the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report

Cherry Hill Public Schools

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materials

focus groups

surveys

results

interviews

Contents

Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Cherry Hill Township Public Schools (CHPS) 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, CHPS 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

- District leaders and the public information officer are dedicated to the ongoing improvement of CHPS' communications program, as evidenced by the public information officer's suggestion to invite a communication audit to gather data to inform future decisions.

- The public information officer is well-liked and respected by employees, especially district leadership, and enjoys a strong, collegial and collaborative relationship with personnel who are integral to the execution of her duties, including the superintendent and technology director.

- Parents, employees and community members expressed optimism about what

they perceive as a concerted effort on the part of the new superintendent to increase transparency and engagement.

- Parents and community members who are familiar with CHPS processes and operations believe that the district shares plenty of information, if you know where to find it.

- The district's Zone PTA (districtwide parent group), school PTA groups and the town government are supportive of the school district and frequently share its messages to help reach more stakeholders.

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- The communication appetite and expectations of school board members, employees, parents and community members far exceeds the resources the district has invested in communications staffing. As a "one-person-shop," the public information officer has too many competing priorities that pull her from one urgent situation to another and often interrupt her efforts to complete regular day-to-day information updates.

- With 19 school buildings in the district, the public information officer must rely on principals to tell her about news and activities in their buildings, but principals cannot always prioritize looping her in.

- CHPS does not yet have a strategic communication plan to ensure long-range communication efforts that support the district's goals and objectives are incorporated into the public information officer's daily activities or that those efforts are regularly evaluated for their effectiveness, but this report will support the development of such a plan.

- The sheer number of communication channels and lack of consistency in how and when they are used lead to frustration and confusion, particularly among parents. The district website's lack of content organization and currency of information leave stakeholders without a central, reliable information repository.

- Combating mis/disinformation on social media is a widespread and growing concern. The lack of communication from the district about substantive issues and decisions creates an information void that is quickly filled by rumors and misinformation.

- Perceptions about inadequate engagement and two-way communication are hurting the district's credibility. Employees feel unappreciated for their expertise, which is eroding staff morale. External audiences believe invitations to provide feedback are often disingenuous.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor recommends the following strategies for enhancing CHPS' communication program. For each recommendation, a series of practical action steps based on current best practices can be found later in the report. The recommendations 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.

1. Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

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

3. <u>Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.</u>

4. <u>Redesign the district website.</u>

5. <u>Address information overload and redundancy by streamlining and clarifying communication outflow.</u>

6. <u>Combat misinformation and disinformation by providing accurate, easy-to-find information through a variety of communication channels.</u>

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in CHPS, not just the public information officer. ***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. That background is provided here.

About the District

CHPS is the 13th largest school district in New Jersey, serving more than 10,700 students in grades PK-12 and employing more than 1,700 staff. The district encompasses a 24-square-mile area in southern New Jersey, about 20 minutes from Philadelphia and 90 minutes from New York City.

The CHPS student body is diverse. According to data reported by the New Jersey Department of Education, students identify as 52 percent white, 17 percent Asian, 15 percent Hispanic, nine percent Black/African American and six percent other/two or more races. In addition, 19 percent are economically disadvantaged, four percent are English language learners and 18 percent are students with disabilities.

From 2016 to 2021, CHPS student enrollment dropped by more than five percent, or nearly 600 students, to 10,545 following the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, however, enrollment has been slowly increasing.

The district has one early childhood center (serving pre-k students), 12 elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools and one alternative high school program. In October 2022, residents approved a $363 million bond referendum, the largest in the district's history, which includes work at all 19 school buildings over a five-year period. CHPS' annual operating budget is more than $240 million, and in 2022, the district's per pupil spending was $18,721.

The district has a reputation for academic excellence, with a 94 percent graduation rate. CHPS enrolls significantly more students in advanced coursework (including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and dual high school-college courses) than the state average. CHPS was also named a 2018-2023 National District of Character.

CHPS is governed by a nine-member, publicly elected board of education. Board members are elected to staggered three-year terms in the November general election. Following an unusual amount of member turnover in recent years, including two resignations, seven of the board's current members have served for less than three years.

Superintendent Dr. Kwame Morton was appointed by the board of education in April 2024. When this audit began, he was serving as acting superintendent following the retirement of the previous superintendent, who had led the district since 2015. Dr. Morton previously served as an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in CHPS.

As part of its planning process, CHPS developed District Goals that incorporate community engagement as a strategy within Goal #3: "Connecting Beyond Our Classroom." The major activity of this goal is to "establish pride and ownership in district vision" through continued community communication. Indicators of success include:

- Internal stakeholders feel pride and ownership in the district's direction.

- Community is informed on key issues allowing for participation in constructive dialogue.

- Stakeholders engage in collaborative work towards accomplishment of district goals.

About the Office of Public Information

Public Information Officer Barbara Wilson has been with CHPS for nearly 11 years and reports directly to the superintendent. She pursues professional development through membership in both NSPRA and its state chapter the New Jersey School Public Relations Association (NJSPRA), and she was named NJSPRA's 2022 Communicator of the Year.

The public information officer is the only communications professional employed by the district. As a department of one, she focuses primarily on district-level communications, but strives to publicize school achievements and programs, relying heavily on building administrators to share happenings with her. Since she joined the district, CHPS has pivoted away from print communication to embrace digital tools, including social media, e-newsletters, YouTube and a newly-launched podcast.

As articulated in the official job description, the public information officer's primary function is "to promote the efficient and effective operation of the school district by assisting the superintendent in myriad tasks, including but not limited to crisis communications, website management, information collection and dissemination and community outreach." Her duties and responsibilities include:

- Serve as an information resource and district spokesperson

- Manage community outreach

- Develop and promote CHPS "WE" brand, highlighting unity between Cherry Hill West and Cherry Hill East

- Manage the district e-newsletter, website, social media and podcast

- Handle crisis communications and activation of the emergency notification system

- Facilitate presentations

- Provide communications and events support for other departments

- Act as media liaison

- Provide administrative support

- Respond to requests for information

- Handle special projects and perform other duties as directed by the superintendent

In addition to these broad responsibilities, the public information officer serves on the following committees:

- Board Member, Cherry Hill Alliance on Drugs and Alcohol

- Board Member, Cherry Hill Education Foundation (CHEF)

- CHPS Administration Liaison, Board of Education Strategic Planning Committee

- CHPS Administration Liaison, Zone PTA

- CHPS Administration Liaison, Cultural Proficiency/Equity/Character Education Committee

- CHPS Administration Liaison, Fair Funding for Cherry Hill Schools Committee

- CHPS Liaison, Sustainable Cherry Hill Earth Festival Planning Committee

The public information officer has established a variety of processes to guide her school communications work. For example, she uses an annual calendar of observations to identify school news coverage opportunities and the district's social media analytics to

guide the timing of posts. While there is not a comprehensive strategic communication plan to guide the district's public information efforts, a communication plan for the 2022 bond referendum was developed and executed by an external public relations firm.

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 in light of the district's mission statement: "We shall provide all children with an education that develops open-minded thinkers with the strong academic and interpersonal skills to thrive in an ever-changing world and make it a better place for all."

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

Research Components

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

Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the Public Information Office submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (district and school e-newsletters, informational booklets and brochures, bond campaign flyers, the 2020 State of the District presentation, etc.). The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

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

SCOPE Survey

NSPRA conducted 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 SCOPE Survey was conducted for CHPS from Jan. 29 - Feb. 17, 2024. It included questions regarding the following:

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

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

- Perceptions 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 interval for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the district and using the industry standard equation for reliability.

- **Parent Survey:**
  - 798 surveys completed
  - ±3.5 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)

- **Faculty/Staff Survey:**
  - 250 surveys completed
  - ± 6.2 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target almost met)

- **Community Survey:**
  - 99 surveys completed
  - ± 9.8 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 CHPS' 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 acting superintendent, public information officer and director of technology on Feb. 21-22, 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:

- Elementary faculty

- Elementary support staff

- Elementary administrators

- Secondary faculty

- Secondary support staff

- Secondary administrators

- Central office administrators

- Board of Education members

- Parents

- Community members

Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

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

- Auditor Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP

- Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR

- Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR

- Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR

- Communication Research Specialist Alyssa Teribury

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

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Cherry Hill Board of Education, Superintendent Dr. Kwame Morton and Public Information Officer Barbara Wilson, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. When reviewing the report, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its public information officer** by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. The recommendations included here are those the auditor

believes are best suited to taking CHPS' communication program to the next level.

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

- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that CHPS would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the school district and its work through the perceptions of others.

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

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

Next Steps

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range communication 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 Public Information Office.** NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the Public Information Office, 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 public information officer 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 shown to the left.

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

Sharing the Report

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

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

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

Key Findings

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

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

District Image/Brand

- On the SCOPE Survey, when participants were asked to rate their overall perception of the district, 61 percent of parents, 53 percent of employees and 48 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

Overall Perception of the District
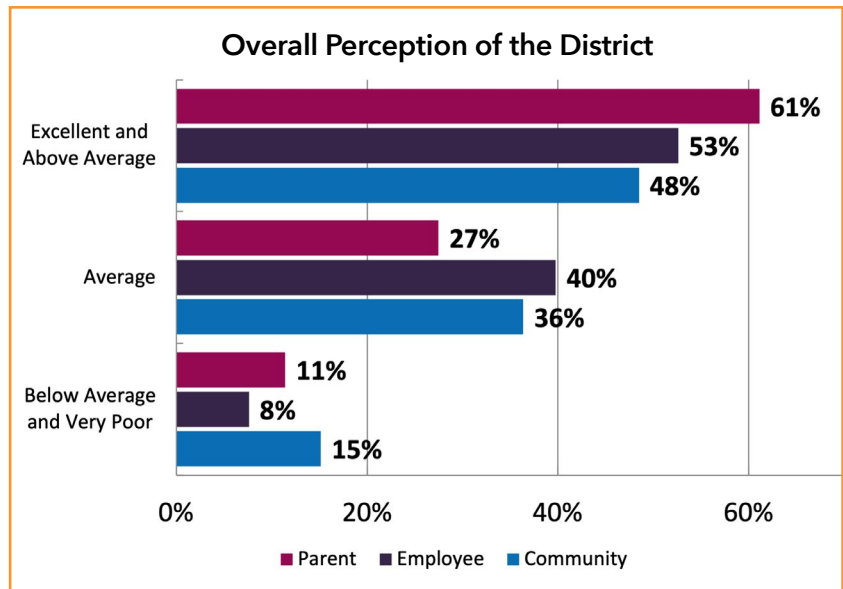
Survey, local perceptions were at or above national averages among staff and the community, while parents' perceptions were slightly below the national average.

Overall Perception of the District	CHPS	National Average	National Low	National High
Staff	3.6	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents	3.6	3.8	2.6	4.3
Community	3.4	3.3	2.1	4.3

- **When asked to describe the district, participants across the focus groups said "large," "diverse" and "inclusive."** These were also among the most common words SCOPE Survey respondents identified as coming to mind when they think of the district, as illustrated on .

- The district does not routinely offer public information to parents and community members in languages other than English, which one district leader mentioned as a challenge for CHPS. On occasions when it does (e.g., certain new stories on the CHPS website, the communications survey accompanying this audit), translation is typically limited to Spanish only.

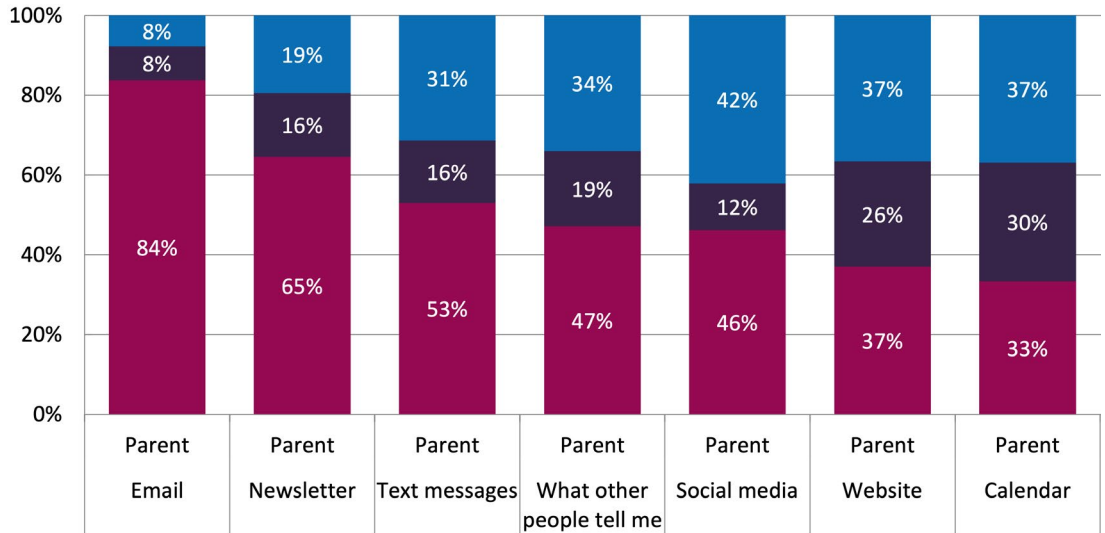- According to the New Jersey Department of Education, CHPS' student population of English language learners has increased slowly but steadily from 3.0 percent in 2016-17 to 4.3 percent in 2022-23. Data regarding students' primary home language indicates that about 22 percent speak a language other than English.

- **Participants in the parent and employee focus groups consider CHPS teachers and students as among the district's greatest strengths.** One participant shared, "I've always been impressed by the strong, caring staff that want to see their students do well."

- **CHPS has a reputation as a high-performing district**, offering a culturally responsive and well-rounded education to students that goes beyond academics. A support staff member commented, "A lot of people who grew up here come back to raise their families here. People come to Cherry Hill for the schools."

- **In several employee focus groups, participants said they worry that the district is now "coasting" on that reputation**, believing that program reductions, stagnant hiring salaries, loss of academic department chairs and insufficient staff training are negatively impacting the quality of education. As one faculty member remarked, "Things that used to make this district unique they are undoing bolt by bolt."

- **Perceptions exist among both internal and external stakeholders that there is a divide within the community based on the two high schools**—Cherry Hill East and Cherry Hill West. In response, the district created the "WE" brand to emphasize unity between Cherry Hill **W**est and Cherry Hill **E**ast in its messaging.

  - The public information officer's job description specifically mentions promoting the "WE" brand as a key responsibility. Comments from focus group participants indicate familiarity with the effort, but some question its effectiveness, with one parent commenting, "The only time [the high schools] see each other is when we compete against each other."

  - A district leader described "occasional tribalism" among some long-time residents that pits one school community against another, adding, "[Some] still act as if those 'this side of town versus that side of town' tropes still exist. It's confusing to people who didn't grow up here."

- **Internal focus group participants voiced concern over what they perceive as the district's lack of strategic direction.** Staff members described instances when new initiatives or programs appeared to be launched without seeking input and being evaluated for their effectiveness. A district leader noted, "There's a sense of urgency where actions are taken swiftly to address immediate needs, sometimes at the expense of thorough planning" but felt that the tendency "is shifting with the [interim] superintendent." Similar sentiments appeared in the SCOPE Survey comments, such as:

  - "Each department rolls out initiative after initiative without looking at the whole picture of the district."

  - "Surveys like this one seem to be sent a lot, but there isn't often clear action in response."

- **In SCOPE Survey comments and focus groups, many parents and employees credited the interim superintendent for recent efforts to increase transparency and prioritize information sharing, especially with staff.** Under his tenure, the district has launched a Labor Management Collaborative (LMC), part of a statewide initiative of the New Jersey Education Association to foster collaboration and bring diverse staff voices into district-level decision-making. The LMC is composed of employees who volunteered and others who were asked to serve. District leaders acknowledge that it is not yet well-known among all staff; mention of the LMC occurred in only one of seven staff focus groups.

- **Focus group and SCOPE Survey comments suggest a perception of increasing discipline and behavior problems among CHPS students,** particularly since in-person learning resumed after the pandemic.
  - Comments from staff members describe a lack of respect for rules among students. There is a perception that since the district adopted a restorative justice approach earlier this year, "We don't reprimand students anymore and have to turn everything into a positive."
  - Comments from parents and community members indicate a perception of frequent fights between/among secondary students during the school day. Parents and community members said they often learn about the incidents after student-created videos are posted to social media or shared with news outlets. One community member observed that, "None of this is communicated to the public," while another commented, "The school system has frequently made news for all the wrong reasons."

- **Parents and employees in the focus groups and in survey responses expressed frustration at the significant inconsistencies that exist among the schools** in areas including policies, procedures, staffing support, learning opportunities, communications and parent engagement. Following is a sample of the many comments shared on this topic:
  - "Each school operates independently at the building level, functioning like their own fiefdoms."
  - "Every principal runs their own building differently, and that's a problem because parents and students compare notes and then they might start to complain about the inconsistencies."
  - "The rules for the kids and the staff vary among the buildings."
  - "There's no consistency in what information is shared across schools; this leads to confusion and a feeling that the district is not cohesive."

- **Acknowledging that the recent voter-approved capital project is a much-needed step in the right direction, internal and external stakeholders expressed dismay over the condition of the district's facilities and the decisions that allowed buildings to fall into disrepair.** A parent shared, "One thing that's always baffled me here is the lack of facility maintenance and repair. School districts of a comparable size and tax base would not tolerate some of the things we see in our buildings." Another said, "[The buildings are] the first impression. It's not a good look for us."

