

the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report

Paulding County School District

15948 Derwood Rd., Rockville, MD 20855

301-519-0496 | nspra.org



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Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Paulding County School District (PCSD) 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, PCSD 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 Communications Office staff are dedicated to the continual improvement of PCSD's communication program, including through inviting a communication audit to gain data and insights to inform the development of a communication plan.
  - The School-Community Ambassadors program and postings on social media were consistently cited as ways PCSD is effectively sharing positive messages about the district.
  - There was recognition by multiple focus groups that the Communications Office staff is professional, skilled and

actively involved in the promotion of PCSD.

- Employees expressed a high degree of satisfaction with various aspects of communication, particularly in regard to trust, ease of reading and accuracy.

- **Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program**
  - PCSD desires but does not yet have a formal communication plan to ensure long-range communication efforts that support the district's goals and objectives are incorporated into the department's daily activities.
  - Parents expressed frustration and confusion by the many digital platforms used to communicate with parents.
  - Based on comments from focus groups, interviewees and survey open-ended comments, PCSD appears to be reactive to situations that would benefit from planned and deliberate proactive communication.
  - Combating mis/disinformation is a prevalent concern.
  - The website's deficiencies in functionality and navigation are sources of frustration for stakeholders.

- **Recommendations.** Based on analysis of the research findings, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing PCSD's communication program.
  1. Develop a comprehensive communication plan.
  2. Create organizational structures to support the communication function.
  3. Review the number of parent and staff communication tools and consider a more streamlined approach.
  4. Take advantage of the transition to a new website platform to incorporate improvements.
  5. Develop and execute a plan to combat misinformation and disinformation.
  6. Enhance communication to better serve the needs and interests of diverse and non-English-speaking families.
  7. Elevate Board of Education communications and outreach.
  8. Strategically enhance PCSD's social media presence.

  For each recommendation, practical action steps based on current best practices are included in the report.

  Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in PCSD, not just the Communications Department. **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

PCSD is the 11th largest school district in Georgia and operates under the guidance of the elected Paulding County Board of Education and board-appointed superintendent, Steve Barnette.

The district is located in the metropolitan Atlanta area and provides public education for Pre-K (Special Education) and Kindergarten through 12th-grade students. The district has 19 elementary schools, nine middle schools and five high schools, which includes a college and career academy.

The current racial/ethnic breakdown of PCSD students, as reported by the Georgia Department of Education, is as follows:

- 48 percent white
- 31 percent Black/African American
- 13 percent Hispanic
- 6 percent two or more races
- 1 percent Asian

The district expects to educate 31,765 students during the 2023-2024 school year, with an increase of 464 students over the previous year (a 1.5 percent increase). From 2013 to 2023, enrollment has increased by 3,051 students, or 10.8 percent.

Despite the increase in enrollment, PCSD has not experienced a corresponding increase in funding. Local funding is based solely on property tax values, and PCSD is identified as a "low-wealth" school district due to a limited commercial and industrial tax base and the large number of school-aged children per household. In 2022, per-pupil expenditure was $11,254, with only 18 of the 180 districts in the state having lower per-pupil expenditures.

The Board of Education recently earned recognition as an exemplary school board for the fourth consecutive year, and Communication and Engagement is one of the five PCSD Strategic Goal Areas in the district's strategic plan. Performance objectives for this goal include:

- Communicate efficiently, effectively and transparently with all district stakeholders
- Improve communication and access of information to our diverse populations
- Facilitate partnerships between the community and the school district

About the Communications Office

Public Information Officer Jay Dillon has been a school communications professional for over 20 years, first consulting for PCSD before being hired as the lead of the department. He

reports to Chief of Staff Jason Gregaydis. The Communications Office has two additional staff members: Digital Communications Manager Greg Hannon and Communications Coordinator Nikki Robinson.

As stated on the Communications Office webpage, "Promoting and maintaining confidence in our public education system is an ongoing challenge met not only by improved instructional programs, but also by sound communication practices that increase public awareness, understanding and support for public education. Effective communication practices provide public relations and a forum for sharing ideas, all of which ultimately benefit the students of Paulding County by increasing parent and community engagement."

The office is formally charged with:

- Supporting, planning and carrying out a communication program among the district, its schools and the community.
- Supporting, planning, and carrying out a communication program between the district and its employees.
- Assisting with the publicity for district programs, activities and achievements.
- Training local schools to implement programs to facilitate telling their story and effectively engaging stakeholders.
- Assessing the public's knowledge of and attitude toward its schools and using this information to help plan the communications program.
- Providing the appropriate liaison services between the school district and news media.
- Developing clear messaging for stakeholders in times of crisis or emergency.

In addition to these overarching responsibilities, the Communications Office has responsibility for the following:

- Providing support to the Paulding Education Foundation, a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization
- Providing support to Partners in Education, a partnership between businesses/ organizations and the district/schools
- Collaborating with the Paulding Family Connection, a state-sponsored organization that links local government and non-profit agencies with PCSD schools and students
- Leading the "Get Paulding Reading" initiative, part of the district's community engagement effort, including having a PCSD representative on their board of directors

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 to "Engage. Inspire. Prepare" and its vision: "To prepare ALL students for success today and tomorrow."



The result is a report that will provide PCSD 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 Communications Office submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *News from the Board*, fliers, teacher of the year booklet, website and social media banner designs, etc.). The auditors 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 Evaluations (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 PCSD from Aug. 23 through Sept. 4, 2023. It included questions regarding the following:

- How people are currently getting information and how they prefer to receive it.
- How informed they are in key areas such as leader decisions, district plans and district finances.
- Perceptions 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:**
  - 983 surveys completed
  - ±3.1 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- **Faculty/Staff Survey:**
  - 468 surveys completed
  - ± 4.5 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)
- **Community Survey:**
  - 21 surveys completed
  - ± 21.4 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met)

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

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 PCSD's 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. On Sept. 18-20, 2023, auditors met with 18 focus groups and conducted five interviews with the superintendent, public information officer, communications coordinator, digital communications manager and the executive director of the Paulding Education Foundation.

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 school parents
- Secondary school parents

- Racially and ethnically diverse parents
- Parents of students with special needs
- Students
- Elementary school teachers
- Middle school teachers
- High school teachers
- Support staff
- Paraprofessionals
- Administrative assistants/office personnel
- Non-teaching professionals
- Supervisors
- Assistant principals
- Principals
- Partners in Education
- Board members
- Chief officers

Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

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

- Elise Shelton, Lead Consulting Auditor
- Tom Scheidel, APR, Consulting Auditor
- Sheba Clarke, Audit Assistant
- Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR
- Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR
- Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR

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

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Paulding County Board of Education, superintendent, chief of staff and public information officer, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. When reviewing the report, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Communications Office** 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 PCSD's communication program to the next level.
- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.
- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that PCSD 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 auditors' analysis,** and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

Next Steps

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

Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.
- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority,** but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Communications Office.** NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the Communications 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 Communications Office 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 PCSD 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.

