatives and decisions.

Action Step 4.1

Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.

There are many ways to simply deliver information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication. A common theme among staff focus group participants was a desire to see the district leadership team at their work sites. These visits are opportunities for conversation about issues and to make human connections.

As noted on pages 16-18 of the Key Findings, when Shaker Heights Schools staff were asked how often they use various sources of information for information about the district, 100 percent indicated they use email on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Eighty-six percent indicated that they use newsletters (the *Shaker Weekly eNews* and school-based electronic newsletters) and the calendar as sources of information about the district on at least a monthly basis. "What other people tell me" was the next highest rated area at 82 percent. While clearly there is a logical use for sharing more routine information via email and in newsletter form, this data reflects that a high value is also placed on face-to-face communications.

Administrators and supervisors who plan and run meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. This can be especially important when significant changes in procedures, schedules, staffing and policies are being considered and/or when there are new relationships that need to be established. Providing a space for open dialogue and Q&A promotes a better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the system and its schools.

The following are suggestions for enhancing face-to-face communication.

- **Include all employees assigned to a school in faculty meetings.** Consider expanding the traditional faculty meeting to an all-staff meeting at least once a month and invite non-instructional support staff to attend. Share information relevant to them at the top of the meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related

to instruction are discussed and provide meeting notes to those who cannot attend. Along with school-specific topics, principals should share important district updates and key messages at these meetings.

- **Hold breakfast or lunch meetings with staff.** Once a month, have an administrator (e.g., superintendent, Superintendent's Leadership Team member, principals, department leaders) host an informal breakfast or lunch meeting with a different group of 10-15 staff members. During the meeting, solicit feedback from staff on what is going well in their schools/departments and what areas may need to be improved. Keep the group relatively small to ensure everyone has a chance to comment. Consider this an opportunity to build relationships with employees in a casual setting while gaining valuable insight into challenges and successes around the district.
- **Create opportunities for district staff to interact with one another.** Consider holding regular meetings of all district office staff. Share important district updates and key messages, but also allow time for employees who may have limited interactions otherwise to become better acquainted with one another. Increasing interactions between employees in different departments can help avoid conflicting communications, overlapping deadlines and other operational disconnects that ultimately create issues. Improved collegiality between departments can also positively impact message consistency and improve customer service. Focus group participants noted that some employee groups who don't have access to a district computer or cell phone are unintentionally overlooked when important messaging needs to be relayed.

#4

Nurture a culture of two-way communication with employees

- **Cultivate internal key communicators across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department have team members that colleagues consider to be "in the know" and who are trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put this system to work by identifying these individuals and engaging them in helping to share key messages. Provide these staff members, advisory committees, association leaders and other key influencers with regular news updates and key messages and ask for their support in disseminating information.
- **Schedule listening opportunities for the superintendent at school and department staff meetings.** In an Oregon school district, a superintendent began offering "Live with [Superintendent's Name]" virtual events that were very popular with employees. Similar "Live with Dr. Glasner" events could focus on a particular topic and give employees the opportunity to meet and interact with the superintendent either in person or in a virtual setting. (This might be an excellent application for a district podcast, as in Action Step 5.5). The format could include taking 5-10 minutes to provide a brief update on district issues and then using the remaining time to solicit staff comments and concerns. There might be a specific topic to focus on, but it is also useful to ask for comments on issues or topics that are top-of-mind for

stakeholders. Gathering input in this more casual manner can help inform decisions and clarify rumors, too.

Action Step 4.2

Develop an infographic to help employees understand and remember the importance of two-way communication.

Consider developing a simple infographic to share with employees that explains the difference between two-way and one-way communication. This might be done initially as a digital or print flyer shared with all staff, though ideally it would be provided in a setting that allows for discussion such as a training session.

A more complex graphic might be posted as a colorful poster in employee break rooms, but a simpler graphic could be worked into fun collateral such as magnets.

Boston (Mass.) Public Schools developed a "A Model for One-Way and Two-Way Communication" handout to share with staff as a reminder to both listen and explain. View it at this link: https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/112/model%20for%20one-way%20and%20two-way%20communication.pdf

This tactic emphasizes and reinforces the principle that every staff person has a responsibility to communicate on behalf of the district.

Recommendation 5

Expand the communication methods used to engage external stakeholders.

"The 70 percent" is how several stakeholders labeled the group of Shaker Heights Schools residents who don't have a direct connection to Shaker Heights Schools, but who bear the majority of the tax burden to pay for them. Survey results and focus group feedback suggest that these community members are interested in knowing more about the schools and having the opportunity to engage in conversations about them.

The Department of Communications contributes to the *Shaker Life* magazine distributed to all Shaker Heights residents and all residents of the Shaker Heights City School District four times a year. However, like many school districts today, most other Shaker Heights Schools communications rely heavily on electronic and social media for distribution. This one-way push of information limits stakeholders' ability to respond and generally does not reach those without direct connections to the schools.

For school districts, having a knowledgeable community that understands local education issues is vital to operating effectively. Whether it is through their votes, their taxes, their home location or their enrollment choices, these stakeholders make decisions daily based on their understanding—accurate or not—and those decisions directly affect local schools.

To increase the knowledge of all residents about Shaker Heights Schools, the auditor recommends that the district increase opportunities for community engagement and that strategies for doing so be incorporated when updating the strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1). As addressed in Recommendation 2, these activities should be developed in collaboration with the Family and Community Engagement Center.