- **Misinformation about the district, particularly on social media, is a growing problem, according to participants in nearly all focus groups.** Despite the sense that there is a relatively small group of individuals responsible, concern is mounting that these alternative narratives are increasingly gaining hold among others, creating misunderstandings and negativity in the community.

Communication Sources and Preferences

- **The SCOPE Survey asked participants how often they relied on various sources for information about CHPS.** As shown in the charts below, email is the most frequently used source for parents,

Sources for District and/or School Communication Relied Upon by

…by _Parents_

	Parent Email	Parent Newsletter	Parent Text messages	Parent What other people tell me	Parent Social media	Parent Website	Parent Calendar
Less than monthly +Never	8%	19%	31%	34%	42%	37%	37%
Monthly	8%	16%	16%	19%	12%	26%	30%
Daily+Weekly	84%	65%	53%	47%	46%	37%	33%

… by _Employees_

	Employee Email	Employee Newsletter	Employee Website	Employee What other people tell me	Employee Calendar	Employee Text messages	Employee Meetings
Less than monthly +Never	2%	16%	17%	26%	23%	42%	30%
Monthly	3%	9%	16%	10%	23%	18%	33%
Daily+Weekly	95%	75%	67%	64%	53%	40%	37%

… by _Community Members_

	Community Email	Community What other people tell me	Community Social media	Community Newsletter	Community Website	Community Calendar	Community Local news and media
Less than monthly +Never	41%	42%	42%	57%	49%	60%	47%
Monthly	4%	13%	15%	9%	15%	16%	24%
Daily+Weekly	54%	45%	43%	35%	36%	24%	28%

Legend:
- ■ Daily+Weekly
- ■ Monthly
- ■ Less than monthly +Never

employees and community members alike. District-based information sources rounded out the top three for parents and employees, with both citing newsletters second and then text messages and the website, respectively. For community members, the next most frequently used sources after email are both external to the district, i.e., what other people tell them and social media.

Sources for District and/or School Communication Relied Upon by ...by *Parents*

58%	68%	70%	60%	79%	76%	96%
14%	7%	11%	22%	14%	17%	3%
28%	25%	19%	18%	7%	7%	

| Parent Printed information | Parent Mobile app | Parent Local news and media | Parent Phone calls | Parent Meetings | Parent School board | Parent Podcast |

... by *Employees*

57%	59%	71%	79%	75%	68%	95%
12%	18%	11%	4%	10%	23%	1%
31%	23%	18%	17%	16%	9%	

| Employee Social media | Employee Printed information | Employee Phone calls | Employee Mobile app | Employee Local news and media | Employee School board | Employee Podcast |

... by *Community Members*

75%	83%	70%	77%	76%	88%	92%
5%	5%	20%	14%	15%	6%	7%
20%	12%	10%	9%	10%	5%	1%

| Community Text messages | Community Mobile app | Community School board | Community Meetings | Community Printed information | Community Phone calls | Community Podcast |

■ Daily+Weekly

■ Monthly

■ Less than monthly +Never

- **Survey participants who rely on email as a frequent source of information about the district were asked which types of email they reference**. Results show that all groups rely most heavily on information emails from the district, although parents relied on other types almost as much.

Email Sources Used for District Information

Source	Parent	Employee	Community
Personalized emails (from a teacher, colleague, or other school/district employee)	78%	79%	35%
Information emails from the district	89%	89%	91%
Automated emails from the district or school (Attendance, Lunch Balance,...)	75%	49%	39%
Other (Please specify)	3%	2%	7%
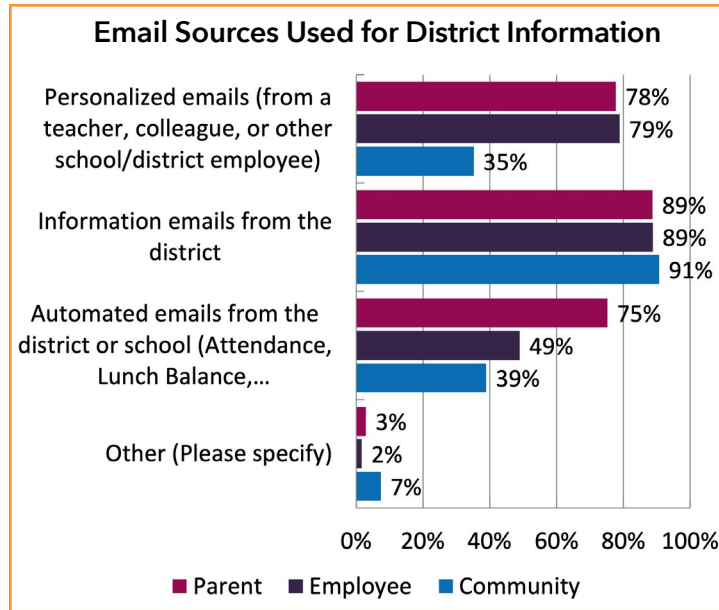
- **Survey participants who rely on newsletters as a frequent source of information** were asked which newsletters they rely on. Employees and especially parents indicated a stronger reliance on principal or school newsletters.

Newsletters Used for District Information

Source	Parent	Employee	Community
District newsletter	67%	81%	92%
Principal or school newsletter	90%	82%	34%
Other (Please specify)	5%	3%	13%
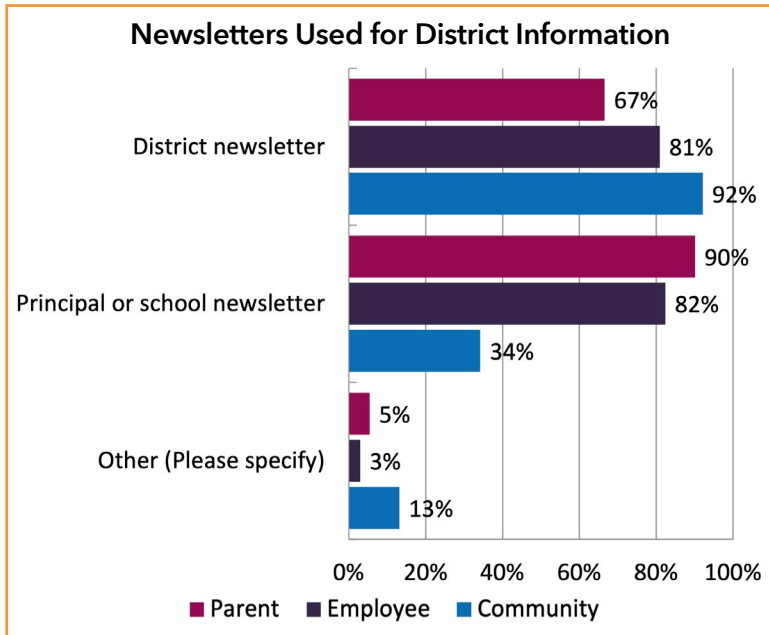
- **Survey participants who rely on what other people tell them for information about the district** were also asked who their sources are. As shown, parents rely most heavily on their own student, employees rely on colleagues and community members overwhelmingly rely on friends or family members.

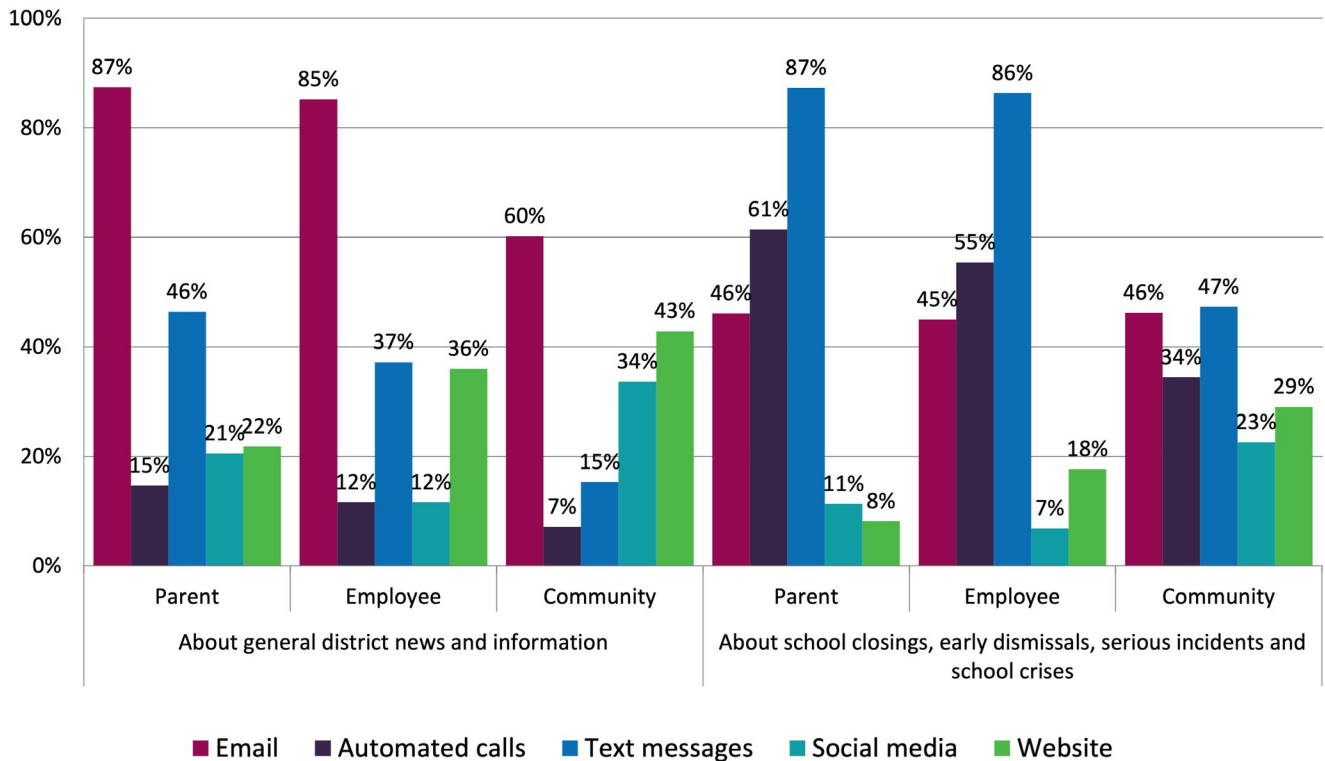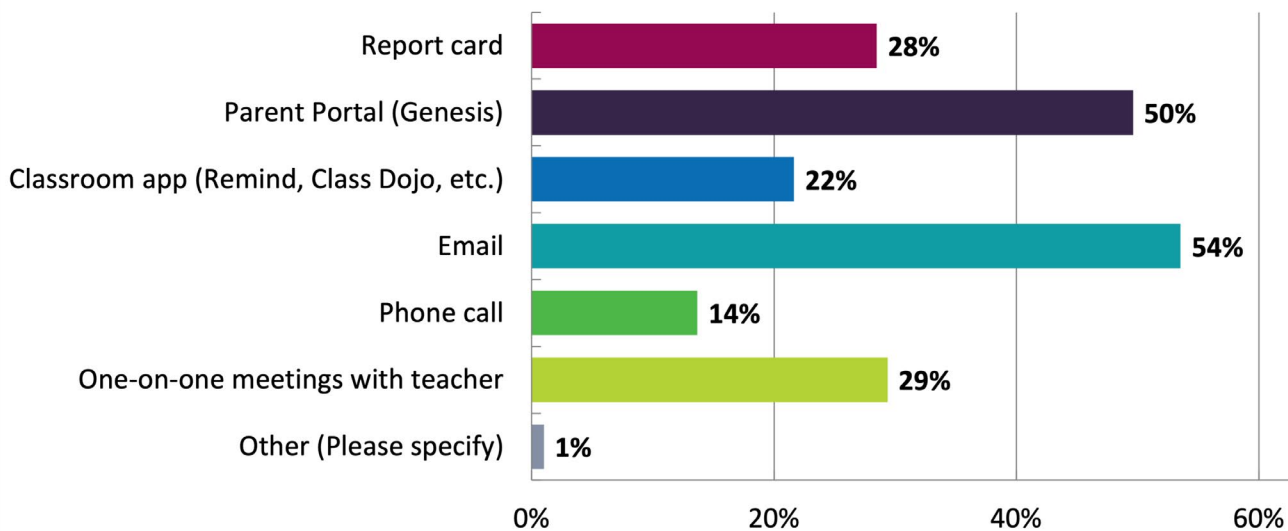**Word-of-Mouth Sources of Information About the District**

Source	Parent	Employee	Community
Friend or family member	63%	21%	69%
My student who is enrolled in a district school	66%	9%	13%
A colleague	9%	77%	6%
Teacher or principal at my child's school	60%	36%	9%
Other school or district employee	22%	56%	28%
Other (Please specify)	8%	4%	30%
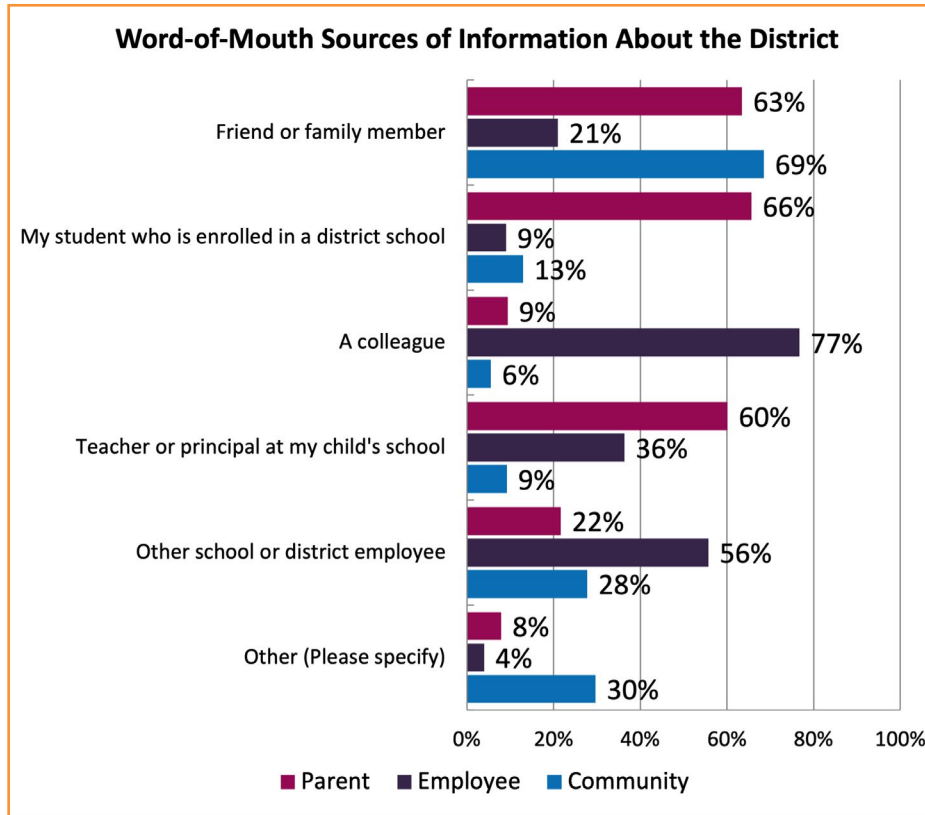
- **Stakeholders have different preferences on how they receive information depending on the topic**, as shown in the charts on .
  - Parents, employees and community members by far prefer email for receiving all types of information, except for emergency communications (including school closings, serious incidents and school crises) when all audiences prefer text messages.
  - Parents also prefer email, along with the Genesis Parent Portal, for receiving information about their children's progress and how they can best support student learning.
  - For employees, email and district/department meetings are their preferred methods for receiving information to help them perform their duties and support student learning.

- **Following a sustainability push several years ago, CHPS stopped producing most print-based communications and relies almost exclusively on digital communications.**
  - The public information officer produces a weekly newsletter, including a message from the superintendent, which is emailed to all employees and parents. Community members can request to be added to the distribution list.
  - Designed using Smore, a digital newsletter and media curation tool, the newsletter is sent by the technology director via the district's email client.