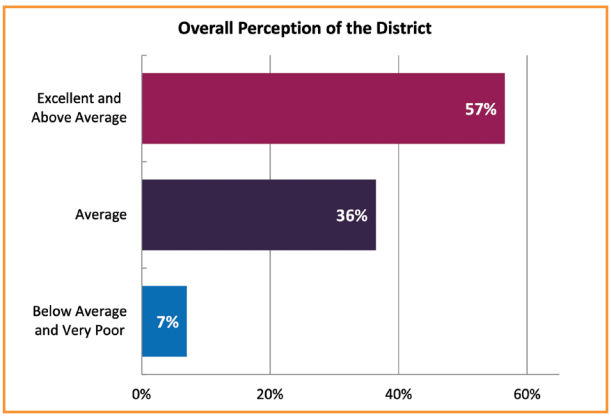
Key Findings

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

- Collectively, focus group participants and SCOPE Survey respondents agree that the district hires quality teachers and staff.
- Focus group participants and survey respondents commented on the district's community atmosphere, while also acknowledging its rapid evolution into a larger district.
- As shown to the right, when SCOPE Survey respondents were asked to rate their overall perception of the district, 57 percent rated it as "excellent" or "above average."



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

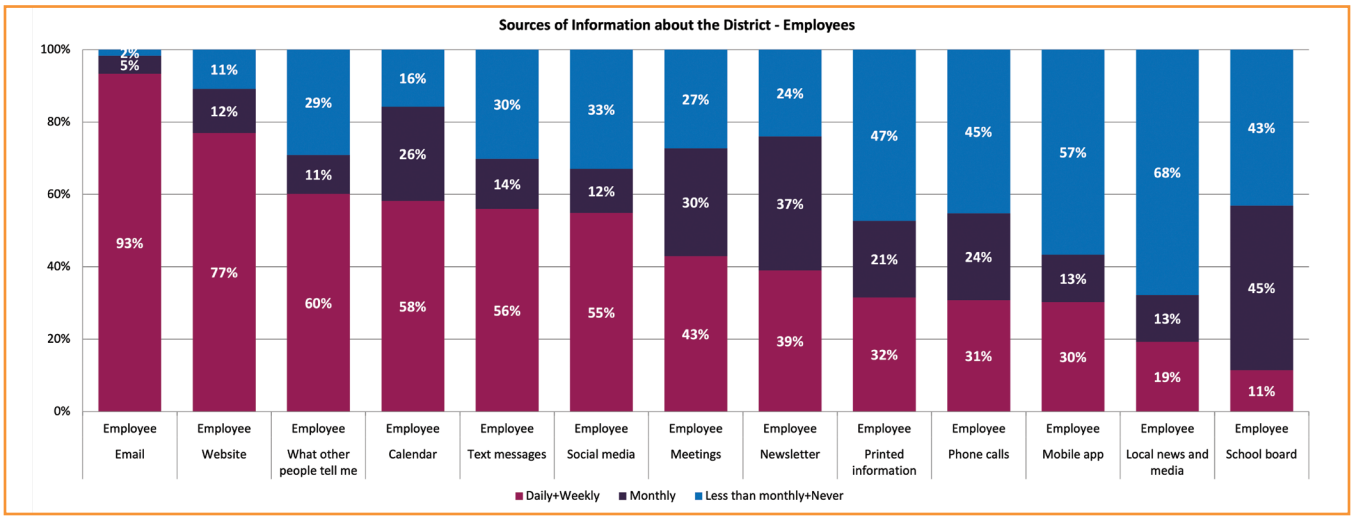
Overall Perception of the District	PCSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	3.9	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	3.6	3.8	2.6	4.3
Community	3.5	3.3	2.1	4.3

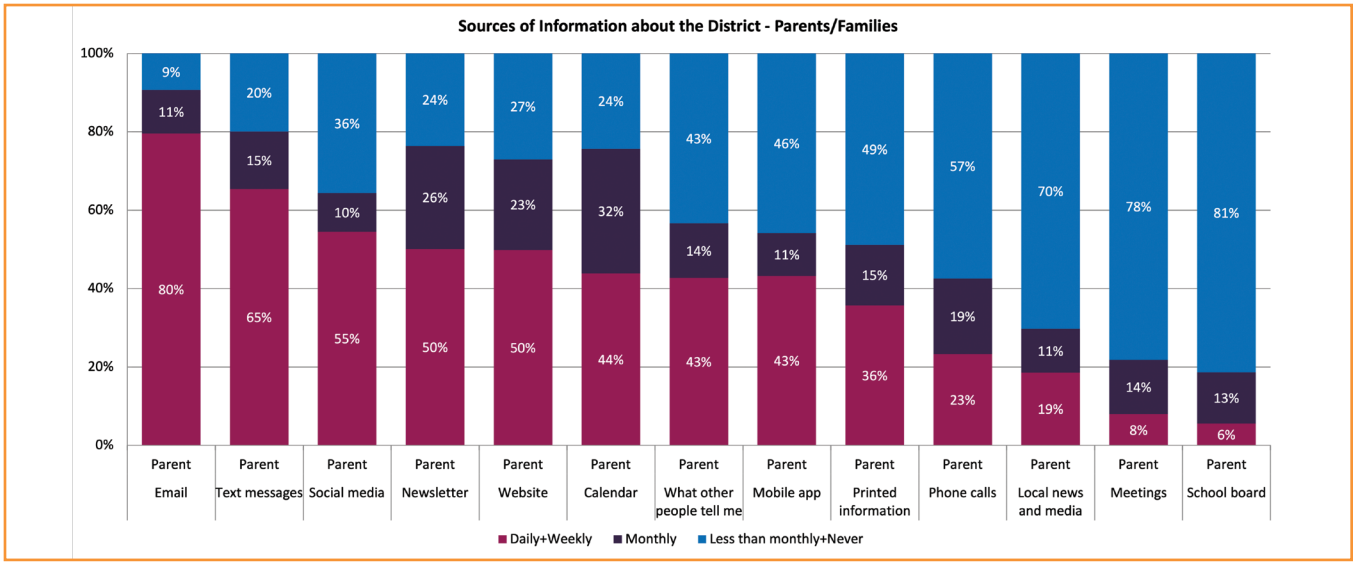
- One of the PCSD's five strategic goal areas is Communication and Engagement, with specific targeted objectives and measurements that reflect the district's commitment to effective communication.
- Internal focus groups observed that the superintendent is visible and engaged with internal stakeholder groups

- PCSD graduation rates and student academic achievement were identified as sources of pride for parents, staff and school community partners.
- PCSD is recognized by the state as a "low-wealth" district due to a limited commercial and industrial tax base. Staff and school administrators in focus groups repeatedly referred to this designation.
- With a burgeoning student population of 31,765 students (a growth rate of 1.5 percent or 464 new students this year), facility space is limited. Staff focus groups uniformly pointed out the need for more classroom space and additional hires.
- Community infrastructure limitations create traffic challenges in and around larger schools/ campuses, with parents, students, teachers and staff particularly associating this issue with schools in the North Paulding area.