Action Step 5.1

> **Determine when and how formal engagement processes will be used for specific initiatives.**

As demonstrated in several of the following action steps, many engagement opportunities can be created that simply open the door for more interaction with the community. However, when an issue is likely to be controversial and/or extensive changes to the system might result, employing a successful engagement process may require a more extensive, structured process.

To determine whether a future decision may require this kind of an engagement process, consider what Dr. David Mathews, former CEO and president of the Kettering Foundation, identified as "Gateway Questions" that lead to engagement:

- **Is this a problem that affects me?** People first must connect the problem or issue to what they deem valuable before they get involved.
- **Can I do anything?** Even if they feel the problem is serious, they must feel there is something they personally can do to make a difference.
- **Who will join me?** People often feel powerless if they see themselves as acting alone but will believe they can make a difference if others of like mind join them.

If it is determined that an extensive engagement process specific to a particular issue would be beneficial, consideration should be given to who will manage the process. Many organizations offer training and other resources such as books, session guidelines and facilitator

manuals. (One such organization that has partnered in the past with NSPRA and member districts is Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and public engagement organization.) The district can also opt to bring in an external facilitator trained in public engagement to lead the initiative. Throughout focus group meetings and in the SCOPE open-ended survey, comments were made that there are a number of well-trained professionals in Shaker Heights who want to provide their expertise and services. This may be a place where a volunteer with the appropriate skill set could be of use.

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

Action Step 5.2

Continue to provide and refine opportunities for two-way communications.

Shaker Heights Schools should continue, or in some cases update, its strategies to ensure stakeholders have an opportunity to provide feedback outside of situations when major decisions or changes are being considered.

- **Expand the digital methods for stakeholders to easily submit comments and ideas.** Inviting comments and ideas via an anonymous-optional digital tool or e-form can make providing feedback more convenient and comfortable for busy or self-conscious community members, parents and staff. Shaker Heights effectively does this with its Tell Us What Is On Your Mind form on the Long Term Master Facilities Plan page on the website. Expanding this to other topical areas beyond school facilities could widen the community's input opportunities. School systems today can invite input digitally in a variety of ways, including through online feedback apps such as K12 Insight's Let's Talk customer service platform, the ThoughtExchange community engagement platform and artificial intelligence-powered, education-focused chatbots like AlwaysOn.

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

- **Continue to promote and also develop guidelines for two-way engagement on social media.** Shaker Heights Schools social media currently allows for public comments, and communications staff do interact with those comments when questions and feedback are posed.

#5

Expand the communication methods used to engage external stakeholders

Continue this practice, but be sure to also define and consistently apply a process for handling questions, inaccurate statements and complaints. Consider the following:

- **If someone posts inaccurate statements or complaints**, here are some conflict resolution strategies to deescalate the situation:
  - **Build trust.** Even if the person engaging cannot be satisfied, show care, attentiveness and kindness in all responses to the individual.
  - **Hide a comment rather than delete it, unless it violates posting polices for the page.** On Facebook, comments can be hidden to the general public, but they will remain visible to the commenter and the commenter's friends. This reduces the public exposure to inaccurate information while allowing the individual to still express their feelings and beliefs.
  - **Get off the public newsfeed.** Ask the social media user to direct message (DM) the district social media account so you can have a more detailed and private conversation. If the inquiry can not be managed in this space, move to the next strategy.
  - **Get offline.** If DM does not work, ask the person to send you an email or direct them to an existing complaints process.
  - **Have a conversation.** Conflict is best resolved with parties closest to the source. Have the appropriate administrator be in contact with the person via phone or email to personally address the concerns.
  - **Sometimes no response is an effective response.** Determine who is sharing the concern or conflict. Social media inquiries from individuals rather than anonymous accounts should be prioritized in terms of a response.
- **Once a process is established, share it as part of social media guidelines on official district pages** so stakeholders can be made aware, as necessary, that these rules exist and that reactions from the district are consistent and not determined on a "case by case" basis.
  - Consider adding links to the guidelines on the page "Intro" on Facebook (see NSPRA example) and the brief bio areas on X and Instagram (see NSPRA example).
  - Review other school districts' examples of social media post response guidelines such as the Online Engagement by District Stakeholders Policy from West Fargo Public Schools in North Dakota (https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/Audits/online-engagement-district-stakeholders-west-fargo-ps (1).pdf?ver=YJc3oJMQBgAZv0UFeQsqlg%3d%3d) and the Social Media Response Guidelines of Papillion La Vista Community Schools in Nebraska (https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/social-media-response-guidelines-papillion-la-vista-cs.pdf?ver=ZRckEYcjXW2TAX9HyaaWNA%3d%3d).

- **Develop and implement listening campaigns with parents and the community.** On a regular basis, provide the superintendent with opportunities to meet with diverse groups of constituents. Besides schools, these meetings might take place in public libraries, community

centers or even local coffee shops so stakeholders can meet with the superintendent off the district's "turf."

- Provide a structure for the conversations and increase the appeal for potential attendees by designating specific topics; few people are willing to take time out of their busy schedules for a meeting with no clear purpose. For example, one session might focus on safety issues, another might focus on the district's stance regarding social media.
- Make it clear that the purpose of these listening opportunities is to hear from stakeholders, not to make decisions. It is also important to honor the school district's chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

Action Step 5.3

Use technology to increase the variety of voices/opinions that can be heard during committee meetings and other community group conversations.