Preferred Source of Information Based on Type of Communication

About general district news and information

	Parent	Employee	Community
Email	87%	85%	60%
Automated calls	15%	12%	7%
Text messages	46%	37%	15%
Social media	21%	12%	34%
Website	22%	36%	43%

About school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises

	Parent	Employee	Community
Email	46%	45%	46%
Automated calls	61%	55%	34%
Text messages	87%	86%	47%
Social media	11%	7%	23%
Website	8%	18%	29%

Legend: ■ Email ■ Automated calls ■ Text messages ■ Social media ■ Website

Parents' Preferred Method of Receiving Information About Their Student

Method	Percentage
Report card	28%
Parent Portal (Genesis)	50%
Classroom app (Remind, Class Dojo, etc.)	22%
Email	54%
Phone call	14%
One-on-one meetings with teacher	29%
Other (Please specify)	1%

Preferred Source of Information Based on Type of Communication

	Email	Automated calls	Text messages	Social media	Website

About school and district events, programs, and calendar updates

Parent: 84%, 14%, 48%, 25%, 25%
Employee: 84%, 9%, 39%, 13%, 39%
Community: 57%, 7%, 21%, 33%, 44%

About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues

Parent: 87%, 8%, 20%, 20%, 41%
Employee: 81%, 6%, 19%, 11%, 51%
Community: 62%, 9%, 15%, 26%, 52%

Employees Preferred Method of Receiving Information About Performing Duties and Supporting Student Learning

Method	Percentage
Email	85%
Individual meetings with your supervisor	30%
Printed memos, letters and notices	10%
Text messages	22%
Faculty, department, committee or districtwide…	35%
Staff intranet	8%
Phone calls	2%
Other (Please specify)	2%
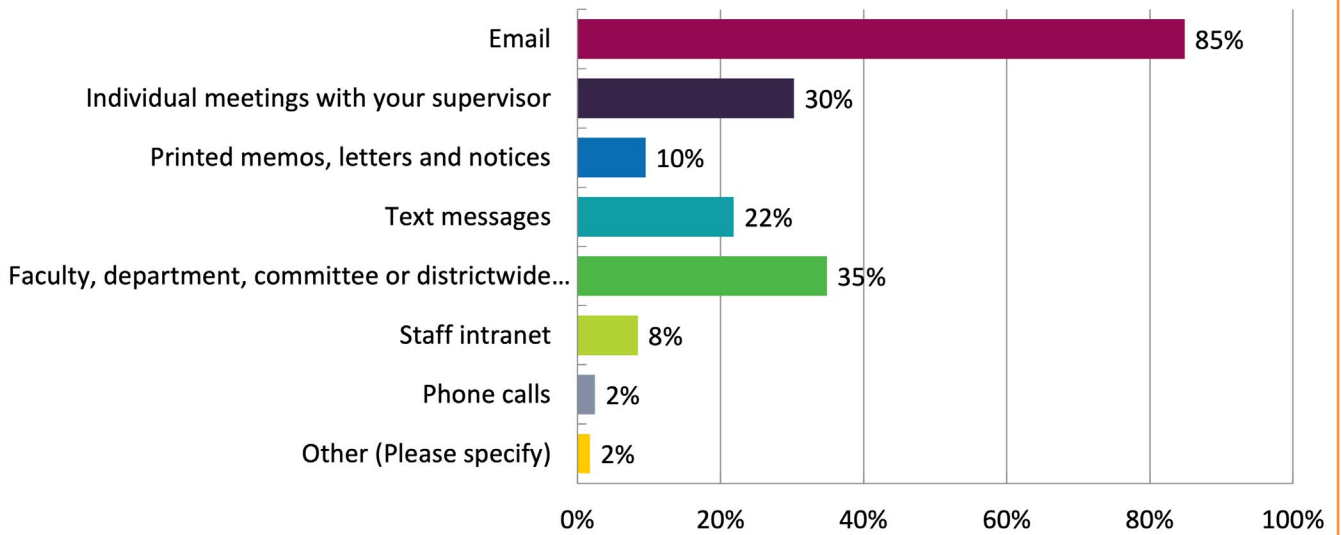
- The newsletter is sent to nearly 23,000 email addresses, of which about 20 percent are community members.
- Some, but not all, school principals also produce a weekly emailed newsletter.

- CHPS regularly relies on parent-teacher associations the Zone PTA (districtwide) and school-level PTAs to help disseminate information.

- CHPS sometimes asks the Cherry Hill Township mayor to include district announcements in the township's communications.

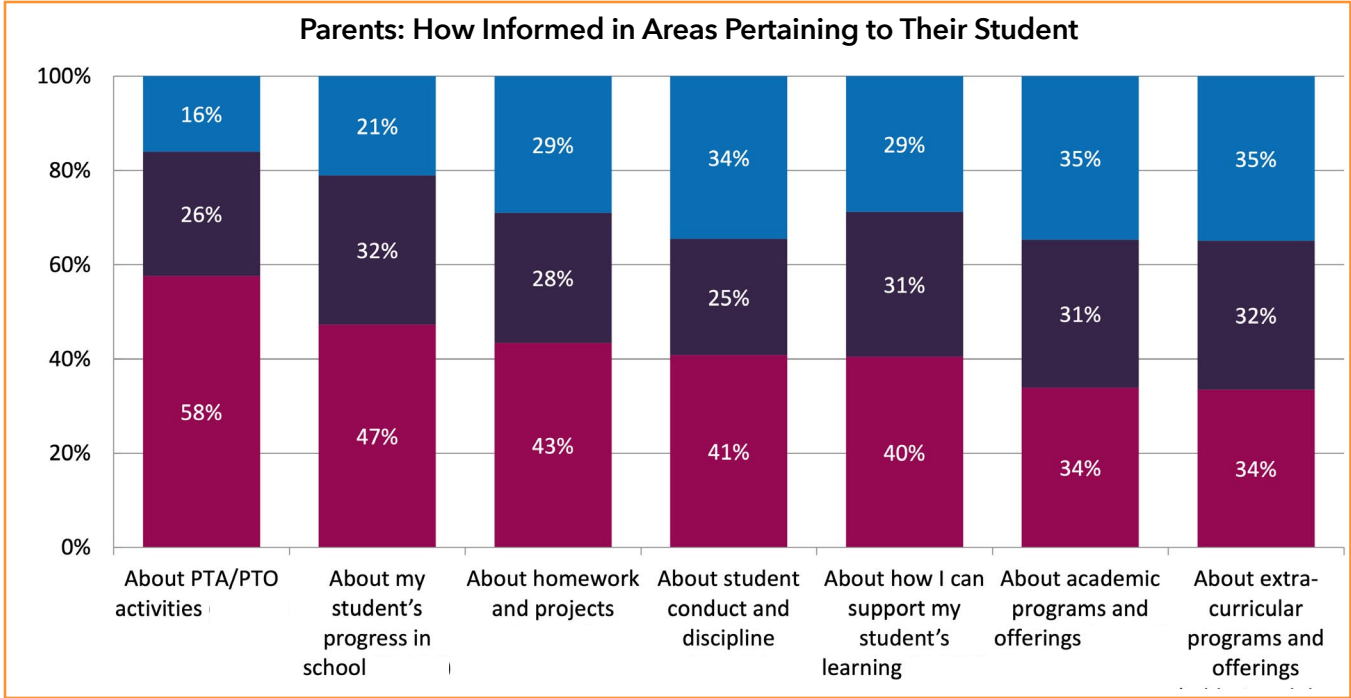# Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- **Many employee focus group participants praised the district's public information officer for her professionalism and willingness to go above and beyond despite being "a department of one."** A building principal said, "[She] should be in the room with us more often to help us plan roll out and implementation of programs. We need her to help us anticipate things. We need her point of view and her ideas."

- **Parents are more highly satisfied than employees or community members with CHPS communications.** When SCOPE Survey participants were asked to give an overall rating for their satisfaction with communication, 58 percent of parents rated the district as excellent or above average, compared to 50 percent of employees and 37 percent of community members.
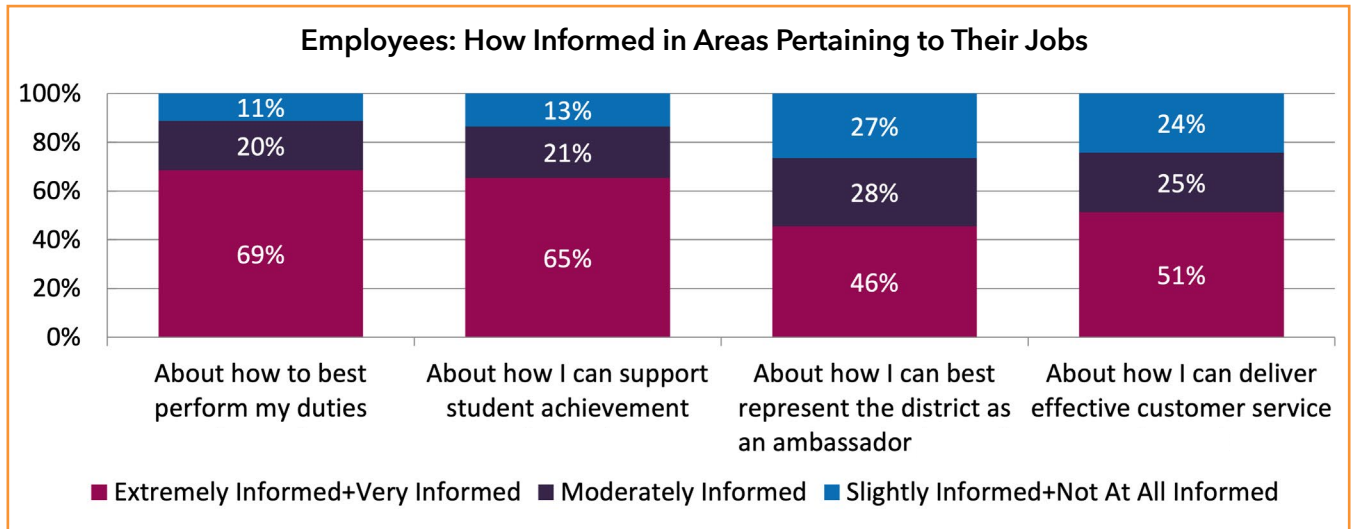
Overall Satisfaction With Communication

	Parent	Employee	Community
Excellent and Above Average	58%	50%	37%
Average	28%	40%	37%
Below Average and Very Poor	14%	10%	27%
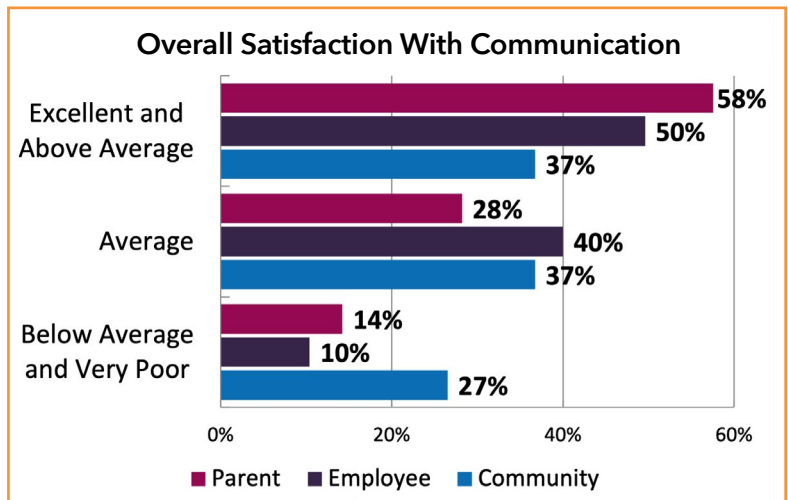
When responses regarding stakeholders' overall satisfaction with communication are converted to a five-point scale to compare with SCOPE Survey results of districts nationwide, CHPS' ratings are at or close to the national average for each stakeholder group as shown on the SCOPE Scorecard.

Overall Satisfaction with Communication	CHPS	National Average	National Low	National High
Staff	3.5	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents	3.6	3.8	3.1	4.2
Community	3.2	3.2	2.0	4.0

- **When asked to rate how informed they are on eight different topics, all stakeholder groups gave the highest marks to information about school safety** (including school closings, serious incidents and school crises), with 82 percent of employees, 78 percent of parents and 59 percent of community members saying they felt at least moderately informed (see charts on pages 24-25).

Parents: How Informed in Areas Pertaining to Their Student

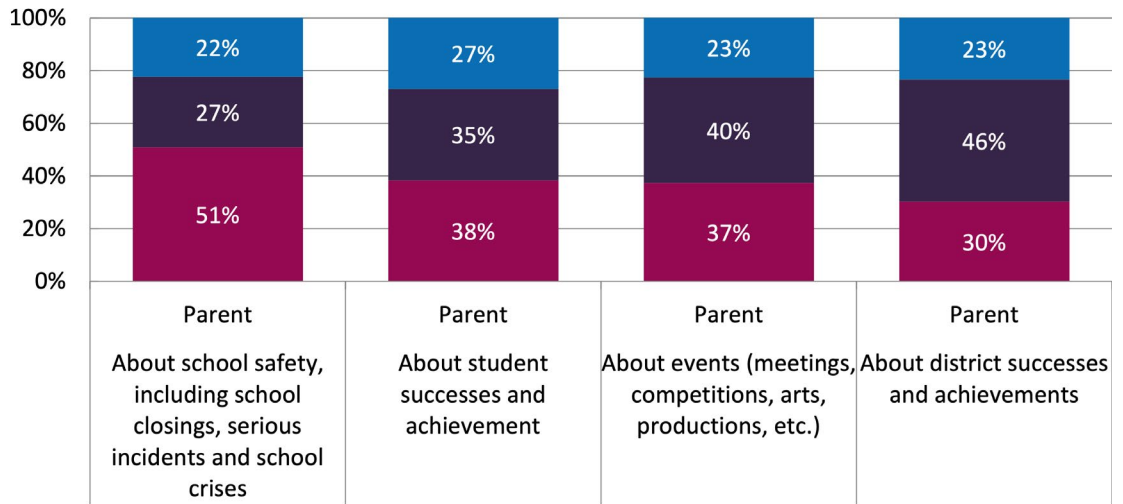|	About PTA/PTO activities	About my student's progress in school	About homework and projects	About student conduct and discipline	About how I can support my student's learning	About academic programs and offerings	About extra-curricular programs and offerings
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	16%	21%	29%	34%	29%	35%	35%
Moderately Informed	26%	32%	28%	25%	31%	31%	32%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	58%	47%	43%	41%	40%	34%	34%

- **When parents were asked how informed they felt in areas pertaining to their role as a parent**, the highest ratings were for "about PTA/PTO activities" and "about my student's progress in school," as shown in the chart above.

- **When employees were asked how informed they felt in areas pertaining to their jobs and roles as employees**, the highest ratings were for "about how to best perform my duties" and "about how I can support student achievement," as shown in the chart below.
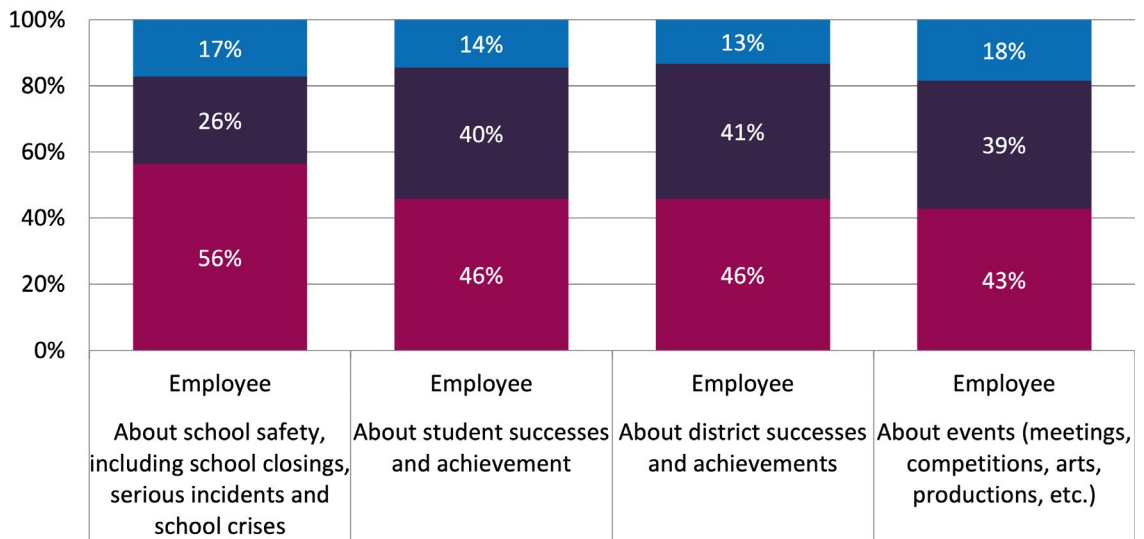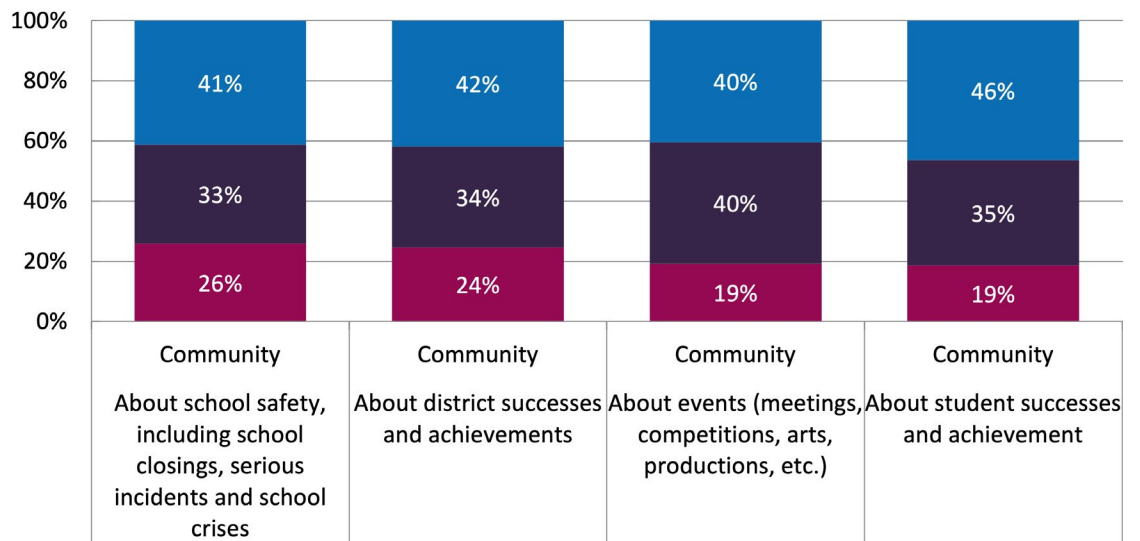
Employees: How Informed in Areas Pertaining to Their Jobs