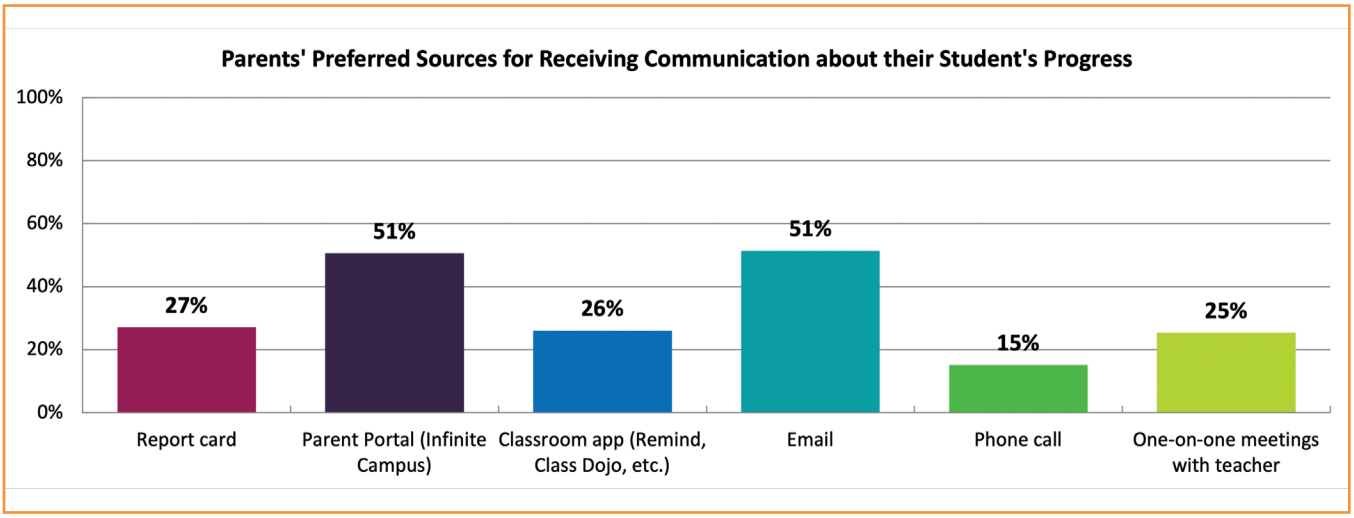
Communication Sources and Preferences

- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked how often they use various sources for information about the school district. As shown below, email is the most widely used source of information for staff and parents. (Community participation in the survey was too low to draw inferences.)

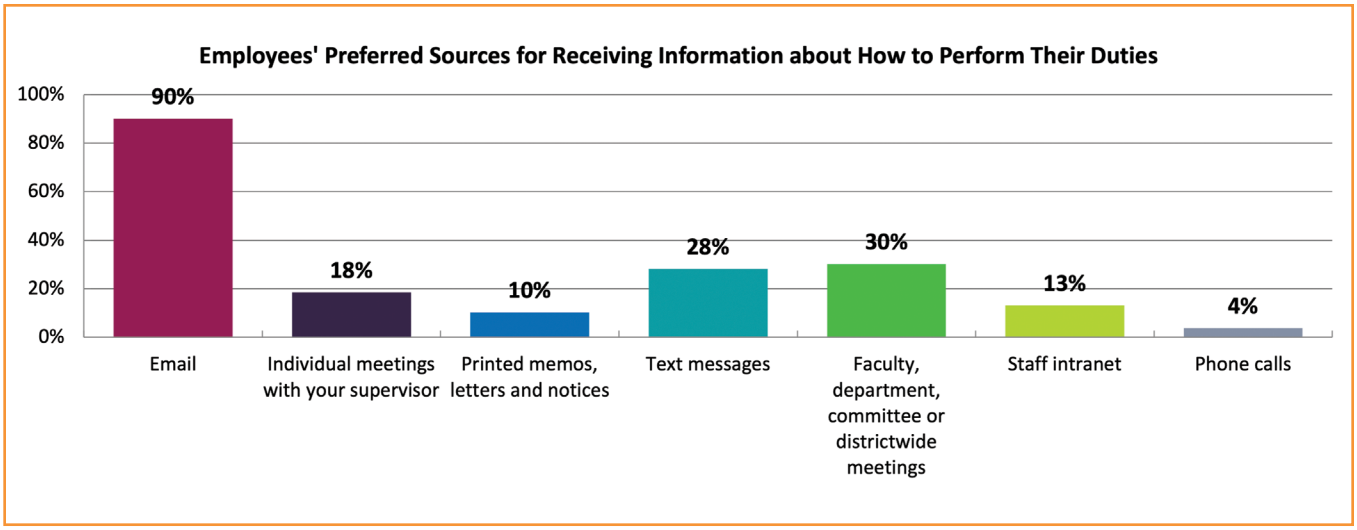




- Consistently, focus group participants cited the School-Community Ambassadors program as a win for the district, particularly in regard to the improvements made in the district's social media content over the past year. This is reflected in the SCOPE Survey with 55 percent of parents and staff indicating that they use social media to get information about the district on a daily or weekly basis.
- When parents were asked to identify their preferred methods for receiving communication about their student's progress and how to support their learning, email and the parent portal were rated the highest.



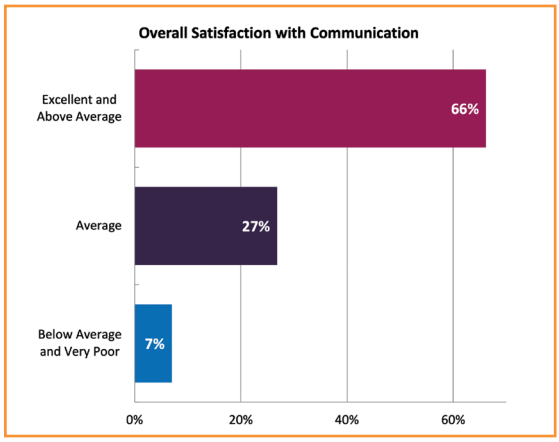
- When staff were asked to identify their preferred methods for receiving information to help them perform their duties and support student learning, email received the highest rating by far.