Shaker Heights Schools has a number of committees and other types of small-group meetings that allow it to share information with and get input from external stakeholders. Such groups provide a more personal way to build trust with key influencers in the school community and serve as a feedback mechanism for the district. However, even in this more intimate setting, it is possible for a small number of voices/opinions to dominate the conversation, preventing district leaders from getting a full picture of a situation or an accurate take on public perception.

While skilled facilitators can help to prevent a single individual from monopolizing a conversation, there are also communication technologies today that can increase the representation of thought in a meeting setting.

For example, during a committee meeting the group might be given access to a digital space for sharing ideas, and that shared digital space might be projected on a screen for all to see. The meeting host could be intentional about posing questions, inviting people to speak to the room or to offer their thoughts anonymously within the digital space, and then taking time to speak to those comments received digitally on occasion. A few example tools to explore include digital whiteboards (e.g., Google Jamboard, FigJam by Figma, Lucidspark by Lucid), brainstorming tools (e.g., Mentimeter) and engagement platforms (e.g., ThoughtExchange).

Action Step 5.4

Develop and promote programs to increase senior citizens' engagement in schools.

The Department of Communications is well-positioned to offer thought leadership in Shaker Heights Schools around events that would increase senior citizens' engagement. If designed to appeal to their interests and needs, such programs could give less-affiliated residents a reason to welcome a first-hand look at Shaker Heights Schools' impressive educational and extracurricular programs.

Garland Independent School District in Texas (53,000 students) earned a 2020 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for its strategic communication campaign to promote a Senior Citizen VIP Pass. The pass offered free general admission to district-hosted athletic events and fine arts performances. In three months, the campaign netted more than 1,000 senior

citizen sign-ups, and the effort later led to the development of a successful senior citizen VIP tour of schools. Programs like this build good will but 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 a 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 5.5

Explore the creation of a district podcast.

A podcast can be a great addition to a district's set of communication tools if done with a clear objective, strategy and dedicated staff time and resources. Nearly 90 million Americans are podcast listeners, and the medium is expected to grow, with forecasts predicting the number to top 100 million by the end of this year. Surging in popularity in 2020 during the pandemic, podcast listeners also grew more diverse over the last few years. What was once a platform known only to 30 percent of Americans a decade ago is now known to nearly 80 percent of U.S. consumers ages 12+.

As communications staff and district leaders consider whether this would be a worthwhile communications tool to develop for Shaker Heights Schools, consider other school districts' experiences with the medium.

NSPRA talked to four award-winning producers of school district podcasts for their insights into how and why they first started a podcast, how it resonated with their community, and what to consider if your district has ever thought about starting one. Visit https://www.nspra.org/News/is-a-podcast-right-for-your-district to view the news article and access additional resources.

Action Step 5.6

Continue to offer an outreach program to local real estate agents.

When it comes to selling a school district to prospective home buyers, real estate agents are limited on what they can say because of the Fair Housing Act. 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. As a result, agents can't legally tell parents one neighborhood has better schools than another or that one home is in a more desirable district. However, 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.

Shaker Heights Schools partners with the City of Shaker Heights on quarterly meetings with area real estate agents. These meetings appear to largely be an opportunity for the city and district to provide program updates, and for agents to share concerns or questions. The district also is able to provide print materials that agents can share with their clients.

In preparing the district's materials for these meetings, consider the following:

- Be sure there is a companion webpage for prospective families on the district website that aligns with the packets provided to agents, which should include a link or QR code to the webpage.
- After at least one quarterly meeting a year, offer a bus tour of the district or select

schools to highlight specific programs.

- Regularly review Shaker Heights Schools' ratings on GreatSchools.org and Niche.com, where self-submitted, anonymous reviews of a school from parents, teachers, students and community members appear below school rating details. Many property listing websites send families to these sites for information on local schools. Show principals how to check what the site is telling potential families and employees about their schools, how to "claim" their school to add general information, and how to encourage parent-teacher organization leaders to add reviews.

Action Step 5.7

Expand outreach activities to the community.

One way to increase support for Shaker Heights Schools is to create more opportunities for community members to interact with the schools. Some initiatives to consider include:

- **Creating strong connections with families new to Shaker Heights.**
  - Information about new home purchases is tracked by local governments. Reach out to see how to obtain that information on a regular basis. Then consider developing a "Welcome to Shaker Heights Schools" mailer to be distributed at least quarterly to new residents who have moved into the school district's enrollment zone.
  - Develop a webpage, brochure or handbook that explains how parents can become involved in their child's school and the school district. Provide answers to the most frequently asked questions that new residents have and include the common communications channels the district uses such as email, automated calls and Facebook.
- **Continuing to foster a service-oriented attitude by setting standards for all staff.** Staff in central office departments should see their main focus as providing direct support to schools as well as providing excellent service to parents and the public. The Department of Communications has offered customer service training previously. Encourage all central office departments to establish standards for their levels of service to schools and the public.

Here are several more community outreach ideas that could be adopted for district or school purposes:

- **Seeing is Believing Tours:** Sponsor short school tours for community members, real estate agents, university faculty and senior citizens that allow them to see teachers teaching and students learning.
- **Top Ten Supporters Lunch:** Host CEOs or top managers of the school district's top 10 tax-paying businesses for lunch or breakfast. The management of some of these businesses may not have reason to interact with the schools unless invited even though their employees likely live in the district and their children attend Shaker Heights Schools.
- **Volunteer Day:** Host a community volunteer day where the school district gives back to the community. Teams of employees and student groups can tackle volunteer projects on a single morning or afternoon. Have a hashtag for the day and encourage employees to post on social media about their activities.
- **Recording Local History Day**: Have high school students visit with senior citizens to record the town's oral history.