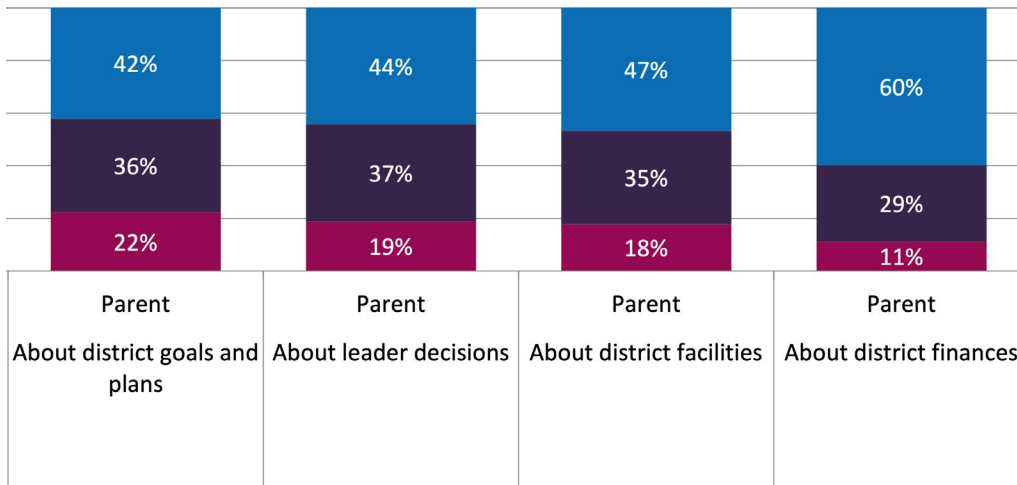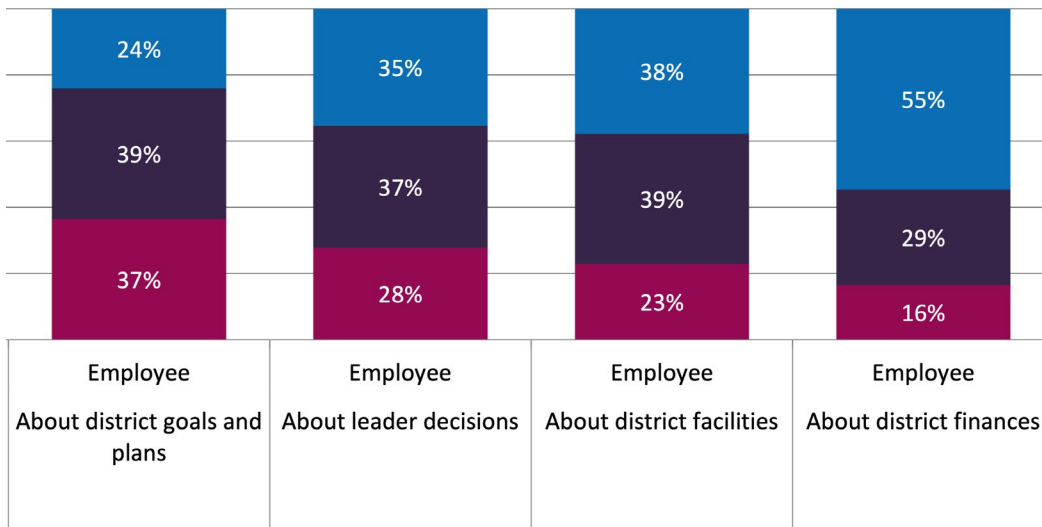|	About how to best perform my duties	About how I can support student achievement	About how I can best represent the district as an ambassador	About how I can deliver effective customer service
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	11%	13%	27%	24%
Moderately Informed	20%	21%	28%	25%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	69%	65%	46%	51%

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

How Informed in Key Areas
...Parents

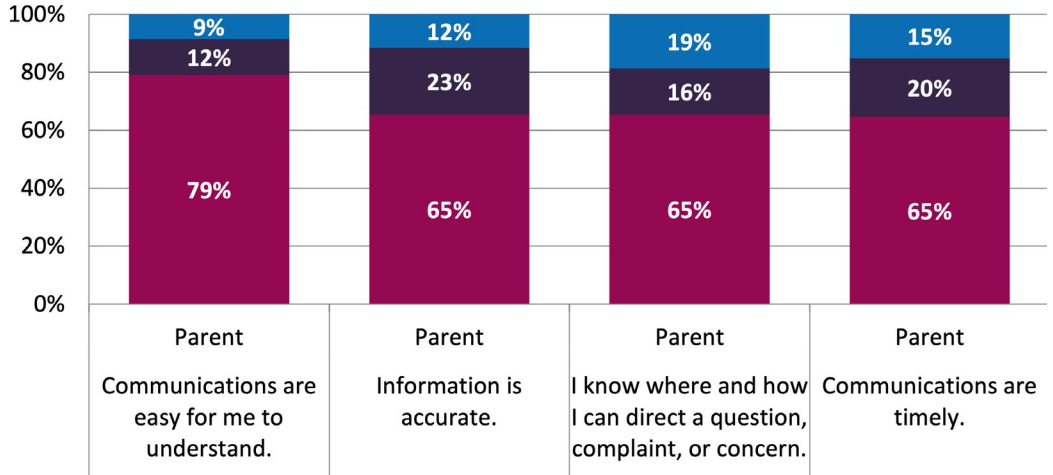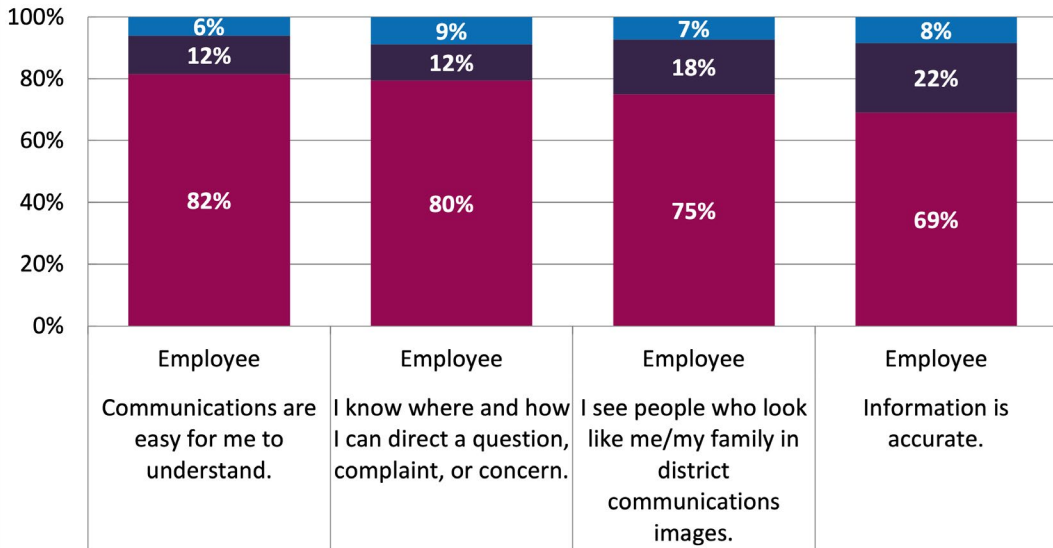|	Parent — About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	Parent — About student successes and achievement	Parent — About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	Parent — About district successes and achievements
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	22%	27%	23%	23%
Moderately Informed	27%	35%	40%	46%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	51%	38%	37%	30%

... Employees

	Employee — About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	Employee — About student successes and achievement	Employee — About district successes and achievements	Employee — About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	17%	14%	13%	18%
Moderately Informed	26%	40%	41%	39%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	56%	46%	46%	43%

... Community Members

	Community — About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	Community — About district successes and achievements	Community — About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	Community — About student successes and achievement
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	41%	42%	40%	46%
Moderately Informed	33%	34%	40%	35%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	26%	24%	19%	19%

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

How Informed in Key Areas
...*Parents*

	Parent About district goals and plans	Parent About leader decisions	Parent About district facilities	Parent About district finances
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	42%	44%	47%	60%
Moderately Informed	36%	37%	35%	29%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	22%	19%	18%	11%

... *Employees*

	Employee About district goals and plans	Employee About leader decisions	Employee About district facilities	Employee About district finances
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	24%	35%	38%	55%
Moderately Informed	39%	37%	39%	29%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	37%	28%	23%	16%

... *Community Members*

	Community About district goals and plans	Community About leader decisions	Community About district facilities	Community About district finances
Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed	42%	54%	56%	64%
Moderately Informed	40%	31%	32%	28%
Extremely Informed+Very Informed	17%	15%	12%	8%

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

Perceptions About Communication Quality and Engagement ...*Parents*

	Parent — Communications are easy for me to understand.	Parent — Information is accurate.	Parent — I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	Parent — Communications are timely.
Disagree+Strongly Disagree	9%	12%	19%	15%
Undecided	12%	23%	16%	20%
Strongly Agree+Agree	79%	65%	65%	65%

... Employees

	Employee — Communications are easy for me to understand.	Employee — I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	Employee — I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	Employee — Information is accurate.
Disagree+Strongly Disagree	6%	9%	7%	8%
Undecided	12%	12%	18%	22%
Strongly Agree+Agree	82%	80%	75%	69%

... Community Members

	Community — Communications are easy for me to understand.	Community — I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern.	Community — I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	Community — Information is accurate.
Disagree+Strongly Disagree	13%	26%	20%	23%
Undecided	25%	19%	25%	35%
Strongly Agree+Agree	62%	55%	55%	42%

Legend: ■ Strongly Agree+Agree ■ Undecided ■ Disagree+Strongly Disagree

Perceptions About Communication Quality and Engagement

...Parents

Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent
14%	14%	20%	25%	30%
20%	23%	28%	25%	32%
65%	64%	51%	50%	38%
I trust the communication I receive.	I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images.	My involvement is welcome and valued.	Communications are open and transparent.	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.

... Employees

Employee	Employee	Employee	Employee	Employee
12%	14%	22%	23%	30%
21%	20%	25%	29%	32%
67%	66%	53%	48%	38%
I trust the communication I receive.	Communications are timely.	My involvement is welcome and valued.	Communications are open and transparent.	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.

... Community Members

Community	Community	Community	Community	Community
28%	25%	33%	35%	39%
29%	40%	34%	39%	43%
42%	35%	32%	27%	18%
I trust the communication I receive.	Communications are timely.	Communications are open and transparent.	My involvement is welcome and valued.	My input and opinion are welcome and valued.

■ Strongly Agree+Agree   ■ Undecided   ■ Disagree+Strongly Disagree

27

- **The SCOPE Survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements about communication quality and engagement in key areas**, as shown on pages 26-27.
  - All three stakeholder groups had the highest level of agreement with the quality-related statement, "Communications are easy for me to understand."
  - All three stakeholder groups had the lowest level of agreement with the engagement-related statement, "My input and opinion are welcome and valued."

- **A feeling that the district does not seek stakeholder input, or does so for appearances only, echoed throughout the focus group discussions and survey comments.** Following are some representative statements:
  - "While we are often asked for our input, it feels as though it's to 'check off a box' rather than to be a partner or valued participant in decisions that are made."
  - "I just don't think this district wants parents' involvement whatsoever, or for anybody to speak up at meetings."
  - "During public comment, the board cuts people off and interrupts them."
  - "The district is not transparent about specific school and districtwide decisions or incidents. Negative events are swept under the rug instead of openly discussed and involving the community to brainstorm solutions."

- **CHPS survey respondents' average ratings for trustworthiness of district and school/ department information scored close to but below the national average** on the SCOPE Scorecard. With a rating of 4 meaning "agree" and a rating of 3 meaning "undecided," the following chart data indicates stakeholder uncertainty about trusting CHPS communications.
  - Survey comments suggest this may be due, at least in part, to the perceived "secrecy" in how the board makes decisions. For example, a survey participant said, "It seems much more gets done behind closed doors than in public meetings."
  - Of note, the biggest gap between CHPS' average ratings for trustworthiness and those of districts nationwide pertained to parents' trust in communications from their student's school.

I trust the communication I receive...	CHPS	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents				
From the district	3.6	3.8	3.1	4.4
From my student's school	3.7	4.1	3.4	4.5
Employees				
From the district	3.6	3.7	2.7	4.3
From my school/department	3.8	4.0	3.3	4.5
Community				
From the district	3.1	3.4	2.2	4.3

- **Feedback from stakeholders reflects a desire for CHPS to improve both the timeliness and the accuracy of district and school/department information.**
    - Survey comments from parents and community members remarked on how frequently emails from the schools and the district contain errors, requiring a correction to be sent.
    - Parents said that time-sensitive information often comes at the last minute, preventing them from taking advantage of the information.
    - Faculty, support staff and administrators shared their frustration at not having information when they need it or before it is shared more widely. Employees at all levels remarked that they feel like they are "the last ones to find out" about things.
    - Multiple staff members indicated that central administration's reliance on principals to funnel information to staff results in inconsistent messaging received at different times. As one faculty member commented, "Communication has never been direct from the central office to us. It always passes through the principal, who then shares as much or as little as they deem necessary."

- **A common theme in both focus groups and SCOPE Survey comments was a desire for greater transparency and accountability in communications.** Many stakeholders feel that a more proactive and inclusive approach to communicating about substantive issues would foster greater trust and help to combat misinformation.
    - There is a disconnect between what stakeholder groups say they want and need to know and what central office administrators assume they want to know. Comments from several administrators indicate that they typically target communications to the specific audiences for whom they feel it's relevant, but there appears to be a wider level of interest, as illustrated in the following parent, staff and community comments:
        - "If you pick a random parent at the pickup line and ask them a question about the budget or the board agenda, they'd have no idea. Things are not being explained."
        - "I would appreciate being informed about crises in other schools, not just within my own building."
        - "As a current parent of future Cherry Hill students, it would be helpful to have more communication in general so we can begin to learn about the school system where our children will attend."
        - "Seniors need to be informed as much as the parents of students in the system are informed. It seems like it is by design that they don't want us to know."
    - Although stakeholders were aware of the district's obligation to protect students' privacy, many of their comments centered around frustration about the vagueness of messaging regarding incidents affecting student safety and well-being. Following are some examples:
        - "We know there are policies in place to prevent them from sharing all the details, but I still think there is a way to share more information to quell people's nerves."
        - "It would be nice if they reminded us of the protocols after an incident. They can't 'out' a student, but they can remind us about the protocols to give us some sort of idea [about the response]."

- ▫ "It's important to use sentences that help alleviate fear like, 'The student in question is not on school premises, the situation was unfounded/deemed not credible, etc.'"

- ▫ "District communication is often incredibly vague when addressing events that are more serious and/or bad. Whether good or more unfortunate news, we deserve to be properly informed on what's occurring."

- ▪ The auditor repeatedly heard comments from employees that put the onus on parents and community members to attend board and committee meetings or watch the meeting recordings to stay informed.

- ▪ Several comments by district leadership referenced New Jersey's chronic underfunding of CHPS, with one person describing the nearly $7 million in cuts announced for next year as "devastating for us." Yet on the SCOPE Survey, more than half of parents (60 percent), employees (55 percent) and community members (64 percent) report being slightly or not at all informed about district finances (see page 25). The district does not appear to communicate much financial information to its stakeholders; as one administrator described, "We only share what is required regarding our budget and financial audits."

- • **In both internal and external focus groups, participants lauded the highly visible and transparent public engagement effort surrounding the 2022 bond issue**, for which the district hired an external public relations firm, but acknowledged that the approach was atypical for CHPS despite its effectiveness.

- • **Feedback from parents and employees reflect a sense that they find there to be too many channels for receiving information.** Participants in focus groups and on the SCOPE Survey commented that the sheer volume of communication coming from multiple people and a variety of sources is overwhelming.

  - ▪ There appears to be a lack of clarity about what CHPS uses its different communication channels for, making it a challenge to know where to look for information. One parent said, "There are too many places I need to look in order to know what is going on," while another shared, "I regularly get communications that just point me to another form of communication. For example, it is regular practice for the high school to send text messages that just say, 'Check your email for information on ….'"

  - ▪ Exacerbating the situation, especially for parents with multiple children, is the perceived lack of consistency in what platforms schools and teachers use. At the time of this audit, teachers used ClassDojo, Remind, Genesis (district portal) and others. A parent said, "The random and non-standardized use of both Google classroom and whatever the teachers want to use makes it difficult to follow my child's progress, assignments and grades."

- • **The SCOPE Survey asked about the quantity of information received from the district, schools/ departments and teachers**. As shown on the following page:

  - ▪ Nearly two-thirds of parents said they receive the right amount of information from the district and their child's school, but more than half said they would like to receive more information from their child's teacher. This sentiment is echoed in numerous additional comments submitted by survey participants.

  - ▪ Among employees, about two-thirds said they receive the right amount of information from both the district and their department/supervisor.