- The student focus group cited school-based websites, apps and school announcements as their preferred sources of information.
- Staff focus groups and interview participants addressed concerns about misinformation regarding PCSD, much of it coming from online sources. Staff said they "knew better" than to address inaccurate statements being made.

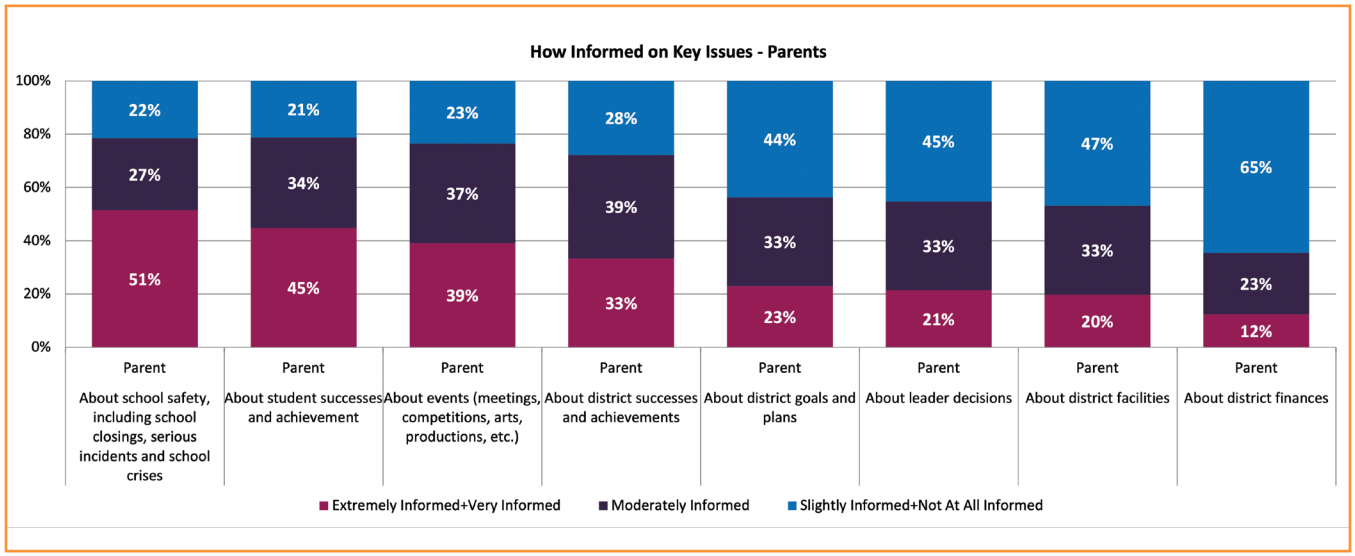
Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- As shown to the right, when SCOPE Survey participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with communication, the majority rated the district as excellent or above average.
- As shown on the SCOPE Scorecard, when these results are translated to a five-point scale in order to compare them with the results of districts nationwide who have participated in the SCOPE Survey, the results were as follows, reflecting results at or above the national average for each stakeholder group:

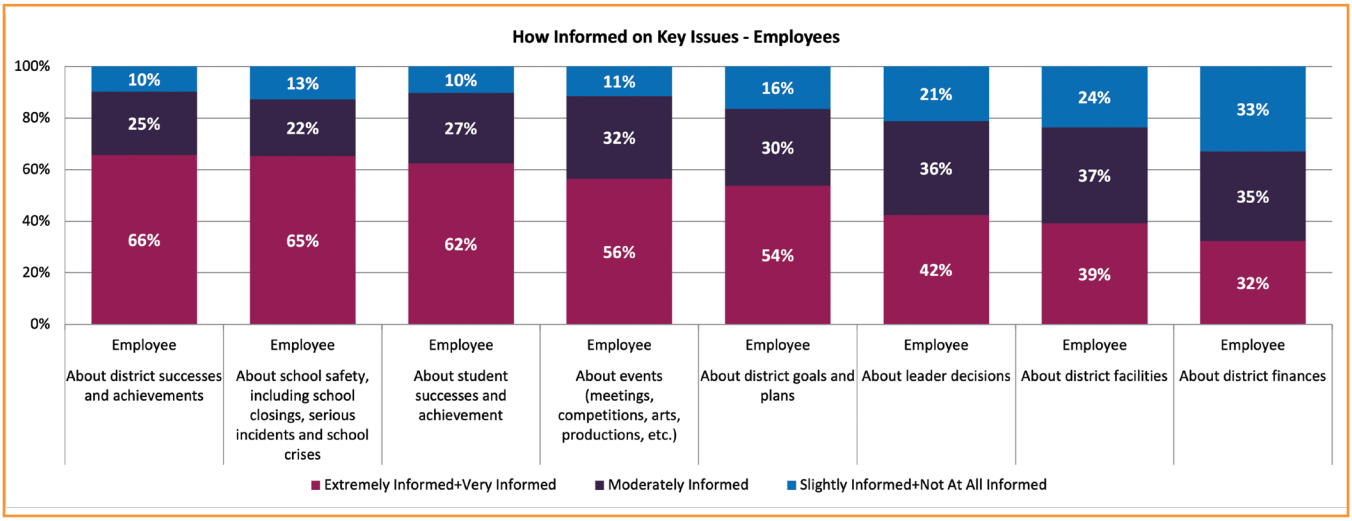


Overall Perception of District Communications	PCSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
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Parents/Families	3.8	3.8	3.1	4.2
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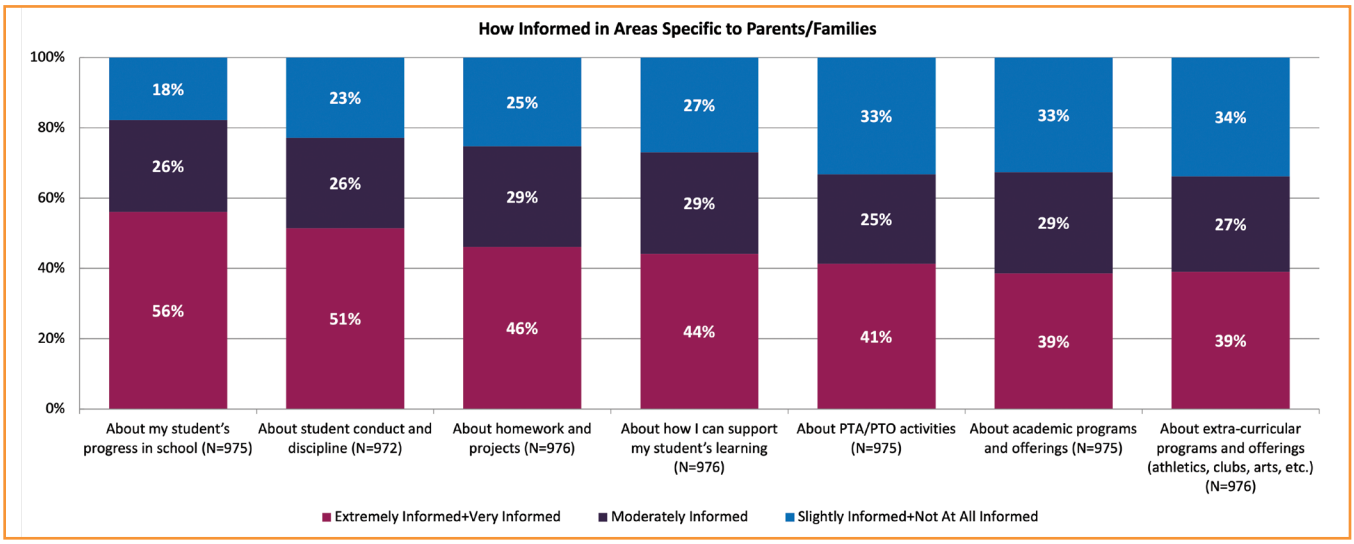
- As shown in the following chart, when parents and families were asked to rate how informed they are on eight different topics, they gave the highest marks to information about school safety (including school closings, serious incidents and school crises), with 51 percent saying they felt extremely or very informed and 27 percent saying they feel moderately informed.



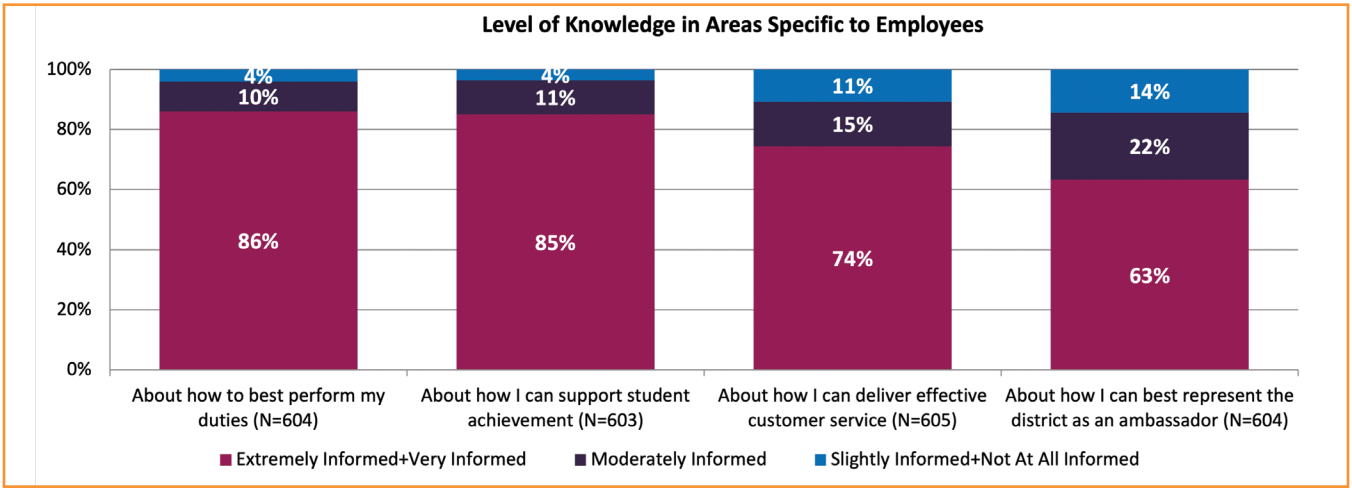
- As shown in the following chart, when staff members were asked to rate how informed they are on these same eight topics, they gave the highest marks to information about district successes and achievements, with 66 percent saying they felt extremely or very informed and 25 percent saying they feel moderately informed.



- When parents were asked to rate how informed they feel on topics *pertaining to their role as a parent*, the highest ratings were for "about my student's progress in school" and "about student conduct and discipline.

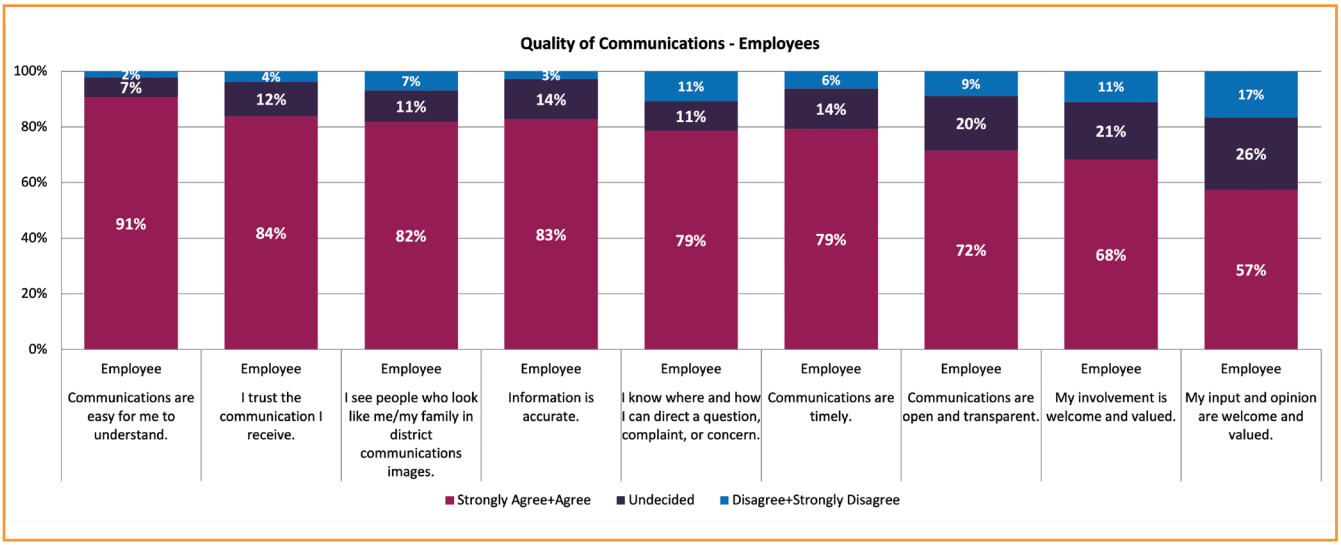


- When staff were asked to rate how informed they feel on topics *pertaining to their role as an employee*, the highest ratings were for "how to best perform my duties" and "how I can support student achievement."