Action Step 5.8

Encourage administrators to participate in local civic and service organizations.

The task of conveying messages and telling the district's story should not fall entirely to the superintendent and the Department of Communications staff. Administrative team members who are active in community and philanthropic organizations can be effective ambassadors for the school district. Administrative team members should look for organizations within the Shaker Heights community that interest them and also give them opportunities to interact with community members outside of their regular work environment. If possible, the school district could pay for memberships to civic and community groups.

Action Step 5.9

Treat students as a key audience.

Although classes and extracurriculars are the main focus of most students, they also keep their parents informed about school and district decisions that directly impact them. Of parents who responded that they regularly get information about the district from talking with others, 76.8 percent responded that their student is their primary source. Focus group conversations with parents and the SCOPE Survey open-ended comments also indicate that parents rely heavily on their children for information about the district. Given this, ensuring students are informed can be a vital strategy in informing and engaging parents, particularly those who are less able to be active in their child's school and/or district activities.

Some suggestions for communicating with students include the following:

- Students in the focus group asked that they receive the same emails as their parents when it comes to issues affecting them such as school safety, scheduling, start and stop times, etc. They noted that they could read the messages provided to them in Google classroom.
- Students rely on their teachers for information, so provide key messages/ talking points to teachers, especially at middle and secondary school levels. Information about graduation requirements, course availability, scholarships and exam schedules are of high interest to high school students and their parents.
- In-school announcements and assemblies are an effective way to reach students.
  - Provide schools with scripts for public address announcements.
  - Create PowerPoint slides or videos for schools whose announcements are presented on television monitors.
  - Leverage a week's worth of student announcements by packaging them into an email update for parents.
- Ask the Student Advisory Council to distribute information relevant to students. This will be particularly effective for those councils using social media.
- Meet students where they are by communicating with them via social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram—the top three platforms used by U.S. teens aged 13 to 17 in 2022 according to the Pew Research Center.
- Keep students in mind when structuring the new websites. Determine what students are looking for and provide

new content or easier access to those areas. Consider a student portal off the main website that compiles information particularly relevant to students.

- Communicate the Shaker Heights Schools mission, vision, and strategic initiatives to students in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. Help students understand how the initiatives relate to them and impact their education. Student reporters for school newsletters could interview administrators about the initiatives or short information segments could be added to student announcements.
- Find ways to increase student-to-student communication. High school students could share tips with eighth graders about how to prepare for the transition to high school or information about clubs and extracurricular activities. Provide opportunities for students to share their school pride and encourage their peers to get involved in the life of the school.

Action Step 5.10

Provide prompt summaries of school board meetings.

Currently, Board of Education meeting agendas are located on BoardDocs and minutes are linked on the Board of Education's webpage. However, the minutes can be lengthy and are posted after the board approves them, which might be a month or more after the actual meeting.

Providing a brief summary immediately after each regular meeting of the Board of Education would demonstrate transparency with the community and allow the district to frame the public conversations about school governance topics. The summary could be emailed to all staff the morning after the board meeting, linked to the weekly newsletter, posted on the Board of Education webpage and emailed to local reporters to support accuracy in news media coverage.

The brief summary should be less formal and more easily digestible than official board minutes. Single paragraphs for each major agenda item can include hyperlinks to reports, bookmarked sections of recorded meeting videos and other documents. A good tip is to have the board meeting summary in draft form before the meeting. The document can then be quickly updated with board actions and posted online after the meeting.

Following are some examples of NSPRA award-winning school board meeting summaries shared separate from and in advance of official meeting notes:

- NCSS Board Notes, Newton County (Ga.) School System–https://www.smore.com/xyft5
- Board Matters, Orange County (N.C.) Schools–https://www.orangecountyfirst.com/cms/lib/NC50000429/Centricity/Domain/34/Feb21BoardMattersENG.pdf
- Springboard, Spring Independent School District, Houston, Texas– https://www.springisd.org/cms/lib/TX01918331/Centricity/domain/4/email/springboard/template/html/SBMay21.html

Recommendation 6

Strengthen communication infrastructure by developing and consistently implementing processes and procedures.

As shown in the survey data (see page 19), except in emergencies, email is the preferred method of receiving communication for Shaker Heights Schools' stakeholders. However, both parents and staff indicated that the volume, frequency, length and number of sources of communications are presenting an overwhelming challenge. They also shared difficulties in reaching communities in the district that have less access to technology and/or less time to sort through a lot of information.

The Department of Communications has an opportunity to support schools and educators in establishing processes and procedures that will help to mitigate these challenges and frustrations for parents and staff, while also clearing up any internal confusion about who is supposed to communicate what and when.

Action Step 6.1

Clarify the communication roles of all administrators.

Ensuring all relevant information is disseminated in a timely manner requires teamwork and coordination. All Shaker Heights Schools leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and, if they do not already, have collaborative relationships with the Department of Communications. Communication expectations for district, school and department administrators should be clarified and discussed several times a year so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

Consider using a chart like the one on the bottom of the next page to clearly define communication roles and responsibilities for different administrators. By clarifying their responsibilities and ensuring communication activities are aligned with the strategic plan and integrated at all levels, the district can connect more directly with parents and community members while also strengthening internal trust and engagement among employees.