Parents' Satisfaction with the Amount of Information They Receive

	From the district	From my child's school	From my child's teacher(s)
I would prefer to receive more information	33%	35%	53%
I would prefer to receive less information	4%	3%	0%
I receive the right amount of information for me	63%	62%	47%
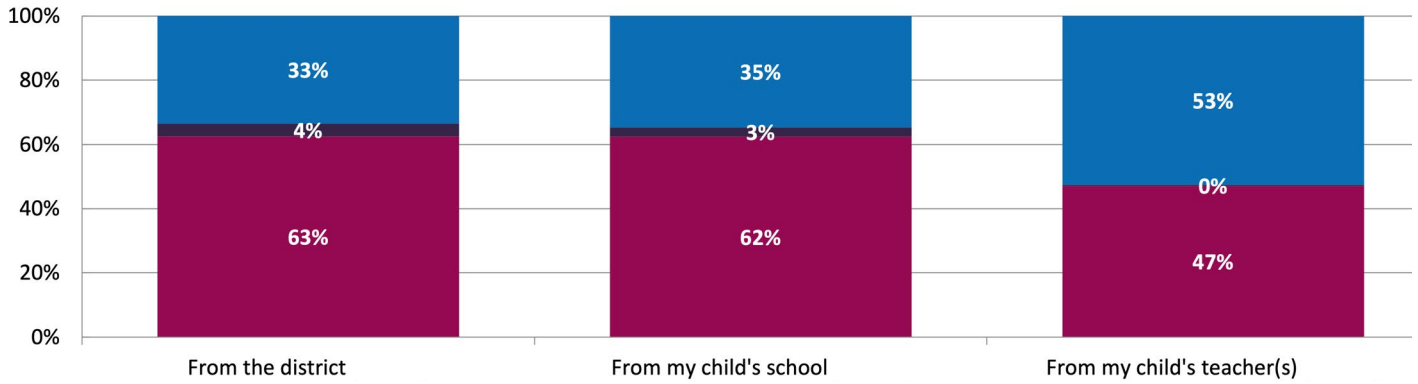
Employees' Satisfaction with the Amount of Information They Receive

	From the district	From my department/supervisor
I would prefer to receive more information	33%	29%
I would prefer to receive less information	2%	3%
I receive the right amount of information for me	64%	69%

■ I receive the right amount of information for me   ■ I would prefer to receive less information   ■ I would prefer to receive more information
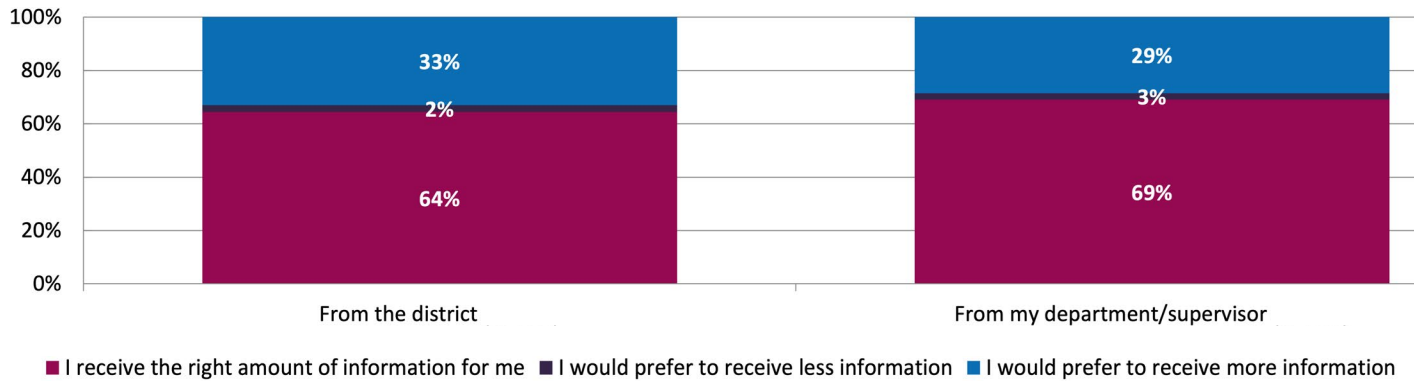
- **Focus group participants acknowledged that the district makes a lot of information available**, but felt that the lack of a coordinated approach often results in redundancy, confusion and contradictory messages.

- **Comments by parents and community members in the SCOPE Survey expressed a desire for more concise and streamlined communication that is focused on important academic, fiscal and policy issues and decisions.** Many seem to feel that district and school communications fail to prioritize sharing this type of information in lieu of sharing publicity and photo ops, as illustrated in the following comments:

  - "There is no hierarchy to the messaging. A PTA flyer is treated no differently than the results of your child's state assessments. In short, it's chaotic."

  - "Important things should not be buried in newsletters."

  - "There's constantly something asking for money, and it's hard to filter through to actual academic-related information."

  - "I might get 10 emails a week from the school for a single event but not a single communication from the district on items of importance."

- Despite expressing appreciation for the weekly e-newsletter updates from Dr. Morton and several principals, parents and employees felt that the newsletters are typically too long and often turn into "information dumps."

  - Several comments identified a lack of organization and formatting as making the newsletters difficult to digest.

  - A few comments questioned the newsletter release schedules. Some employees said they would prefer to receive them on Mondays, to start their week, instead of Friday afternoons when they are preparing for the weekend. One participant wondered if the weekly frequency led to the "tendency to fill it with fluff and nonsense just to have something to share."

  - It was noted that not all principals send them, and most non-parent community members do not receive them.

Digital Communication Tools

District/School Websites

- **At the time of this audit, the district was considering switching website vendors.** Several years ago, the district used Finalsite as its website platform. Unsatisfied with the platform, the district switched to Blackboard, which was subsequently acquired by Finalsite in 2022. The district recently learned that Finalsite will discontinue development support for its Blackboard products, leaving CHPS with the choice of using a product they weren't happy with in the past or selecting a new website provider.

- **Responsibility for updating the CHPS website (https://www.chclc.org/) is currently shared.** The district's public information officer maintains the district-level pages and calendar, while updates to the school sub-sites are handled by school-level staff or a staff member in the Technology Department. Under this model, the priority and attention given to school website updates varies widely by school, something noted by parents and employees in focus groups and survey comments:

  - Although efforts are made to provide training, factors like staff turnover and lack of interest hinder the development of dedicated web authors. Not all school web authors are equally invested, and not all schools prioritize sharing news and stories with the same urgency.

  - While each high school provides a stipend to a staff member who serves as school webmaster, the other schools do not.

- Requests for technology staff to handle school updates occur when assigned staff are unavailable, forget how to accomplish a task or no longer want the responsibility, and this is placing an increasing strain on technology staff.

- **The CHPS website generally appears to be mobile responsive but has some issues related to content accessibility.**

    - The [Web AIM website accessibility tool](#) was used to [assess the homepage](#). This tool checks whether content and design elements pose any barriers to access for users with visual, hearing, motor or cognitive disabilities. Six errors were identified, mostly due to missing form labels. There were also 26 alerts, which are less serious than errors, for things such as redundant links, small text and links to PDF files. More significantly, there were 34 contrast errors (i.e., low color contrast between text and background colors). Although the website offers a "High Contrast" option, selecting it results in an increase in contrast errors to 43.

    - Both the accessibility and mobile responsiveness of the current website platform and design are significantly undermined by the way that content is posted to the site–e.g., when text is formatted into columns or tables and when PDFs, Word documents and PowerPoint files are uploaded.

        - In SCOPE Survey comments, a parent who is blind described an inability to fluidly navigate and perform basic tasks on the district and school sites such as reading archived e-newsletters.

        - In focus groups and in survey comments, stakeholders complained about how often information is buried in a linked PDF rather than simply put on a webpage, a practice that also limits the searchability of that content.

        - Many pages offer visitors a list of hyperlinks, mostly to PDF documents, with no other text or information to provide context.

- **Feedback from parents, employees and community members also indicate that the site navigation is cumbersome, content is not well-organized and information is often out-of-date,** especially the calendars. Typical comments include:

    - "It's impossible to find information on the website. It's not intuitive, it's not updated in a timely manner. There are so many words and not enough pictures."

    - "It takes too long to find information, and sometimes after all that searching what you find is incorrect. Most people give up."

    - "The school websites are useless."

- **Branding elements on the district website are limited to use of its "cherry" logo, familiar red color and imagery of a cherry blossom tree**, similar to CHPS' printed and digital publications. Branding elements on the individual school websites vary widely and center around each school's mascot, logo or coat of arms. Other than a "district home" button at the top and a background banner of a cherry blossom tree towards the bottom, there is little to consistently brand the schools and their websites as part of the wider CHPS system.

- **Although the district homepage and each school homepage prominently display a large photo gallery/slider, the photos are often not properly sized (leading to image distortion) and**

feature mostly posed group shots, showing little learning in action. The only other images used throughout the site appear to be clip art, stock photos or text overlays that add minimal visual interest. The high school homepages are notable exceptions, featuring several action-oriented shots of student athletes.

- **The district homepage embeds a "featured video" and the district's Twitter feed.** The video is from 2023, and the most recent tweet is nearly a month old, calling into question whether either should be featured so prominently.

- **Site content does not rely on consistent text styles or layout.** Font styles and text justification vary, and some pages offer section navigation while others do not. Hyperlinks do not consistently offer industry-standard cues (e.g., blue color or underlined when a mouse hovers over them), which may prevent visitors from recognizing them as hyperlinks.

District/School Social Media

- **CHPS uses the following social media platforms:**
  - The district's Facebook account (https://www.facebook.com/CherryHillPublicSchoolsNJ) has 2,300 followers. There are multiple posts nearly every weekday, and posts are generally about school events and activities, calendar reminders, student/staff achievements and job postings. The majority of posts include a photo or graphic, and reposts from the PTA, the town and other organizations and governmental agencies are common.
  - The district's X/Twitter account (https://www.twitter.com/ChpsTweets) has more than 5,800 followers. There are multiple tweets on most weekdays, many of them identical to the Facebook posts. Tweets also feature recaps of sports and celebrations of calendar holidays. Generally, all tweets include a photo or video, and retweets from the schools and other community groups are common. Many tweets use the district's #WEareCHPS hashtag.
  - The district's Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/chpsinsta) has more than 4,000 followers. There are typically one to three posts per week, and posts generally are about events, calendar reminders, student/staff achievement and classroom activities. Many are identical to the Facebook posts.

Cherry Hill Public Schools, Cherry Hill, NJ
1.5K likes · 2.3K followers
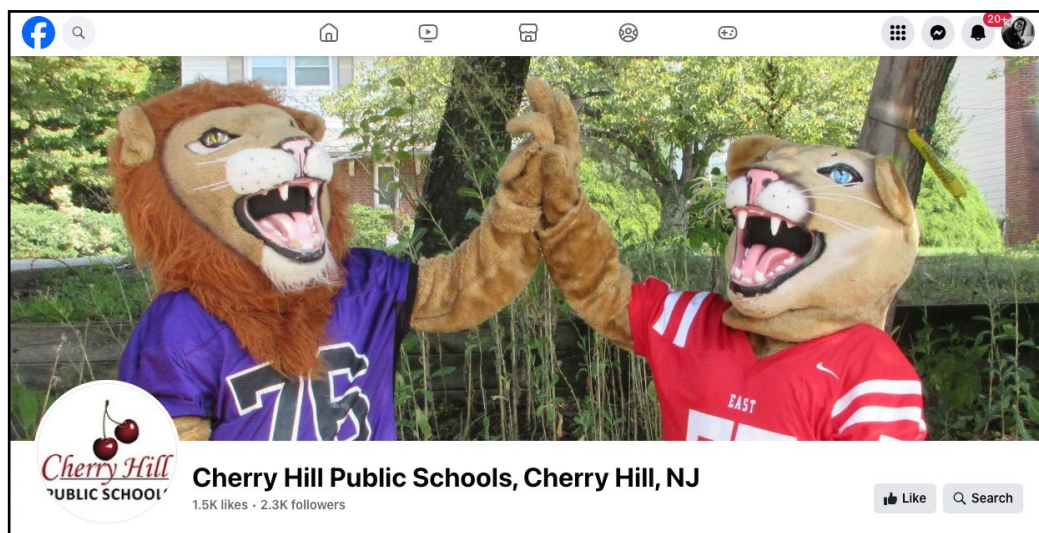
- The district's LinkedIn account (https://www.linkedin.com/company/cherry-hill-public-schools/) has 325 followers. There are only a handful of posts in the past year, all announcing job vacancies.

- **Following are engagement rates for CHPS' main social accounts during a school week of posts from February 12-16, 2024**, using publicly available data and industry calculations that define engagement as the viewer taking an action in response to a post by liking, commenting, sharing/reposting, etc.:

  - Posts on the Facebook page had an average engagement rate of 1.04 percent, which is above the 2022 average engagement rate across all industries of 0.15 percent.

  - Tweets on the X/Twitter account had an average engagement rate of 0.11 percent, above the 2022 average engagement rate across all industries of 0.05 percent.

  - Posts on the Instagram page had an average engagement rate of 1.90 percent, above the 2022 average engagement rate across all industries of 0.60 percent.

  - During this week, on all three platforms, the post that had the most engagement by far was about the "Sign Jokester," a recurring district meme featuring a comical school sign.

- **CHPS' social channels are maintained by the district's public information officer,** except for the LinkedIn account, which is managed by the district's Human Resources Department.

- **The district does not appear to have formal policies regarding the use of social media except as it relates to certificated staff's** personal use or use in communicating with their students. However, there are posting guidelines in the about section for the district's Facebook page.

- **Results from the SCOPE Survey show that Facebook is the most often used social media platform for school-related information, followed by Instagram**, for parents, employees and community members. X/Twitter is not used much by parents and community members, although it is more popular among staff, as shown in the chart below.

Social Media Platforms Used for District-Related Information

Instagram — Parent: 51%, Employee: 44%, Community: 28%
Facebook — Parent: 80%, Employee: 66%, Community: 75%
X (Twitter) — Parent: 17%, Employee: 35%, Community: 12%
YouTube — Parent: 9%, Employee: 13%, Community: 20%
Other (Please specify) — Parent: 4%, Employee: 3%, Community: 14%

■ Parent ■ Employee ■ Community
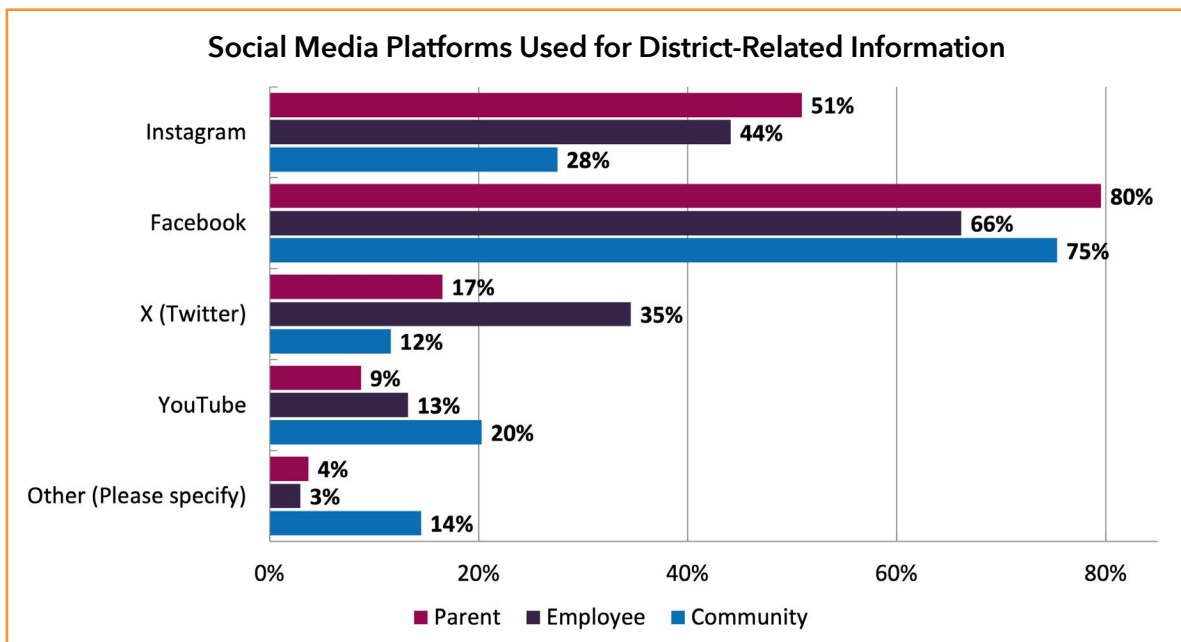
- **Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages for some schools exist, but most are "unofficial," have no posts or have not been updated for at least a year.** Exceptions are active X/Twitter accounts for each high school and the High School West Instagram account.

- **While searching for the district's account on X/Twitter, the auditor discovered that the search term "Cherry Hill Public Schools" directs one to another Cherry Hill Schools account** (https://twitter.com/hill_schools), featuring the district's official logo, with 13 followers. This account was established in November 2021 and has one tweet about a job vacancy in the district. This account appears to have been established in error.

District/School Video Channels

- **The district's YouTube channel** (https://www.youtube.com/@cherryhillpublicschools4787), in existence since 2014, has 1,640 followers and houses 535 videos. A review of the channel over a one-year period from March 2023 – February 2024 shows an average of 4 to 5 videos posted per month.