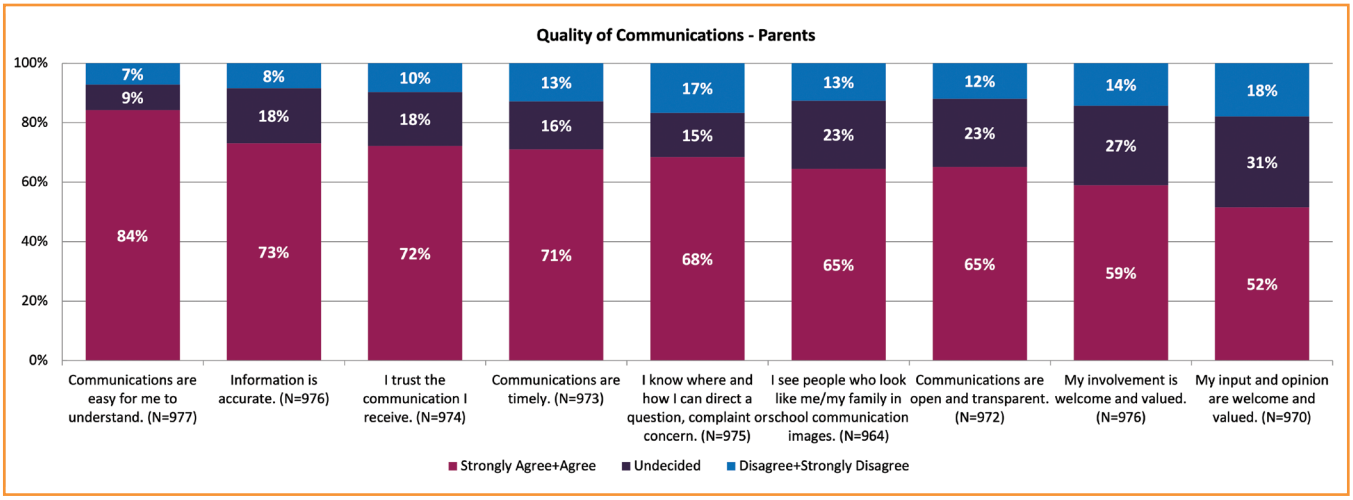


- Parents and employees in focus groups noted they would like to have a better understanding of district finances. SCOPE Survey results reflect this need, particularly with parents, where 65 percent said they are slightly or not at all informed about district finances. In open-ended comments and in a focus group for school-business partners (Partners in Education), community members noted that they would like easier access to information regarding PCSD financial information and facility improvements.

- On the SCOPE Survey, employees were asked to rate their satisfaction with the quality of communication in key areas and gave the highest ratings to "communications are easy for me to understand" and "I trust the communication I receive."



- On the SCOPE Survey, parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the quality of communication in key areas and gave the highest ratings to "communications are easy for me to understand" and "information is accurate."



- **Staff and parent focus group participants frequently praised the work of the Communications Office.**
- **For the most part, board members reported that they feel well-informed and are provided with timely information.** They also said they know where to go if they need information.
- **PCSD has an outline of a communication plan designed to address the district's communication strategic goal and three of its objectives with measurable key performance indicators.** However, the Communications Office and district leadership acknowledge there needs to be a more robust plan, which they expect to develop with the findings of this audit.
- **In focus groups and in the SCOPE Survey open-ended comments, parents and staff expressed concern that district and school communications are often reactive to a current situation or crisis and that more could be done to "get ahead of issues."** As an example, one parent noted: "Most times information is given at the last minute. For example: two days before school starts we receive an email about the issues with transportation. We never get a clear answer on how it's being addressed. Student buses are still filled to capacity."
- **Frustration was expressed by parents in focus groups and in survey comments that schools and teachers are using multiple platforms to communicate.** At the time of the audit visit, teachers used ClassDojo, Remind123, SeeSaw, Canvas, Elemental and the student portal in addition to text, email, social media and Infinite Campus. Students also addressed confusion over teachers using multiple apps.
    - One parent commented in the survey that, "Parents haven't been taught all the different places you have to go to get information. In my opinion, there needs to be one site where we can go to see grades, do assignments, and get info on classes, schools, or events. It feels like teachers are allowed to use whatever system they like to do things (i.e., Remind, ClassDojo, Clever, Quizzes), and we are supposed to know where to go to find the info we need to help our children.

- Another parent said in a focus group, "I feel like there needs to be more education for the parents on how to use apps to keep up with their kids."
- Another parent noted: "Communication is inconsistent. Sometimes I get a text, sometimes a phone call, sometimes an email, sometimes a message through an app. Sometimes information is put on Facebook, sometimes on a sign or flier at the school, sometimes on the school website, sometimes a flier sent home, sometimes through the parent portal. Unless I check all of them every single day, I miss information. It's all too much to keep track of. Fliers that come home are usually on events only a day or two away, with no contact information for questions. Why not standardize for efficiency?"
- A staff member who is also a parent commented that they do not use social media and their child's school often sends out information about school events only through social media. Therefore the family sometimes misses events they would have liked to participate in.

- **The frequency of emails and recorded messages at the school and district levels drew some frustration from parents in the open-ended comments on the survey:**
  - "There are so many emails I don't know which ones are important. I don't open them all and then miss stuff I should have opened."
  - "I feel there is 'over-communication,' to the point that I feel overwhelmed by all of it. I understand that the intent is to have the information available and to use a multi-modal approach that will be effective in keeping everyone informed (regardless of an individual's preferred method of communication); however, information is coming in so frequently and from so many different means that it can be very time consuming to sift through such a large volume of it."

- **The challenges of communicating with non-English speaking parents and students were brought up in nearly all staff focus groups.** Focus group participants shared a concern for providing adequate translation services to students and parents.
  - Responding to the Spanish-translated survey, one parent wrote in Spanish: "If you can send forms or notes in English and Spanish it would be much better for the Hispanic race because not all of us are fluent in the language."
  - Another Spanish-speaking parent wrote: "Being new to this country in this educational system is a little limiting for me, despite speaking English I still don't feel fluent enough for some things and for that reason, everything is slower. As a mother, I have doubts and questions but slowly I will learn to go to the right person."
  - An English-speaking parent noted: "For some people, it's the language barrier. I've noticed a lot of Hispanic people who have a hard time understanding when and where to talk to a district person or where to go for meetings. Some of the parents have a hard time speaking English. Maybe the district could bring a communicator for Spanish-speaking Americans."
  - While the website has contact information for parents of ELL students, it is in a three-year-old PowerPoint (completely in English) that must be downloaded from the ESOL link under the main "Academics" tab.
  - At the time of this audit, PCSD offered parents the following translation applications and services: Talking Points, SayHi, RTT Mobile Interpretation (or ELSA lite), Canvas, Lexia, and MYON.