Action Step 6.2

Follow a consistent process for internal communications.

Throughout the focus groups, staff reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and their supervisor; this, in turn, negatively affects the flow of information to their co-workers, parents and the wider community.

The Department of Communications should work closely with the Superintendent's Leadership Team to clarify internal communication processes and develop a list of preferred channels for communication. The process and list should be shared and reviewed with district administrators and school principals at least annually and might include the following:

- **Guidelines for who will distribute various types of information to internal audiences and what channels are to be used**, as described in the previous action step.
- **Plans for issuing talking points for departments and building staff meetings for all major initiatives.** To ensure all staff receive the same information simultaneously, the district should consistently develop and share with administrators 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 Department of Communications for consistency of message, ease of understanding and coordinated distribution.

- **Expectations regarding the timing of internal communications.** Setting expectations for the timing of communications will create consistencies that will help alleviate anxiety about when information can be expected. It will also reduce the frustration we heard from some employees that they often hear important district news from others before receiving it officially from the district. Following are examples of timing expectations to consider:
  - Staff should receive important information at least 15-30 minutes before families and the community so that they can serve as front-line communicators and ambassadors for the schools. When possible, such

#6

Strengthen communication infrastructure by developing and consistently implementing processes and procedures.

Example Chart: Communication Roles and Responsibilities for Different Administrators

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Department of Communications	District-level updates on routine matters that impact more than one school, urgent matters that impact any school, major division-wide initiatives, stories that illustrate the district's mission and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: emails, automated messages, text messages, website, print/digital newsletters, social media, videos, news releases, tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries, emails to staff, and staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Admin. Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/ action briefs, board policy changes	Board webpages
Director of Curriculum and Instruction	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages, emails to staff, and staff, board and community meetings
Treasurer	Budget and finance updates, bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter, emails to staff, and 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 and 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

information should be sent at a time of day when staff are more likely to have easy access to email.

- Information staff need to act on should be sent to them at least 48 hours before they need to act on it.
- The central office will respond to staff inquiries within 48 hours.

- **Protocols for dedicating time for key announcements during leadership/ faculty meetings.** Such meetings should always include an agenda item for sharing updates on and answering questions about current key initiatives and issues.
- **Internal communication tips for principals.** Provide principals with tips on how to successfully and efficiently communicate at the building level with their staff as well as their families. NSPRA members can find inspiration for communication tips to share with principals through multiple posts in the NSPRA Connect online community (example 1, example 2) and the book *The Communicating Principal: Practical Strategies for School Leaders* by authors Trinette Marquis, APR, and Natalie Nash, available on the NSPRA website at https://www.nspra.org in the online store.
- **Suggested methods for determining when and how information is to be shared with internal audiences.** One way to address communication inconsistencies after meetings is using a communication responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of "who does what" for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. This type of grid can also be used with councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated. Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes for "FYI," "to be shared" and "confidential" to each agenda item. Then the person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If an item is "to be shared," then a discussion will be needed to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed, as outlined in the previous bullet.

Following are links to some example communication guides for administrators:

- Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School Division–https://bit.ly/3uoCe8J
- Communications Handbook, Pflugerville (Texas) Independent School District–NSPRA Connect post share
- Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools–https://bit.ly/4a0z0ZF

Action Step 6.3

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

Shaker Heights Schools is facing a challenge common to many school districts in this time of media saturation: information overload. An article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Why Do Schools Send So Many Emails? They Don't Have To," focused on the topic, with the writer, Julie Jargon, opining, "My kids head back to the classroom in about two weeks. So far I've received nine emails, five text messages

and two newsletters from their schools, some of which directed me to other sites to fill out forms. I've received notifications of numerous Facebook posts but haven't had the bandwidth to look at them. Schools deliver information in multiple ways to keep families informed…but do they need to do this much communication? For parents and guardians, already crazed at work, managing school chatter can feel like another full-time job." As Shaker Heights Schools leaders think about how to streamline school-level and district communications, the article is worth reading, including the 100+ comments submitted by parents.

Ironically, information overload is a sign the district is providing a steady outflow of information and, as shown on pages 26-27, the SCOPE Survey showed more than two thirds of all stakeholders indicate that they are moderately, very or extremely informed in all areas except the district budget. Most districts would prefer to be criticized for providing too much information than not enough. However, information overload causes its own problems, the most serious being that stakeholders can start to tune out communication and miss something important. Determining what information to send in which channels and how often to send it can be tricky, but the extensive data gathered in the audit can serve as a guide (see pages 16-18).

In the parent focus group and open-ended comments on the SCOPE Survey, there was feedback about the variety of communication tools used by the district, schools and teachers. Parents expressed frustration at the variety of tools currently in use. The auditor's review shows nearly a dozen apps and methods, including SeeSaw; Remind; Here Comes the Bus, Shaker eNews; PTO newsletters; Constant Contact; SchoolMessenger; Smore flyers; Google classroom; PowerSchool progress reports; school-issued weekly newsletters and teacher newsletters.

To begin streamlining parent communications, the auditor recommends the following steps:

- **Take inventory of all communication tools currently in use across the district**. To make sure the list is complete, each school principal should be asked to provide a list of the communication tools used in their building, what they are used for and whether they think they should be retained or replaced.