- **CHPS live streams its board of education meetings via Zoom and posts the recording to its YouTube channel.** A dedicated link within the board of education section on the CHPS website provides information about how to access the live streams and has the most recent meeting recording embedded on the page.

- **The majority of videos on the channel are board meeting videos, videos about the 2022 bond vote and its ongoing construction work, and "Minute with Dr. Meloche" videos**, a series that featured the previous superintendent, who retired in June 2023.

Word that Best Describes the District
...Parents/Families

...Faculty/Staff

...Community Members

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) and external opportunities (O) and threats (T)—known as a SWOT analysis—affecting the ability of CHPS 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	• CHPS has a diverse student body and an education program known for offering myriad learning opportunities. • Stakeholders consistently name CHPS teachers as a strength of the district. • District leaders and the public information officer recognize the importance of effective communications and the need to improve the district's engagement and communication practices. • There is internal recognition of the public information officer's expertise and willingness to support administrators' communications needs. • CHPS enjoys supportive, collaborative partnerships with its PTA groups and town leaders.	• Parents are overwhelmed by the multitude of platforms the district uses to deliver information. • The fragmented and inconsistent approach to sharing information internally contributes to frustration among teachers and administrators. • CHPS' one-person department is insufficient for meeting the community's district communication expectations. • Efforts to be proactive and strategic about communications are hampered by the lack of a communication plan. • The current website structure is difficult to navigate and contains outdated information. • Employees believe their input is not heard or heeded, which erodes morale.
	OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
EXTERNAL	• Residents choose to live and raise families in Cherry Hill because of the district's schools. • The successful passage of the 2022 bond referendum, following a previous defeat, demonstrates the community's support for investing in its schools and the effectiveness of a proactive, strategic communications campaign. • Stakeholders desire more information from the district to understand important education issues and decisions.	• Chronic state underfunding and recently announced state funding cuts for next year may impact the resources available for expanding communications capacity. • A large and diverse family population makes communicating effectively increasingly challenging. • Misinformation spread via social media fosters negativity and erodes trust.

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 CHPS' 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

| | | CHPS | 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)	**3.6**	**3.8**	**3.1**	**4.2**
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About school and district events and programs (1)	**3.2**	**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)	**3.4**	**3.7**	**3.1**	**4.4**
	About how I can support my student's learning (1)	**3.1**	**3.4**	**2.4**	**4.1**
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my school/department (2)	**3.7**	**4.1**	**3.4**	**4.5**
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	**3.6**	**3.8**	**3.1**	**4.4**
STAFF	**General Perceptions**				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	**3.6**	**3.6**	**2.3**	**4.2**
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	**3.5**	**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)	**3.2**	**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)	**3.6**	**3.7**	**2.7**	**4.3**
	Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department (2)	**3.8**	**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)	**3.2**	**3.2**	**2.0**	**4.1**
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About student success/achievements (1)	**2.6**	**2.9**	**2.0**	**4.2**
	About district finances and related issues (1)	**2.1**	**2.5**	**1.7**	**3.6**
	About school safety (1)	**2.8**	**2.9**	**1.7**	**4.0**
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district (2)	**3.1**	**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:

1. Comprehensive Professional Communication Program

2. Internal communications

3. Parent/Family Communications

4. Marketing/Branding Communications

5. Crisis Communication

6. Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns

7. 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 LCPS' 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.

CHPS and the *Rubrics of Practice*

When considering the CHPS 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 established in CFA 3 and 5, and emerging or nearly established in CFA 1-2, 4 and 6-7.

The Recommendations in this report provide insight and advice that will help CHPS continue to enhance its efforts in each benchmarked area for a communication program. However, making comparisons against national benchmarks is something that the district's pubic information officer can engage in, annually or biennially perhaps, using the *Rubrics of Practice*. That might involve including self-assessment via the rubrics as an evaluation measure in CHPS' strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1) 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

With a new superintendent and a board of education actively seeking improved engagement with stakeholders, CHPS has an opportunity to re-envision its communications to match the evolving needs and expectations of its growing, diverse community. While there is no shortage of communications coming from CHPS, strengthening its stakeholder relationships requires a more strategic approach to the communications function. The district is fortunate to have a dedicated communications professional with a commitment to best practice and a sincere desire to explore new ideas.

The first step in creating a more robust and multi-level approach will be to develop a comprehensive plan that can address the issues of consistency, accuracy and timeliness, while ensuring adequate attention to communicating about the issues and decisions that are most impactful to students, employees and the community. Key to accomplishing this and other goals will be ensuring that the Public Information Office is well-staffed and duties and responsibilities are properly prioritized to advance the most important work of the district. That said, it is critical to note that all departments and staff have a responsibility to ensure that CHPS continues to build trusted relationships with its stakeholders. As the district considers and begins to implement these recommendations, it will be important to involve staff beyond the public information officer.

The following recommendations 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. Each recommendation is accompanied by action steps with tactical ideas for how it might be accomplished. As the staffing and funding levels available to support these efforts are considered, CHPS leaders may choose to implement some, all or other action steps than those outlined here.

Some recommendations can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. **Generally speaking, a district should not try to address more than 2-3 recommendations each school year while continuing to deliver existing communication 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. Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

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

3. Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.

4. Redesign the district website.

5. Address information overload and redundancy by streamlining and clarifying communications outflow.

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

Recommendation 1:

Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

The day-to-day demands of any public school system can easily consume the majority of staff members' time, leaving little time or resources for communication planning and evaluation. This can result in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering the district's key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools.

Comments from the SCOPE Survey and focus groups reflect the perception that CHPS is not transparent about current issues and decisions and that the information that is shared about these issues is not effective in addressing the questions and concerns of the community. Even if these perceptions are not accurate, they represent a public relations problem for the district.

Communication programs that are not driven by a clear strategic vision and measurable objectives can easily fall victim to reactively addressing the crisis of the moment, and school districts that do not follow a strategic plan for communications can easily lose their "voice" to individuals or media outlets who are telling the district's story their own way.

Developing a formal, strategic communication plan will also help the public information officer save time by grounding efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, cost-effective and most likely to succeed in CHPS' community.

Following are action steps that will help CHPS integrate strategic communications into every aspect of the district's work and allow issues to be addressed proactively and effectively, thereby increasing stakeholder confidence and trust.

Action Step 1.1

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

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective plan nor does it guarantee improved information flow. A communication plan with clear goals, measurable objectives and strategies will maximize the number of stakeholders who are receiving information and impact their attitudes, beliefs or actions as a result. Such a plan should focus on engaging stakeholders as well as informing them. The plan should include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, staff responsibilities, desired outcomes and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative.

There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan, but following the four-step RPIE process has proven successful for many school districts and is a best practice of accredited public relations practitioners. Good communication planning is time-consuming, but making time to create such a plan will provide a road map (see "Get on the Road" side note) to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of all district communications.

Research

Research (R) and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders'

needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant, top-line findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit, including the SCOPE Survey data, will be an excellent starting point, providing deeper understanding of communication sources, preferences and perceptions than the district had prior to conducting the audit.

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)

As part of the research phase, determine all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in CHPS. Include ongoing communication

#1

Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

activities and tactics: managing website content, district e-newsletter, building e-newsletters, social media postings, 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 also include any regular staff efforts to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, advisory groups, business partnerships, open house programs, news media relations, participation in community organizations, etc.

The compilation of this research will provide an accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations. It also will provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communications and public relations functions and will help 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 (P) is at the heart of the RPIE process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications road map will begin to come to life. This is the heavy-lifting phase of creating a communication plan, but completing the following steps will pay big dividends for the district.

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

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

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

- **Determine Strategies**. Strategies are the approaches used to achieve objectives; they are broader in scope than tactics. A strategy states what is going to be done to achieve a desired outcome, while tactics describe how that strategy will be done. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to understand, particularly for district and department leaders in other functional areas. It will also make it easier for public information staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For example, if the measurable objective

is to increase the percentage of all stakeholders who say they are moderately to extremely informed about district finances, a strategy and its related tactics might include:

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

- **Sample Tactics:**

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

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

  - Form a financial advisory committee and provide it with communication materials such as infographics to help members act as ambassadors who can explain district finances in the community.

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

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

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

  - Parents broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and middle school) or by another identifier (e.g., "active/involved," "non-English-speaking,")

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

  - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents and others active in the schools and community

  - Elected officials at the town, county, state and federal levels

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

  - Students such as those participating in student government

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

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

  - Equipment, software and subscriptions

  - Materials and supplies

  - Printing and duplicating

  - Print and digital advertising

  - Contracted translation services

  - Professional development

- **Consider the needs of families whose primary language is other than English.** Like many districts across the country, CHPS is experiencing an increase in students (and families) whose first language is not English. Preparing for and addressing this communication challenge should be a integral part of the development of CHPS' strategic communication plan.

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

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

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

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

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

The first step is to identify and implement methods for determining and updating families' language preferences in order to monitor how and to what extent communications in languages other than English can reasonably and effectively be provided. The U.S. Department of Education requirements for translations center on the number of eligible persons to be served; the nature and importance of the program, activity or service needing translation; the costs of translation services and some other factors. A good rule of thumb is to offer translations if 10% or more of the population living in an area speaks the same non-English language. (This is the same as the federal threshold for translations related to the healthcare industry.) Although recent data indicates that CHPS has not yet reached that threshold for any single language, in nearly a quarter of student households families speak a language other than English, and indications are that this percentage will increase.

Consider using contracted translation services to increase the availability of translated materials to help parents get answers to their questions and to better understand what is happening in their child(ren)'s school(s) on a daily basis. Examples of providers for this type of support include Alboum Translation Services (https://alboum.com/), Hanna Interpreting Services (https://hannais.com/) and Homeland Language Services (https://homelandlanguageservices.com/). Also, find out what built-in translation options are available through CHPS' website and emergency notification vendor(s) and, if they exist, be sure to inform parents about their availability (and how to access or adjust settings). User-friendly instructions can be included in new student registration packets and as part of annual back-to-school reminders.

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

- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the public information officer; other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. (Communication staffing is further addressed in Recommendation 2.) Further, the SCOPE Survey showed that teachers, principals and employees are a powerful source of information for stakeholders, so it is important that employees understand key issues and initiatives, can answer questions about them and know when they are responsible for disseminating it (see chart on page 59).

As CHPS works through the planning process, ensure the following questions are addressed for every major initiative the district undertakes:

- Who needs to know?

- What do they need to know?

- Why do they need to know?

- When do they need to know?

- How are we going to tell them?

- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?

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

Implement

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

Evaluate

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

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

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

- Pattonville (Mo.) Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program–https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/Awards%20Section/Award%20Winners/School%20Comms%20Awards/Gold%20Medallion/gm-low-pattonville-sd-year-round-communication.pdf?ver=HEgwT3my8cFJJ0vUwHOAIA%3d%3d

- Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan–https://alexandriapublic.ic-board.com/attachments/dce41d87-af3a-4c04-8e3a-5a7b8d27d556.pdf

Action Step 1.2

Include proactive issues management as a component of communication planning.

A deliberate effort to understand and foresee community sentiment around potentially controversial topics can help build understanding and support for key initiatives by allowing the district to explain proactively before controversy breaks down trust.

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

As demonstrated in the examples for objectives, strategies and tactics (see), consider adding a goal and/or objectives related to issues management to the strategic communication plan. By proactively addressing issues on the horizon and by equipping district and school leaders with talking points to start the conversation, the district can frame the conversation on its own terms rather than allowing others to do so first.

Action Step 1.3

Make a plan for crisis communications.

Formal crisis communication plans are a key planning element of highly effective school communication programs. The public information officer should explore developing a crisis component for the overall strategic communication plan or developing a separate, robust crisis communication plan, as a complimentary tool to the district's crisis management plan.

SCOPE Survey data show that stakeholders feel better informed about school safety issues than about other topics, an acknowledgment of CHPS' efforts to communicate following school incidents. Yet lack of detail and timeliness prevents the district's messaging from reassuring constituents and reaching them before rumors and misinformation spread.

A crisis communication plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels. While the public information officer and appropriate building administrators are typically involved in drafting statements and messages, these responsibilities should be formally designated in the plan, along with putting in writing the expected sequence and flow of communications. This will help ensure that administrators and educators can focus on managing the crisis while the public information officer can focus on keeping internal and external stakeholders informed about the crisis in a timely and accurate manner.

Such a plan should take into account the varied communication needs of stakeholders during different types of crises, from urgent but time-limited events (e.g., school shooting, bomb threat) to ongoing crises with lengthier impacts (e.g., natural disasters, weather events, pandemics).

In addition, explore these elements when developing the crisis communication plan to facilitate quicker and more streamlined dissemination of information:

- **Expand the definition of affected stakeholders beyond those who are enrolled in or work at a specific location.** When a crisis happens at a school, the impact goes beyond that one location. In the focus groups, participants shared that they heard about incidents at other schools through the grapevine, as opposed to directly from the district. Keep in mind that a number of situations exist that make the incident in one location a concern for many across the district: students in a single family may attend multiple schools, relatives may work in other schools and staff may be traveling from one school to another.

  Early, proactive and broad communication to staff, parents and community members during a crisis will reduce the void others may fill with erroneous information. Following are ways to expand who can access crisis information without overwhelming the email boxes of those who are less directly affected and potentially less interested in the crisis:

  - *Develop and promote a crisis alert list that people can sign-up for to receive school crisis information.* When a school building-specific crisis occurs, you can send targeted communications to directly affected staff and families and also send an email to the crisis alert list, instead of to the entire district.

  - *Develop and promote a crisis alert webpage that only is activated in the event of a situation.* Maintain the same URL every time. Let people know that will be the webpage to go to for the latest updates on active or recent school crises. Share the link via social

media so that people have direct access to the most current updates instead of having to scroll through their feeds.

- **Consider developing in advance template messages that buildings can use during unexpected, but not atypical, crises** (e.g., weather closures, bomb threats, neighborhood incidents that trigger a lockdown, social media threats). The district also should implement a clear process for developing urgent messages quickly so they can be sent to staff, parents/guardians, community members and high school students efficiently. View one district's example of crisis messaging templates for school leaders at https://www.nspra. org/Portals/0/PR%20Resources%20 Section/Samples%20and%20Resources/ Principal%20Comm%20Templates%20 2018.pdf?ver=2mwpER09ojIKGOsVb3gc 9w%3d%3d.

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

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

While all crises are unique, and therefore will be responded to differently, a carefully crafted and frequently updated crisis communication plan will keep CHPS from starting from scratch when a crisis does occur and tensions are high and will help position the district as a reliable source of information.

Action Step 1.4

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

As noted on pages 26-27 of the Key Findings, when parents and staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with various statements about the quality of communication in CHPS, the lowest ratings were given to "my involvement is welcome and valued" and "my input and opinion are welcome and valued." Comments in the focus groups reflected a similarly low perception in this area. While other findings suggest that district communications are generally considered trustworthy, it is important to maintain that trust by ensuring that parents, employees and the community have adequate opportunity to provide input on decisions that may impact them.

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

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

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

- *Who will join me?* People often feel powerless if they see themselves as acting alone but will believe they can make a difference if others of like mind join them.

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

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

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

- **Establish an effective method for stakeholders to submit comments and ideas.** Inviting comments and ideas via an anonymous-optional digital tool or

e-form can make providing feedback more convenient and comfortable for busy or self-conscious community members, parents and staff. School systems today can invite input digitally in a variety of ways, including through online feedback apps such as K12 Insight's Let's Talk and artificial intelligence-powered customer service chatbots like AlwaysOn. The ThoughtExchange crowdsourcing platform, recently adopted by CHPS, is another option.

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

- **Schedule listening opportunities for the superintendent at school and department staff meetings.** The district's recently enacted LMC is a positive step in offering a select group of employees meaningful opportunities to contribute to district decision making. Some districts have also introduced successful "live with..." events featuring the superintendent engaging with a wider group of staff, virtually or in person. When offered regularly and advertised to focus on a particular topic, such events give employees a purposeful opportunity to meet and build relationships with the superintendent.

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

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

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

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

Action Step 1.5

Provide opportunities for administrative leaders to review and understand their roles in strategic communications.

It is important to engage other CHPS leaders in understanding, supporting and endorsing communication strategies. Responsibility for the daily exchange of information extends beyond the official work of the public information officer, and at times, it falls informally to other district, department and building leaders as well as to front-line office staff.

The auditor recommends that the public information officer offer a meeting for administrators and their primary administrative assistants to learn about the strategic communication plan and their roles in its success. With only one formal communications staff member, it is important to clarify and delineate any informal communication roles for administrative leaders and their front-line staff as well as the expected flow of information. This creates an opportunity to educate colleagues about the mission of the department and the connection between excellent communication and achieving district goals.

Periodically, the public information officer should also use part of the Superintendent's Council meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep staff energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with less impactful tasks. Another benefit of this review is helping administrators to understand why the public information officer may sometimes have to say "no" to new projects or ideas that are less aligned with the strategic communication plan and/or beyond current communications staff capacity.

Action Step 1.6

Provide regular strategic communication plan updates to the Board of Education.

When the new communication plan is finalized, as well as when annual updates are made, the plan should be reviewed at school board and leadership meetings to highlight its major components and provide updates on progress. This step in the planning process ensures all district leaders are informed about communication strategies and activities. It also sends a clear message to all stakeholders that the district is serious about communication.