- **Other district-, school- and department-level communication concerns frequently expressed in focus groups included the following topics:**
  - There is a lack of consistency in messaging among schools. Parents with multiple children said they sometimes receive different messages from different schools on the same topic, and staff say information coming from the district is sometimes interpreted differently by different schools.
  - Teachers expressed frustration over receiving multiple, and sometimes lengthy, newsletters from multiple departments.
  - Teachers who are parents commented that they sometimes receive information about district happenings through the parent communication channels before they hear about it as a staff member.
  - While teachers and other PCSD staff shared in focus groups that they appreciate the synopsis of board meetings included in *News from the Board*, parents and community members said they don't have access to a summary of board actions and must watch the entire board meeting on the PCSD YouTube channel to learn what happened.
- **In disaggregating survey data and from focus group discussions, it was evident that there are three distinct challenges for communications that are of concern within the PCSD community:**
  - Enrollment growth in the North Paulding area and how it is impacting class sizes, traffic and staffing
  - Lack of internet availability in some areas of the county
  - Increasing population of non-English speakers

Digital Communication Tools

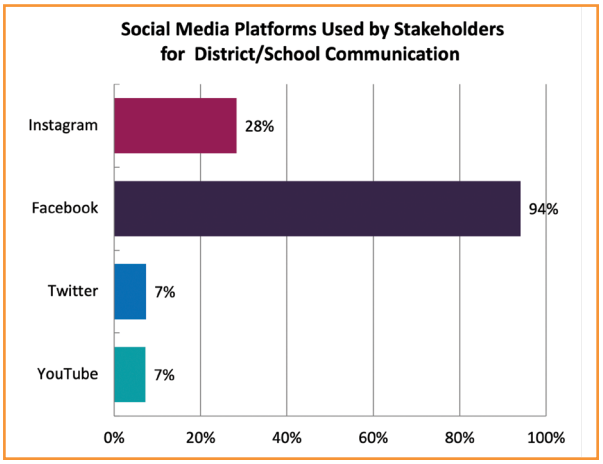
- ## District/School Websites
  - The website designs are clean and professional with well-designed pages.
  - The website is responsive, in that it adjusts the content presentation based on the device that is being used.
  - The WebAIM website accessibility tool was used to assess the PCSD district website homepage. This tool checks for items that may be difficult for users with disabilities to access. PCSD's result showed relatively few issues. Only seven significant errors (e.g., missing form label, empty link) and three contrast errors (e.g., low contrast screen colors) were identified. There were also 25 alerts, which are less serious than errors, for things such as redundant links, small text and links to PDF files.
  - The district website and school sub-sites are currently on the Blackboard platform and are managed by the Communication Office's digital communications manager. With Blackboard's recent acquisition by Finalsite, PCSD will be moving to a new Finalsite website after review of this audit.
  - The only analytics currently available are the number of total visits to the channels, but it is anticipated that the switch to Finalsite will provide much better website analytics tools.

- The following are comments representing frequent themes from focus groups, interviews and the SCOPE Survey about the district website:
  - "Everything is there. If you can't find it, you're not looking hard enough."
  - "Website navigation is difficult and it is sometimes hard to find specific information."
  - "The design could be updated to look more modern while also supporting a better user experience."
  - "Current events, sports information, grade by grade information, it's rarely up to date. The directory shouldn't be so hard to get to. Pictures with the names would be nice."
- Each of the 33 district school buildings has its own website. These sites were mentioned in focus groups as one of the primary sources of information, in some cases, even above the PCSD home site. There were a few parent focus group comments that school websites were not up-to-date with information.
- In focus groups, employees indicated that they have reasons to access the intranet regularly, but are frustrated with its structure and navigation. A common theme was, "The information you need is there, but it isn't always where you expect it to be." Other common observations are represented by the following:
  - "The staff list doesn't include titles, so it's not very helpful."
  - "It's messy, and there is a lot of old stuff."
  - "HR materials are hard to find. I struggle with it."

District/School Social Media

- The following social media platforms are utilized by PCSD:
  - The district's Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/pauldingboe/) has 26,000 followers. The average engagement rate on the most highly viewed posts so far in the 2023-24 school year is 2.8 percent. This can be compared to the 2020 average engagement rate for education posts of 0.15 percent. A "good social media engagement rate" overall is considered 2.5 percent.
  - The district's Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/pauldingcountyschooldistrict/) has 720 followers. The average engagement rate is 6.46 percent from October 2022 through October 2023. This can be compared to the 2020 average engagement rate for education posts of 2.56 percent. In the student focus group, students noted they primarily follow the district's Instagram account. The postings that appear to engage the most followers are about student activities and recognitions.
  - The district's Twitter/X account (https://twitter.com/pauldingboe/) has 8,664 followers. The average engagement rate during the week of Sept. 1-15, 2023 was 0.06 percent, which matches the 2020 average engagement rate for education posts.

- As shown previously, social media is heavily relied upon for information about the district, with 55 percent of respondents indicating they use social media for information daily or weekly and 23 percent indicating they use it monthly. It is the third-highest-rated source of information for parents and the sixth-highest-rated source of information for staff.
- As shown to the right, Facebook is the dominant social media platform used by stakeholders for information about PCSD.
- PCSD's official social media pages are managed by the communications coordinator.
- School-level social media pages are managed by School-Community Ambassadors with oversight from the communications coordinator. All schools have at least one social media platform and many have three.



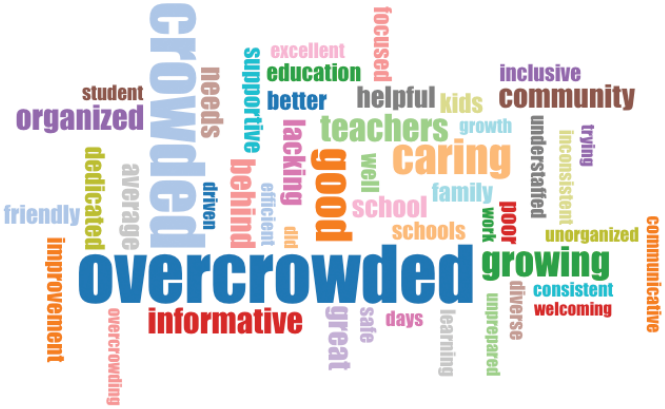
- The district re-posts school content without any additional commentary.
- Focus group participants consistently shared very positive feedback about the district's use of social media. Representative comments are as follows:
  - The posts are "community-oriented and morale-boosting."
  - "Social media contributes to promoting equity and visibility for all."
  - "They really do a good job with Facebook."
- The landing pages for each of the platforms are consistently branded with the PCSD logo. Photos, graphics and video are frequently used and the copy is appropriate.
- Content across the district's three platforms appears to be basically the same as what is posted on the district website and is primarily used for announcements and information. Messaging is not differentiated by platform.
- In the event of emergency communications, the public information officer is designated as the clearinghouse for information.
- There is minimal formal regulation of the use of social media in PCSD, and there are no specific policies or guidance documents regarding the use of social media by board members, staff or students. The Communications Office does not currently have a social media-related goal and/or objective, and there currently are no rules of engagement posted on any of the social media platforms.
- During staff and parent focus groups, auditors were told that board members regularly engage with one another and the public on social media. Words used by focus group participants to describe these posts were "entertaining," "uncomfortable" and "embarrassing."
- Due to a lack of internet availability in parts of the county, parents and staff are concerned that communication sent only by social media is not being received.