- **From there, the department should establish a small review committee that includes representative teachers, parents, school level administrators, technology staff and Department of Communications staff.** The committee should be briefed on what each tool is used for, who uses it, who receives it, how often it is used, how easy it is to use, whether training is provided on its use and any available data on readership, open rates, distribution schedules, etc. Committee members can also use this audit report to inform the group's discussion. As part of the process, the group should identify situations where schools and teachers are using different platforms to accomplish the same purpose.

- **Another consideration for the group is the potential for a holistic solution that integrates many communication capabilities into a single platform.** (A wide range of such products and features are available, and the district's website provider may offer that capability.) If individual users can select how they want to receive information and only receive it that way, fewer would feel the frustration of getting pinged by email, text message, auto-generated calls and social media all at the same time.

- **From this analysis, the group will be able to develop a set of recommended communication tools for use by all teachers and schools as appropriate**

for student age groups. The list of recommendations should be shared with district leadership, who would make the final determination of which tools to keep and which to eliminate.

As the district conducts its analysis, it may find this article in *Forbes Magazine* helpful: "How To Better Understand Customers' Communication Preferences." While this article is oriented to how companies can serve the communication needs of their customers, it contains useful tips for school divisions such as the following:

- Remind stakeholders frequently to review and update whatever communication options are currently provided and tell them how they can subscribe and unsubscribe to information feeds. In some cases, a person may opt-out of a communication channel, like texts for example, then forget they've done so and become frustrated when they miss urgent communications.
- Consider equity and access to technology in planning strategies and tactics. Several focus group participants expressed concerns about how to ensure that parents who cannot afford technology, or grandparents who may be uncomfortable using technology, can access electronically-delivered information. This is a difficult problem to solve in the digital age, but the auditor encourages the district to gather data around the number of parents/guardians in this situation and address it in the strategic communication plan. If the number of stakeholders with limited access to technology is small, perhaps those parents/guardians could have an opportunity to opt-in to paper communications.

It will be helpful to develop a guidance document that spells out which communication tools are preferred for which schools and grade levels, along with best practices for how frequently they should be used, in which situations they should be used and how to obtain support or training to use the designated tools effectively. The guidance should include recommended release and response times to ensure information is shared in a timely manner and stakeholders are not left waiting for responses to their questions, comments or concerns. Consider also including:

- Basic formatting tips to improve readability, visual appeal and accessibility of school newsletters.
- A list of approved sources of royalty free images, graphics and videos that won't violate copyrights.
- Templates for common school-to parent or teacher-to-parent messages.
- Summaries of relevant school board policies and laws that relate to sharing information with parents.

Find examples of staff guidelines on when to use which communication platforms in NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Goldmine) section on "Training - Administrators, Board Members, Staff" at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff.

To ensure the guidance document remains complete, effective and current with changing technology or stakeholders' needs, it should be reviewed annually by communications staff for any necessary content updates.

Action Step 6.4

Create a guide describing privacy laws in simple, easy-to-understand language.

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

This information should be shared annually with parents within start-of-school materials. Make sure this information is posted on the website so that parents can be directed to it as needed. This allows the district to clearly lay out the legal restrictions it is obligated to follow, while also letting parents know that these are established rules that apply to all situations and are not decided based on the details of a specific event.

Action Step 6.5

Continue to try to make information easy to consume.

Parents want brief, accessible, easy-to-read information from their district and schools. With the multitude of ways that technology delivers an abundance of information on a 24/7 basis, communicators today should ascribe to the 3-30-3 rule: You have three seconds to grab a reader's attention, 30 seconds to engage them and three minutes to tell them what they need to know.

This is a challenge for school districts, particularly when trying to communicate complex issues. Following are some tips for making sure the message gets across.

- **Create shorter pieces** with compelling headlines, brief bullets, a simple summary and links to where more information can be found, if desired or needed.
- **Provide a list of the articles or topics at the top of newsletters** and link them to the accompanying story. In this way, readers can skim the list and click on only what is of interest or importance to them.
- **Create an infographic when there is a lot of data to be shared.** An engaging infographic can quickly deliver key information, be repurposed for use on the website and social media, and be shared with the local news media. Easy-to-use infographic platforms include Canva and Piktochart. For inspiration, check out the Infographic category of the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section of the NSPRA website at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Infographics or the example of an effective budget infographic by Chesapeake Public Schools in Virginia at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/Infographic-Chesapeake-PS-22-23-Budget.pdf?ver=ly2K0ruq1zccQCkCVJTSUA%3d%3d.

Recommendation 7

Prepare to correct and prevent the spread of false information.

When asked about the biggest communication challenges facing Shaker Heights Schools, several focus group participants commented on the threat posed by misinformation (i.e., inaccurate information) and disinformation (i.e., deliberately untruthful information) on social media. Shaker Heights Schools is not alone in facing this challenge.

A report on false information released by NSPRA in June 2024 shows that 96 percent of the association's members consider the spread of false information to be an issue for K-12 public school systems, and at least three out of four school public relations professionals (78 percent) indicated their school system has experienced a challenge caused by the spread of false information within the last 12 months. On a wider level, a November 2023 survey by the Institute for Public Relations, the Fourth Annual Disinformation in Society Report, found that among Americans, 61 percent consider misinformation and 60 percent consider disinformation to be more significant threats to society than terrorism, border security, the budget deficit and climate change.