Action Step 1.7

Incorporate the elements of communications planning into major projects and initiatives.

In addition to the overall communication plan for the district, project-specific communication plans should be developed whenever key issues or initiatives (such as potential budget challenges, bond or levy elections, or the hiring of a new superintendent) need to be addressed or implemented. These more narrowly focused plans won't be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, but the same type of thoughtful planning around key issues affecting the district is important.

Developing these plans can also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind and avoid jumping to strategies and tactics that are familiar or appealing to staff. For example, while video is a powerful visual medium, meeting a particular objective might require a series of in-person community presentations or even an old-school flyer to reach the target audience. Creativity should be encouraged in exploring new strategies and tactics to keep communications relevant and highly effective.

For several examples of project-specific communication plans, check out the 2023 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award winners' entries at https://www.nspra.org/Awards/Award-Winners/2023-Gold-Medallion-Winners.

Action Step 1.8

Focus strategies on increasing stakeholder understanding and engagement.

During focus group discussions, many parents noted feeling overwhelmed by the volume of communications they sift through daily, including those coming from the district and its schools. In addition, many noted the large amount of information posted in the weekly school newsletters. For some, this led them to miss important messages.

As the communications work is planned, focus strategies and tactics on achieving desired stakeholder behaviors/outcomes and not on simply delivering information. While patrons often need to see a message multiple times before they act on it, a greater volume of communications does not necessarily translate to patron action when that volume is seen as overwhelming, distracting or unfocused. When key messages need to be delivered, begin with the audience in mind. Begin by asking what the intended audience wants and needs to know, what their current level of understanding is and what they need to do with the information.

With the variety of communication tactics available in CHPS, prioritize those platforms that have been shown to secure the greatest level of stakeholder engagement. To guide this effort, use data from the SCOPE Survey on which communication tools are most effective in reaching different audiences with important information. This will allow staff to use their time more efficiently and effectively. A tactic should not be used just because it is there and available; it should be used because it is the best tool for the job.

Recommendation 2:

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

The communication landscape for schools has changed significantly in the last few years. On NSPRA's 2022 Membership Profile Survey, communication professionals were asked to identify the top five responsibilities of their position. Following are the percentages of people who rated these responsibilities among their top five.

- Crisis communications - 58 percent
- External communications - 52 percent
- Social media - 48 percent
- Community relations/public engagement - 44 percent
- Media relations - 43 percent
- Website management - 39 percent
- Internal communications - 36 percent
- Strategic communication planning - 31 percent
- Writing/editing - 24 percent
- Marketing - 23 percent

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

The job description for CHPS' public information officer was most recently revised in January 2024. While it fairly accurately reflects current actions, it is entirely tactical in its description of the function, focusing on tools and tasks instead of articulating the purpose

and desired outcome of a robust public information program.

Given the size of CHPS and the appetite of its community for two-way communications, it has been a stretch for the one full-time staff position, supported by a part-time clerical assistant, to handle all routine communication, maintain a strong relationship with the public, respond to unexpected emergencies and challenges that occur on a regular basis in every school district and plan strategically to advance the district's goals and priorities.

There is no national standard for staffing levels in communications, but it is worth considering the staffing practices of similar school systems when reflecting on CHPS' communications capacity and infrastructure. According to the 2022 NSPRA Membership Profile Survey, among school districts enrolling 10,000 to 24,999 students, just 15 percent have a one-person communications department. The vast majority—61 percent—have two to four staff members in their communications office, and nearly 25 percent have five or more. Further, less than 15 percent of districts with an annual budget of more than $150 million have a communications budget of less than $150,000.

The following action steps offer ideas for evaluating, strengthening and expanding the capacity for strategic communications in CHPS.

Action Step 2.1

Track the time spent on communication programs, tasks and services, and evaluate how each serves the district's goals and the communication plan goals.

To ensure staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it is important to know how much actual time is spent on

each task and service, not just by the public information officer, but by all staff members who have communication responsibilities. It is also important to view these tasks through the lens of how well they serve the district in meeting the goals of its strategic plan.

- **Time tracking.** While tracking time may feel onerous, the data provides useful information and the exercise only needs to happen for a limited period of time, perhaps one quarter. Evaluation of the tracked data should include which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which can be improved in the future. The data can be compared against the findings of the SCOPE Survey on the communication sources used and preferred by CHPS stakeholders. This evaluation step is critical in determining whether the current infrastructure and capacity meets the district's communication needs.

- **Alignment with the district's goals and the newly drafted strategic communication plan.** Create a list of all the current communication programs, tasks and services handled by the public information officer and other district leaders, and consider how well each task and service aligns with the district's goals. 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?

#2

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

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

Action Step 2.2

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

QUICK WIN

One way to increase the public information officer's ability to address more strategic communication efforts is to identify routine tasks that could be shifted to other employees to allow her to focus on the areas where she has unique expertise. For example, numerous participants in the focus groups and SCOPE Survey expressed frustration that the district's online calendar is not up-to-date, while the public information officer described the constant interruptions and higher priority tasks that often pull her away from updating the calendar and other information.

Whether these tasks are shifted to the part-time clerical assistant in the communications office or to another current employee, freeing up the public information officer from such tasks

will enhance her ability to focus on higher-level, strategic work that can help the district meet its strategic goals and objectives.

Action Step 2.3

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

Once Action Steps 2.1 and 2.2 have been completed, a new job description should be created for the public information officer that reflects the assessment and the district's increased focus on strategic communications. At that point, current staffing needs will be better understood.

However, it is the auditor's assessment that additional communication staff are needed to free up meaningful capacity. The time tracking and task assessment exercises (Action Step 2.1) will help to identify the skill sets that will be needed in other personnel so that tactical responsibilities can be shifted from the public information officer. For example, many districts have communications specialists or digital communications specialists, who support the lead communications professional with tasks such as content generation for the website; newsletters and print production; production of video and podcast content; and storytelling on social media. If CHPS creates additional capacity, the public information officer can delegate tactical duties while concentrating on more strategic communication initiatives.

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

If funding is not available at this time to create a new communications position, consider adding a budget line for contracted services to support specific projects and initiatives until resources become available to expand the internal team. However it is accomplished, an additional investment in staff capacity will be necessary to allow the CHPS communication program to address the areas of challenge identified in this communication audit report and meet stakeholder expectations.

Action Step 2.4

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

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

Quarterly trainings, or alternatively, an annual communication boot camp for central office and school administrators (and possibly a version for other front-line staff as well) would provide strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help them in their leadership roles and in their communications with stakeholders. This training would also strengthen their partnerships with the public information officer, who can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments and support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators, both of which were requests heard by the auditor in administrator focus groups. Similar

training for school board members also should be considered and is often offered by state school boards associations.

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

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Use the SCOPE Survey data, as well as local and national research, to demonstrate what families and community members want to know from their schools and districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as doing mock on-camera media interviews.

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

- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review the goals and objectives of the district's strategic plan and ask participants to think about the link between good communication and achieving broad district goals. Lead participants in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of district goals as well as school or department goals.

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

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

Action Step 2.5

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

QUICK WIN

All CHPS district, department and school building leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the public information officer. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at meetings of central office and school administrators so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

The auditor perceived and SCOPE Survey data showed that internal and external stakeholders do not believe that information generally flows efficiently in CHPS. Developing and annually reviewing a sample chart that clarifies administrators' communication roles and responsibilities (like the one on the next page) may prove beneficial to ensure that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the strategic plan.

Example: Communication Roles Guide for Administrative Staff

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Public Information Office	District-level updates on: • Routine matters that impact more than one school • Urgent matters that impact any school • Major districtwide initiatives Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media • Video channel • News releases to media • Paid ad placements Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Administrative Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/action briefs Board policy changes	Board webpages
Assistant Superintendent, PreK-12 and Curriculum	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Assistant Superintendent for Business	Budget and finance updates Bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Director of Human Resources	Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items	HR webpages Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Board meetings
Principals	School-level updates on: • School-specific routine matters • School-specific urgent matters • Major districtwide initiatives (using tool kit provided)	School-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media

Recommendation 3:

Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.

To be effective, a school district needs the support and trust of its employees. Gaining that support and trust is difficult, but keeping staff informed of changes and issues while encouraging staff engagement in decision-making shows transparency and good faith.

In a comprehensive, research-based approach to school leadership from the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), the case is made for how leaders effectively implement change, communicate and elicit input. The nonprofit organization's data demonstrates that there is a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement, and that among 21 leadership responsibilities, establishing strong lines of communication with teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement. While these responsibilities are presented as characteristics of a principal, they apply at all levels of educational leadership.

The importance of internal audiences cannot be overlooked when building a successful communications and public relations program. Employees must feel they are an integral part of the organization and understand the school district's mission and vision as well as be aware of current district initiatives and issues. Moreover, they need to be able to share that information when the need or opportunity arises. A well-informed and supportive staff will have a positive influence on external communication efforts as well as the overall environment of the school district.

The opportunities for staff to influence each other and the community in a positive way is significant. In the SCOPE Survey, employees were asked to estimate the typical number of interactions they have with parents or community members weekly. Sixty-one percent indicated they have 1-15 interactions a week, while another 28 percent have 16 or more interactions a week. For this survey sample of 250 employees, that represents approximately 2,000 interactions per week. When extended to the entire staff of more than 1,000, this would represent more than 8,000 interactions per week and ample opportunities for staff to share what's happening in the district.

For these person-to-person interactions to be meaningful and positive for the district, employees must first see themselves as district ambassadors. The following action steps are meant to help with that by enhancing internal communication and enabling leadership to more proactively keep staff well-informed. Such steps also can help staff feel more valued and engaged in school district operations.

Action Step 3.1

Take an employees-first approach to disseminating information.

Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. When employees feel they are "the last to know" and that information comes to them first through non-district channels (e.g., social media, parent conversations), they do not feel valued and instead experience barriers to serving as district/school ambassadors. Their reliance on second-hand sources of information can hamper a district's ability to disseminate accurate, credible information, especially because employees are among the most frequent and trusted sources of information for families.

In contrast, highly effective communication programs prioritize ensuring that their staff get timely, accurate information. By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages and training, the district can exponentially expand its communication outreach while building trust and credibility both internally and externally.

Following are suggestions for developing an employees-first communication process:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Employees are frontline communicators and should receive important information—particularly about issues that affect their jobs and workplaces—before the media and families whenever possible. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to address an initiative or concern, it is essential that senior leaders and school administrators include in their planning how employees will be incorporated into their communication and response efforts.

- **Use the most effectives vehicles to communicate.** Consider the best vehicles for communications based on the urgency of the message, timing considerations and SCOPE Survey data on employees' communication preferences for different situations. If the communication is about an upcoming or ongoing issue, information can be shared with staff via regularly scheduled or as-needed meetings and email. Text notifications may be more appropriate for more urgent or unexpected announcements.

- **When possible, share information in settings that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the topic.** A potential major change in policy or course offerings might be better shared in a staff meeting setting where questions can be asked

#3

Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.

and answered for an entire group rather than in one-off emails for example. Unless employees understand the rationale and the process used to address an issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.

Action Step 3.2

Increase opportunities for face-to-face communication and engagement.

QUICK WIN

There are many ways to simply deliver information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication.

When CHPS staff were asked how they prefer to receive information to help them perform their duties and support student learning, "faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings" (35 percent) and "individual meetings with your supervisor" (30 percent) were the second and third highest scoring areas, behind only email.

While clearly there is a logical use for sharing routine information via email, this data reflects that there is value 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 staff changes take place 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 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, central office administrators, principals) 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. Leaders should 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 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.

Action Step 3.3

Build up the ability of employees to serve as ambassadors.

All employees must share the role of representing the district to the community and serve as ambassadors for the schools. Communication is not just the responsibility of the superintendent, public information officer, district administrators or principals. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with internal colleagues and external stakeholders. The staff focus groups did not feel adequately prepared to fulfill this role, and the SCOPE Survey reflects that only 46 percent of employees felt extremely or very informed about how they can best represent the district as an ambassador.

Highly effective organizations empower their employees through effective communications to serve as ambassadors for the organization during work hours and after hours in their real and virtual communities.

To begin, develop an ambassador tool kit for school system employees. An ambassador tool kit is designed to help employees see themselves as representatives for their school system when out in the community. It gives them the information they need to understand

how the school system operates and how their work supports the organizational mission. The tool kit should be part of the orientation process for new employees and revisited at least annually with existing employees. It can be delivered in a print, virtual or video format.

Employee ambassador tool kits should contain basic facts and information such as:

- The information included in the About Us section of the district website

- Strategic goals and highlights on the district's progress in achieving them

- Student enrollment and demographics

- Number of staff employed

- Revenue sources

- Brief summaries of special initiatives, programs and services

- Branding elements for employee use (e.g., logos, taglines) and where to find and download graphics files

- Ways to engage with the district online

The topics are similar to what might be presented in an annual report to the school community, but content should be written with an employee reader in mind. Think: "What would employees want to know if they were asked to talk about our school system?"

While new employees most need ambassador-style information, it is beneficial to redistribute tool kits annually to all employees during the back-to-school season. This reminds them of their daily roles as representatives of an educational community. In remarks to employees throughout the school year, leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as ambassadors for schools and public education.

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

As the ambassador effort grows, consider formalizing the strategy by designating official employee ambassadors. These should be carefully chosen thought leaders who are well-known and respected in the school community. Consider choosing those who don't already have an official leadership role with the school system. Empower them with timely and accurate information (such as the ambassador tool kit), and then have them represent the school at community festivals, during school tours for the public, on social media, etc.

To empower employees to serve as ambassadors, some school districts implement formal programs such as Santa Ana (Calif.) Unified School District's brand ambassadors program (featured in a recent podcast). Others develop helpful materials such as the award-winning pocket guide produced by Orange County Public Schools in Florida.

Action Step 3.4

Include a communication/ambassadorship element in orientation programs for new employees.

While onboarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of the public information officer, she can support internal communication efforts and should play a role in getting all new hires off to a great start.

Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, to create a positive onboarding experience that

goes beyond forms and documents and offers a solid grounding in the district's history, values and goals.

Beyond providing the ambassador toolkit outlined in the previous section, following are some additional suggestions for addressing new employees' communication needs:

- Create a guide to let new employees know where to find various types of district information and whom to contact if they have questions on a district-level issue or initiative.

- Emphasize their responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their schools.

- Review guidelines and expectations for news media relations and social media so staff protocols are clearly understood.

- Encourage staff to inform the Public Information Office of newsworthy events and visually interesting lessons in their buildings or classrooms.

- Consider preparing a summary sheet of "communication responsibilities" to distribute to all employees so new hires know how to respond to parent/guardian and staff requests appropriately.

Action Step 3.5

Celebrate employee contributions and successes.

QUICK WIN

A combination of formal and informal acknowledgments and expressions of appreciation for employee efforts is important to maintaining high morale and employee engagement. These should be integrated into daily operations in a mindful and authentic manner. Personal acknowledgments of successes—large and small—help to build a positive culture by adding a human touch.

A powerful way the district can expand employee recognition is to highlight how individual employees are supporting strategic goals and helping prepare students for the future. Acknowledging the daily work contributions of employees is often more meaningful than reporting on awards received. Continue featuring success and recognition stories in short videos, publications, websites and social media. Provide commendations at staff meetings, send personal notes and make personal thank-you calls.

Acknowledging the role employees play in the day-to-day success of students, as well as in raising the district's image, is key to building morale and fostering ownership.

Recommendation 4:

Redesign the district website.

SCOPE Survey results found that 56 percent of respondents use the website to find district information monthly, less than monthly or never, and in nearly all focus groups, participants found the current district website to be difficult to navigate, with poor search capability, too many links to PDFs and content often out of date. In its current state, the website is ineffective as the reliable information repository CHPS stakeholders want.

The public information officer and technology director are aware of the website's limitations and in the process of investigating platform options for a new or newly redesigned website. While selecting a vendor is an important step, addressing the content, navigation and maintenance challenges identified in this report (see page 32 of Key Findings) is necessary to increase the usefulness of the CHPS website as a communication tool for the district and its stakeholders. At the same time, an improved content structure and functionality would help differentiate the website from other digital communication tools as part of efforts to streamline information channels (see Recommendation 5).

Action Step 4.1

Identify the features of an ideal CHPS website.

Following are important initial steps to take when approaching a website redesign project:

- **Ask and answer these questions.**
  - Who are our primary audiences for the district website? For the school websites? For any existing or desired microsites?

  - What are our objectives for each audience? What should they be able to do, know or believe by visiting the sites?
  - What current website functionality and features should be kept, deleted or improved? (Strong consideration should be given to designs and features that make the website highly compatible with mobile devices.)
  - What integrations with other apps and programs must the website platform be able to handle?
  - What is the website development timeline?
  - What works and doesn't work in our partnership with the current website provider?
  - When we get to the end of this website redesign process, how will we know that it was successful?

- **Evaluate the site with an eye toward improvements and additions that can be easily incorporated.**
  - Does it contain everything current and potential families need to know?
  - Is there an easy-to-find location that lists all daily events and activities, including sports?
  - Does it feature a dashboard to share demographic data and statistics about the district and its achievements?
  - Does it have a prominent section targeted to the interests of potential new families, which includes why CHPS is a great place to learn in addition to enrollment information?
  - Does it have a prominent section featuring career opportunities, which includes why CHPS is a great place to work in addition to application information?

- Does it appropriately portray the CHPS brand with marketing-oriented headlines and phrases prominently displayed?

- Does it incorporate video clips?

- **Get inspiration.** The Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) area of the NSPRA website has a section dedicated to website resources for members at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Websites. Here you will find information about accessibility and ADA compliance, presentations about how to approach digital communications and links to award-winning websites.

- **Choose the best platform for your needs.** When considering either a redesign or a completely new website, plan to make full use of a contemporary content management system (CMS). An easy-to-use CMS will also allow for delegation of maintenance responsibilities among staff, especially any features that allow posts to "expire" automatically.

  The current site was designed by Blackboard, a company that has since been purchased by Finalsite. It will be important for communications staff to connect with the new site provider to explore new design options that may now be available. Be sure to share the website-related findings of this audit and district leaders' thoughts on the ideal features of a CHPS website, so the district's Finalsite representative can offer potential solutions.

  Following are links to a few district websites more recently redesigned by Finalsite:

  - Jackson County (Ga.) School System website–https://www.jacksonschoolsga.org/

#4

Redesign the district website.

- Issaquah (Wash.) School District website–https://www.isd411.org

- Edina (Minn.) Public Schools website–https://www.edinaschools.org

- Glenbrook (Ill.) High Schools website–https://www.glenbrook225.org/

If the district determines that Finalsite is not the best fit to meet its website needs, the following website providers are used often by NSPRA members' school districts and frequently exhibit at NSPRA National Seminars. Example websites created by these providers are also noted below.

- Apptegy (https://www.apptegy.com/): https://www.bauxiteminers.org/

- CatapultK12 (https://www.catapultk12.com/): https://www.twinriversusd.org

- Edlio (https://edlio.com/): https://www.ecesd.org/

- Gabbart Communications/ParentSquare (https://www.gabbart.com/): https://www.lusd.net/

- Intrado SchoolMessenger (https://www.schoolmessenger.com/): https://aurora.ssdesign.lsnpresence.com/

- **Consider issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) that specifically outlines the features and functions an effective CHPS website must have.** This will compel vendors to specify how their platform matches your needs, instead of focusing on features that may impress but will not serve your interests.

Action Step 4.2

Conduct user-testing and analytics to improve navigability and relevance.

A consistent observation was difficulty in navigating the district website and finding needed information. As the district begins to develop a new or redesigned website, take the opportunity to combine the data from this report with additional information from current users. Initial steps might include the following:

- **Conduct a short user experience online activity** to broaden the audience that is able to weigh in on these same topics. Share a link to the activity with parents, staff, students and the community via email, social media and the website. Following are two activities to consider:

  - *Card sorting* is a research method in which study participants place individually labeled cards (e.g., potential website content) into groups (e.g., potential areas for website content) according to criteria that makes the most sense to them.

  - *Tree testing* will help you evaluate a proposed site structure and navigation pathways by asking users where they would expect to find items based on the website's organization and terminology.

- **Continue to use web analytics** to track the number of visitors to each page, how long they spend on the page, which pages they visit most often, and how they move through the site. Consider deleting or re-organizing pages receiving few visits.

- **Look for ways to get visitors to the information they want with a minimum of clicks.** As a website redesign is planned, be sure to consider navigation options that focus more on what users come to do (e.g., I want to… Enroll a student) than on what the district wants to post (e.g., Academics, Careers).

Action Step 4.3

Ensure website content meets accessibility guidelines.

Website visitors with visual, hearing, motor or cognitive disabilities can use software or devices to scan and explain what is on webpages. Accessibility problems interfere with the accuracy of those scans and may be caused by non-accessible PDF documents, broken links, poor contrast with text and backgrounds, lack of closed captioning for videos and artwork, and photos that are not tagged. (Test a single webpage for accessibility problems for free anytime at https://wave.webaim.org/.)

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

The district's communications and technology staff should become familiar with these updated regulations and ensure that the website platform and all website content are able to meet the WCAG 2.1 standards. Currently that is not the case, and the district is vulnerable to complaints being filed with the Office of Civil Rights on behalf of users with visual or hearing disabilities. Additionally, many U.S. adults today access online content through

tablets and smartphones as well as computers; greater content accessibility improves their user experience as well.

Action Step 4.4

Develop a process to ensure web pages are routinely kept up to date with fresh and accurate content, and hold staff accountable for maintaining those efforts.

QUICK WIN

More regular website housekeeping efforts and protocols should be established so that web authors are alerted to outdated links and content. All staff members assigned to web work need sufficient time to attend to routine maintenance and updates, and many say they need more training to do it correctly. District level pages should continue to be maintained by a trained professional in the Public Information Office.

Anyone working on the district, department or school webpages should be held accountable for meeting accessibility standards and keeping the content current. If school pages are to be maintained by school staff, set clear, specific expectations for their responsibilities and communicate those expectations to them (also to their supervisors). Consider limiting their duties to routine updates and time-sensitive info on specific pages (events, reminders, dates, etc.), and if capacity is expanded in the Public Information Office, having professional communications staff handle higher profile school news and feature stories.

All staff with school site or department webmaster responsibilities should receive initial training upon assumption of the duties (including how to properly post content

and images so that the site remains digitally accessible and mobile responsive), and annual training labs should be conducted to ensure webmasters maintain the requisite knowledge and skills to fulfill their responsibilities, Additional mid-year training for school webmasters could be conducted to help reinforce best practices.

The following are additional best practices for school website maintenance:

- **Perform an initial clean-up** to eliminate outdated information.

- **If available, utilize an expiration feature** so that time-related posts are removed or archived automatically.

- **Establish a baseline of standard information that each school site should have** (by level) so that information is more consistent across buildings. Focus staff on maintaining these areas before expanding school content.

- **Ensure that staff are properly trained in resizing photos** to suit any photo gallery/ photo slider features, or select a design template that uses standard photo sizes.

- **Schedule regular website housekeeping efforts** and provide those with responsibility for content with sufficient time to attend to routine website maintenance and updates.

- **Designate time for the Public Information Office to audit the district and school websites at least annually** (or ideally twice a year, in the summer and after the New Year) to ensure content is current, accurate and complete. The results of the audits should be communicated to the appropriate administrators and webmasters as part of the district's commitment to ensuring a useful and robust website.

Recommendation 5:

Address information overload and redundancy by streamlining and clarifying communication outflow.

In focus groups, CHPS parents expressed frustration about the number and types of platforms they must access and monitor in order to get the information they need. This is a common challenge to many school districts.

- 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 in an effort to keep families informed…but do they need to do this much communication?"

- In recent research by SchoolStatus, results indicate that 50 percent of parents use three or more platforms or tools to communicate with their student's school.

Ironically, information overload is a sign the district is providing a steady outflow of information, but it may not be the information the audience seeks. 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 the charts on pages 16-17 showing the top sources relied upon for information.)

Action Step 5.1

Develop consistent processes for how information is communicated both internally and externally.

Throughout the focus groups, staff reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and their supervisor, and this in turn affects the flow of information to parents and the community. The public information officer should work closely with the Superintendent's Council and principals to clarify the preferred processes for both internal and external communications.

- **Establish guidelines and expectations for internal communications by administrators.** While many staff focus group participants considered communication at the school level to be positive overall, they pointed to some deficiencies in communication between district-level administrators and the schools. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. To ensure that CHPS school leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how they should communicate with internal stakeholders.

This process begins by defining and providing guidelines around internal communications. These guidelines should include:

- Who is responsible for communicating with different employee groups.

- Procedures for how and when important information should be shared.

- The specific communication vehicles to be used to maximize effectiveness and efficiency.

- Tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department-to-school communication.

- Forms and templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.

- Instructions for what information goes into a staff newsletter and what gets pushed out individually by departments or administrators. Ideally, routine and non-emergency notices that are relevant for most/all staff belong in a staff newsletter. Legitimately urgent information pertaining to subgroups can be sent outside of the e-newsletter via email.

- Reminders that communications should include the following whenever appropriate:

  - The rationale behind a decision

  - How a decision or initiative reflects the vision and direction of the district

  - Summaries of important meetings that impacted decisions or changes

  - How a change in district operations or policy will affect staff members' job duties

- **Institute processes that immediately address the communication component when decisions are made or information needs to be shared.** Lack of clarity and

#5

Address information overload and redundancy by streamlining and clarifying communication outflow.

consistency about who is responsible for sharing information with whom can easily impede the flow of communications. This can be easily remedied by adding check boxes—FYI, To Be Shared and Confidential—to meeting agenda items.

Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes

FYI	
To be shared	
Confidential	

The person facilitating each discussion topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If it is marked To Be Shared, then a discussion will be needed to decide "to whom, when and how" the information is to be distributed.

- **Create structures for who is responsible for communicating in various circumstances and how those communications should flow.** Preparation is key to ensuring information is shared quickly and equitably.

  - For news that needs to be shared quickly, determine in advance how those types of communications will flow and who is responsible. At the top of page 71 is an example "communication responsibility

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid for School Closing

Announcement/ Message	Audience	Person Responsible for Communicating	Communication Channel	Release Date/Time
School closed	School Board/ Administrators	Superintendent	Email	When decision is made
School closed	Staff	Human Relations	Email/Text	15 minutes after decision is made
School closed	Parents	Principals	Email/Text	30 minutes after decision is made
School closed	Community	Public Information Office	Website/ Social Media	30 minutes after decision is made

grid" based on a school closing; customize this to your protocols. The most important point is that each notification/announcement should have a clearly designed release sequence that designates who is responsible for pushing information out and when.

- Information that needs to go to all stakeholders should come from the district, not individual school sites. Many parents reported that some schools send out an announcement sooner than others, leading to parents learning information from other parents or on social media rather than from the school their child attends. The best remedy for this is for information that affects all students and families to come directly from the district whenever possible.

- Within the CHPS email client, create email distribution lists of various staff groups (e.g., elementary faculty, science teachers across all grades, all education assistants) and make them accessible to all administrators so that they can send messages directly to intended audiences. Establish a method for keeping these lists

current as staff members change, such as requiring notification from Human Resources to the Technology Department when a staff member is hired or leaves employment.

Action Step 5.2

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

QUICK WIN

The charts on pages 16-17 that show stakeholders' communication preferences provide solid data upon which to create a guide to communication channels such as the sample on the following page. It's important to use this chart not only to see which channels to use, but which channels *not* to use. One of the culprits of information overload is the tendency to send everything on every channel. Provide this guide to any staff who communicate regularly.

Comparing usage data from platforms' internal reporting tools and preference data from the surveys against communications time tracking data (Action Step 2.1) will be helpful.

Example: Communication Channels Ranked by Stakeholders' Preferences

Info. Type	Email	Principals' E-Newsletters	District E-Newsletter	Website	Text	Social Media	Local Media	Call	Power School	Meetings
School closings	#3				#1			#2		
School and district events	#1				#2	#3				

Action Step 5.3

Consider new ways to guide the public on how to access information they are seeking.

QUICK WIN

The auditor heard feedback from numerous participants that finding information and knowing where to look for it is difficult. Consider tactics to provide simplified guidance for stakeholders such as:

- Printed flyers for new family/employee welcome packets

- A user-friendly I Want to … section on the district homepage that is designed to provide more intuitive navigation options for the average user

- An expanded Public Information Office webpage detailing which channels the district uses for different types of information

- Infographics for inclusion in school newsletters

This information could help guide stakeholders, including staff dealing with parents' questions, to the appropriate source of communications.

Find an example of this type of guide, the How We Communicate With Families flyer, from the Lake Stevens (Wash.) School District

available in the Customer Service section of NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) site for members at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Customer-Service.

Action Step 5.4

Make information easier to consume.

Parents want brief, accessible, easy-to-read information from their district and schools. Communicators used to ascribe to the 30-3-30 rule: You had 30 seconds to grab a reader's attention, three minutes to explain the issue and then perhaps your target audience might take 30 minutes to really dig into the details. Now, with the multitude of ways that technology delivers an abundance of information on a 24/7 basis, it is 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 they are 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 the newsletter** 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.

- **Take advantage of features built into email and e-newsletter platforms,** such as Smore, MailChimp or Constant Contact, to disseminate the district and school e-newsletters. The templated interfaces can promote a level of design and format consistency that will help brand the emails as coming from the district. Unlike the district's email client currently used to send the newsletters, these platforms also provide data on open rates and readership and offer user-friendly methods to subscribe and/or update email addresses. Attention should be paid to the title of each email and how the sender's name appears to facilitate easy searching within recipients inboxes. One SCOPE Survey comment pointed out that the district e-newsletter currently comes from "Public Information Office," which is shortened to "Public" when scanning messages, making it difficult to refer back to previous emails.

- **Consider creating 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.

  An example of an effective budget infographic can be found in this one by Chesapeake (Va.) Public

Schools at https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/Infographic-Chesapeake-PS-22-23-Budget.pdf?ver=ly2K0ruq1zccQCkCVJTSUA%3d%3d.

- **Consider producing a communications guide** for principals and administrators that sets clear communication expectations. Two examples follow:
  - Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School District–https://bit.ly/3uoCe8J
  - Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools–https://bit.ly/4a0z0ZF

For additional food for thought, see the related article, "Harvard researchers explain how our brains skim information–and how to actually get people's attention," which appeared in *Fast Company* in September 2023.

Recommendation 6:

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

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

CHPS is not alone in facing the challenge of dealing with misinformation and disinformation. A survey conducted by NSPRA in January 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 systems, data suggests that misinformation and disinformation tend to occur the most around big issues and decisions facing a district. Nearly 70 percent of school

systems dealing with false information note that the information spread was regarding policy-related issues such as regulations. Another 66 percent indicate that false information 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 6.5 provides suggestions on how to handle these situations.)

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

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

Action Step 6.1

Monitor emerging issues.

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

The team should work to identify and discuss

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

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

- How did we become aware of this issue?

- How might the issue impact the district?

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

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

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

Action Step 6.2

Develop brief fact sheets on potentially controversial issues.

QUICK WIN

Brief fact sheets for quick reference on emerging and existing issues can be created as a resource to share with administrators, front-line staff and key communicators. These

#6

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

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.

Action Step 6.3

Build a network of digital ambassadors.

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

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

To put together such a team, consider publicizing the effort and asking for those interested to apply to serve as volunteer frontline communicators. They will be the first to get information and will be asked to

share it over their own networks, providing their own perspectives. Providing in-depth info to those who have the time and interest to absorb detailed information helps spread understanding to those who may be looking for a short-hand explanation from someone they trust. Those selected for the team should participate in an in-depth briefing event, in which key aspects of district operations, finances and pending decisions are reviewed.

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

Following is an example of a district that uses digital ambassadors:

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

Action Step 6.4

Respond quickly to misinformation and disinformation.

A new body of research on misinformation suggests that the approach used to debunk it makes a difference in the efficacy of the correction. According to Professor Ullrich Ecker, a psychological science scholar from the University of Western Australia, 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.

76

- **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 an out-of-state professor or a global drug company executive, even though the local nurse's actual level of expertise on the topic 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.

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 proactively posting information on the CHPS 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 responses that might appear confrontational or targeted at individuals.

Collaborating with the monitoring team described in Action Step 6.1 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, CHPS 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.

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

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

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

Action Step 6.5

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

QUICK WIN

Parents, caregivers and other community members often want more information about student- and staff-related situations than the district is allowed to release.

Educating these stakeholders in advance about privacy laws and the limitations of what the district and schools can disclose will help CHPS leaders to not appear defensive or obstructive as a specific situation is unfolding. The guide should clearly and simply lay out the legal restrictions it is obligated to follow, while explaining that these are established rules that apply to all situations and are not decided based on the details of a specific event.

Share this information annually with parents in back-to-school materials and on the website so stakeholders can be directed to it as needed.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Focus Groups

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

2. What are the areas needing improvement?

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

   3a. How would you describe the school system to someone new to your community?

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

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

   4b. Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?

5. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis (e.g., bomb threat, student misbehavior, employee misconduct, COVID-19, social justice protests)?

   5a. How might the school system improve on that?

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

   6a. What makes you feel that way?

   6b. If not, how would you like to provide your input?

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

Additional Questions: Staff

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

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

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

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

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

Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP

Consultant Auditor

Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP, worked for more than 25 years for the Capital Region Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), an educational services agency, in Albany, NY. She currently works as a public relations and project management consultant.

After starting her BOCES career as a public information specialist in a local school district, Jessica became program manager of the organization's Communications Service, overseeing the day-to-day operations of client-directed services, supervising and coaching staff and providing strategic public relations advice to education leaders throughout New York state. Later, she served BOCES as assistant director of development and engagement, leading high-level, project-based digital initiatives, including several statewide strategic partnerships with the New York State Education Department.

Jessica earned accreditation in public relations (APR) from the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) and is a certified project management professional (PMP). She holds a bachelor's degree in American history from Columbia University in New York City. She began her career as a journalist and as an editor for an education research association.

Jessica served as president of the New York School Public Relations Association (NYSPRA) from 2013 to 2015 and is a two-time NSPRA Gold Medallion Award winner for superior educational public relations programs. She has frequently presented at national conferences for education leaders and communication professionals on topics including building informed consent, communication planning, school budget communications, crisis communications and digital accessibility.

Alyssa Teribury

Audit Assistant and NSPRA Communication Research Specialist

Alyssa Teribury served as an audit assistant for CHPS' communication audit. In addition, as NSPRA's communications research specialist, Alyssa plays a key role in 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.

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.

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