In school districts, data suggests that misinformation and disinformation tend to occur the most around big issues and decisions facing a district. Nearly 70 percent of districts dealing with false information note that the information spread was regarding policy-related issues, and another 66 percent indicate it was related to safety concerns. While less common, false information related to individual students or staff members may be particularly hard to address, as obligations to protect the privacy of individuals often prohibit full disclosure of the facts. (Action Step 6.4 provides suggestions on how to handle these situations.)

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

NSPRA's new report "From Distortion to Clarity: Empowering School Districts to Overcome False Information" offers example scenarios and specific strategies to address false information, but the following action steps provide additional ways to inoculate against the threat of misinformation and disinformation. It is important to note that these steps cannot be the sole responsibility of communications staff and should be handled by a small group of district leaders working together.

Action Step 7.1

Monitor emerging issues.

Identify a small team of perhaps three to five staff members who will be responsible for monitoring emerging issues. The team should include at least one school site administrator, one district administrator and a representative from the Department of Communications. It will work best if the team members have strong existing relationships in the community.

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

- What is the issue, and how widespread is its area of concern?
- How did we become aware of this issue?
- How might the issue impact the district?

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

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

The team should meet at least quarterly to share new areas of concern that may be emerging and discuss the status of those that have been identified and are being addressed. The Department of Communications representative should share summaries or fact sheets on this information, as needed, with other district leaders.

Action Step 7.2

Respond to false information.

A new body of research on false information suggests that the approach used to debunk it makes a difference in the efficacy of the correction. According to Ullrich Ecker, a scholar from the University of Western Australia (https://www.nature.com/articles/s44159-021-00006-y), rebuttals are most effective when you:

- **Repeat accurate information and facts.** More familiar information is more likely to be believed.
- **Use empathy in your response.** Avoid being confrontational and frame communication according to the audience's perspective.
- **Provide alternative or additional information.** Consider that detailed refutations are more effective than brief ones. Explain why the misinformation is wrong, and if possible, expose the vested interest of the misinformation source.
- **Use a credible source.** Corrections are more effective from sources perceived as trustworthy than from "experts." For example, on a health matter a local nurse may be more highly trusted and believed than a professor or drug company executive, even though his/her actual level of expertise may be lower.
- **Respond promptly.** The longer it takes for information to be provided, the more skeptical recipients may become about the transparency of the message. (See Action Steps 6.4 and 7.5 for tips on responding to issues involving privacy laws.)

Ecker notes that communicators sometimes fear that in correcting information they will create a "backfire" effect that reinforces the information. His data and research does not back this up and rather suggests that carefully constructed refutations are effective.

The auditor recommends a practice of proactively posting information on the district website on topics of broad interest and about which stakeholders may have concerns or questions. This should be an exercise in building understanding, demonstrating transparency and reducing confusion to combat false information. Stay focused on topics with wide community appeal/impact and avoid

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Prepare to correct and prevent the spread of false information.

responses that might appear confrontational or targeted at individuals.

Collaborating with the monitoring team described in Action Step 7.1 may help identify topics that should be addressed. If an issue is emerging locally, regionally or nationally, or there is the potential for a local issue to connect to a larger national issue, Shaker Heights Schools can get ahead of it before rumors and incorrect information begin to circulate.

As accurate information is developed, links can be shared on social media and in district or school newsletters, as appropriate, to get accurate information in front of audiences who may be subject to misinformation.

Action Step 7.3

Develop fact sheets on potentially controversial issues to frame the conversation accurately.

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

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

- **The issue at a glance.** In a sentence or two, describe the overall situation or issue.
- **Details of the issue.** Provide the pertinent details of the situation or issue in layman's terms, including the barriers and/or objections to be overcome. Use infographics and pictures, as appropriate, to share data or illustrate a point.
- **Timeline.** Outline what has been done so far and when the issue is expected to be resolved.
- **Next steps.** What is the process being used to address the issue or solve the problem? Include any means for community engagement that will be made available and how that input will be used.
- **Community involvement.** Beyond participating in any formal community engagement opportunities that may be provided, share what various stakeholder groups can do to assist in the process.
- **Key messages and talking points.** Provide succinct answers to frequently asked questions.
- **For more information.** Direct people to where additional information on the topic can be found and who to contact if they have questions.

Here are examples of online fact sheet/fact checkers that other districts have developed:

- VBCPS Fact Checker website, Virginia Beach (Va.) City Public Schools–http://www.vbcpsblogs.com/factchecker/
- The Plain Facts (formerly, Heard It Through the Grapevine) website, Shenendehowa (N.Y.) School District–https://www.shenet.org/plainfacts/

Action Step 7.4

Build a network of digital ambassadors.

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

Today, an adaptation of that idea is to build a network of voluntary digital ambassadors, who can build trust and provide general communications support for the district by helping to share accurate information about issues as well as good news. To put together such a team, consider publicizing the effort and asking for those interested to apply to serve as volunteer frontline communicators. They will be the first to get information and will be asked to share it over their own networks, providing their own perspectives.

Those selected for the team should participate in a briefing event, in which key aspects of district operations, finances and pending decisions are reviewed. They should also receive training on how to best share information they receive from the district. For the digital ambassadors network to have authenticity and gain trust, it needs to be understood that the district cannot and should not control all the content members put out.

The ambassador tactic is common among colleges, but some districts have embraced it as well, including the Bethlehem Area School District in Pennsylvania (https://www.basdnation.org/social_media_ambassador).

Action Step 7.5

Be prepared to report promptly on incidents involving privacy issues.

The Department of Communications has a robust crisis plan that includes templates for messaging. However, the details of incidents often cannot be shared due to privacy issues or law enforcement processes. Stakeholders have some understanding that not all details can be shared (see Action Step 6.4), but survey and focus group participants still expressed a desire for more information about crisis situations.

Delaying a response—or not responding at all—leaves the door open for conjecture and rumor that can be hard to counter with facts once inaccuracies begin to circulate on social media and through word-of-mouth. So when these incidents occur, consider:

- **Which facts can be shared?** Sharing as many facts as possible about a crisis situation lends the message credibility, while facets of information protected by privacy policies and laws can be addressed more broadly by sharing what would generally happen in a case like this.
- **What are parents and staff likely worrying about?** It may be possible to address their worries more generally without sharing confidential crisis details.
- **When will more be known?** Let stakeholders know if and when additional information will be made available.
- **Where can more information be found once it is available?** Let audiences know what channel(s) to monitor to learn more.

Appendix

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Participants

1. What are the strengths of the district?
2. What areas are in need of improvement?
3. What do you think the image of the district is in the community?
4. How is the community informed about what is going on in the district?
5. Do you have the opportunity to provide input on district issues and initiatives?
6. Do people without students in the district have the opportunity to get involved?
7. How do you think communications could be improved?
8. What is the biggest challenge facing the district?
9. Do you trust the information you receive from the district?
10. How effective do you feel DEI is being communicated, understood and implemented?
11. Share your thoughts on the district website/social media channels.

Additional Questions: Parents

1. How do you receive information about your child's progress in school?
2. How do you receive information from the school?
3. How would you prefer to receive information from the school?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. Are you clear on what you are responsible for communicating?
2. Do you get the information you need to do your job?
3. Do you get information in a timely manner?

Additional Questions: Board of Education

1. What is the board's role in communication?
2. Describe the board's communication with the community.
3. Are there opportunities for people in the community to express their opinions on important decisions?
4. What additional tools would you like the Department of Communications to have?

Additional Questions: Students

1. Where do you find information about what is happening in the district and its schools?
2. What would have made your transition to high school easier?

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

Elise F. Shelton

Lead Consultant Auditor

Elise F. Shelton retired as the chief communications officer for the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System in Tennessee, a public school district of 36,000 students, after working in school public relations for 25 years.

Shelton was the southeast region vice president on the NSPRA Executive Board from 2012-2015. She was an active member, officer and past president of the Tennessee Association of School Communicators. She also has served on the executive board and as president of the International Association of Business Communicators—Nashville, Tennessee chapter.

She has been a frequent presenter at NSPRA National Seminars, the National School Boards Association, state school boards association conferences, the National Association of Elementary School Principals and at various state and regional school public relations conferences. As a member of the National Information Officers Association, she received ongoing professional development focused on best practices in crisis communications. Most recently she led crisis communication training for directors and staff in Tennessee's regional library systems.

Shelton has written articles for NSPRA's member e-newsletters, including articles on how schools can navigate around political landmines in highly charged environments (December 2018) and on student suicides and the need for social and emotional learning (March 2020).

She has served as a communications auditor for NSPRA since 2017.

Prior to her career in school public relations, she worked in healthcare communications; magazine publishing; and print journalism, at the *Nashville Banner* and newspapers in Tennessee and Kentucky. She holds degrees in history and journalism from Western Kentucky University and is a certified consultant in crisis prevention and management by the Institute for Crisis Management.

Shawn McKillop, APR

Audit Assistant

Shawn McKillop, APR, is the senior vice president of communications and digital transformation at the YMCA of Hamilton|Burlington|Brantford in Hamilton, Ontario, and also serves as a consultant on public relations and community engagement issues.

Prior to his role at the YMCA, he served as the manager of communications and community engagement at the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). During his tenure there, Shawn specialized in strategic marketing and communications, managed complex issues and provided guidance on government policy, with a specific focus on issues impacting young people.

Before beginning his work in education, Shawn held roles where he supported members of the Provincial Parliament and cabinet ministers, including holding prominent positions with the minister of labour, the minister of community and social services, and the minister responsible for women's issues. It was during his time as a communications advisor to the minister of education that he developed a passionate commitment to the field of education. In 2007, he transitioned into school public relations at HWDSB, eventually

becoming the manager of communications at the Grand Erie District School Board in 2010.

As a contributing partner in the education sector, Shawn remains a member of the National School Public Relations Association.

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.

Susan Downing, APR
NSPRA Communication Audit Coordinator

As NSPRA's communication audit coordinator, Susan Downing, APR, handles the logistics for all audit projects as well as audit report editing and layout. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR), who has spent her career in marketing and communications. Prior to joining NSPRA in 2021, she served as a school communications director for 11 years, spent five years serving on a school board and enjoyed a communications career in the financial industry.

Learn more about Susan at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Audit-Coordinator.

Naomi Hunter, APR
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. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR) with 30 years of experience in strategic communications and public relations in the public, private and non-profit sectors. She joined the NSPRA staff in October 2022 as the communication audit surveys manager after previous work with the association as a consultant auditor while operating her own consultant services, following a decade as a school communications director.

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

Alyssa Teribury
NSPRA Communication Research Specialist

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-Specialist.

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