- **District/School Video Channels**
  - The district's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/c/PauldingCountySchoolDistrict/videos) has 1,450 followers.
  - Analytics provided for 2022 indicated there were 15,765 video views with 1,967 hours of watch time. The average view duration was 7:29. The highest viewership in recent months was a 20-minute piece—"PCSD School Safety Conversation"—with 622 views.
  - Every board meeting is live-streamed and posted. Prior to the start of a live board meeting, there are about 30 minutes of a silent slideshow promoting PCSD online tools. Other videos broadcast on the district channel include student activities and recognitions, employee recognitions and messages from the superintendent. Videos were also used to provide public information on the recent local option sales tax ballot issue (E-SPLOST).
  - The digital communications manager has videography as an add-on role with little time to dedicate to production. Other than E-SPLOST pieces, videos are simply produced, usually as a recording of a meeting.

Word that Best Describes the District: Faculty/Staff



Word that Best Describes the District: Parents/Families



Word that Best Describes the District: Community Members



SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) and external opportunities (O) and threats (T)—known as a SWOT analysis—affecting the ability of PCSD 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	• PCSD is a high-achieving district. • District leaders and Communications Office staff are dedicated to continuous improvement in PCSD's communication program. • There is stakeholder trust in district communications. • The School-Community Ambassador program is widely recognized as a vital communications link. • There is internal recognition of the PCSD Communications Department as strong and vibrant.	• Stakeholders are concerned that the district is reactive to situations as they arise. • Parents are overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive and the multitude of platforms used to deliver it. • Staff believe that communication with them is sometimes inconsistent. • The current website structure is difficult to navigate. • Employees are frustrated with the level of language translation resources available to communicate with non-English-speaking parents and families.

	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
EXTERNAL	• There is much pride in PCSD from parents and the community with a desire to have more knowledge about financial and facility issues. • Voters have supported past district budget needs through E-SPLOST elections. • Paulding County has limited businesses and industries with which to partner, creating a reliance on the Paulding Education Foundation for grants and the Partners in Education for smaller scale collaborations. • Stakeholders want to be informed of Board of Education decisions.	• The fiscal constraints of being a low-wealth district may impact the resources available for communications. • A fast-growing student and family population makes communicating effectively increasingly challenging. • There is an increasing number of non-English-speaking students and families. • Misinformation from online sources creates confusion and erodes trust. • Internet access is lacking in parts of the county, which can cause a communication disconnect when online tools are depended upon.

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 auditors to identify strengths and weaknesses of PCSD's 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 is the ability to compare local 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 = Highly informed**
   - **4 = Very informed**
   - **3 = Informed**
   - **2 = Somewhat informed**
   - **1 = Not informed**
2. **When participants were asked to rate *their level of agreement with* specific statements, they responded using the following scale:**
   - **5 = Strongly Agree**
   - **4 = Agree**
   - **3 = Neutral**
   - **2 = Disagree**
   - **1 = Strongly Disagree**
3. **When participants were asked to provide ratings about their *perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications,* they responded using the following scale:**
   - **5 = Excellent**
   - **4 = Very Good**
   - **3 = Average**
   - **2 = Below Average**
   - **1 = Poor**

In reviewing the SCOPE Scorecard for PCSD, keep in mind that the district met or exceeded confidence interval targets for both parent and staff responses to the SCOPE Survey and therefore there is a higher level of confidence in those results. PCSD did not meet the target for community responses, and *due to the lower levels of their participation there is a lower level of confidence in the community results*.

SCOPE Scorecard

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

**Due to lower levels of community participation in the SCOPE Survey, there is a lower level of confidence in the community results than in the staff and parents/families results.*

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 (CFAs).

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

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

Benchmarking against the rubrics 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 PCSD's communication program compares to national 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.

Assessment

For each critical function area, the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* identifies program components that can be assessed to determine in which category a communication program falls, using the following definitions.

- **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.

When reflecting on the PCSD communication program in light of the national benchmarks, auditors found it to be emerging or nearly established for CFAs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 and fully established for CFAs 5 and 6.

The Recommendations in this report provide insight and advice that will help the PCSD communication program progress from its current benchmark status, as assessed by the auditors, to the next level in each area. For more details on these national benchmarks, find the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023.

Recommendations

Having reviewed district materials, conducted quantitative research and facilitated in-person focus groups with various PCSD stakeholder groups, it is evident to the auditors that PCSD and its Communications Office have accomplished a great deal toward building a solid communication program based on best practices.

As the district grows in student population and in diversity, a robust and multi-level approach to communication is necessary, and the first step in the process will be to develop a comprehensive plan that can address the issues of consistency, accuracy and timeliness, while ensuring stakeholder engagement grows.

Key to accomplishing these and other goals will be ensuring that the Communications Office is well-staffed and duties and responsibilities are clearly delineated and assigned.

The following recommendations are designed to assist PCSD and its Communications Office in seizing these opportunities and addressing the challenges identified in the Key Findings and SWOT Analysis. They are listed in a suggested order of priority and are accompanied by action steps that provide tactical ideas for how they might be accomplished. However, the district may choose to address these recommendations through tactics other than those outlined here.

Some of these recommendations can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. Generally speaking, a district should not try to address more than two to three recommendations each school year, while also continuing to deliver existing programs and services. This is a long-term effort, and new communication components will need to be introduced as budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive communication plan.
2. Create organizational structures to support the communication function.
3. Review the number of parent and staff communication tools and consider a more streamlined approach.
4. Take advantage of the transition to a new website platform to incorporate improvements.
5. Develop and execute a plan to combat misinformation and disinformation.
6. Enhance communication to better serve the needs and interests of diverse and non-English-speaking families.
7. Elevate Board of Education communications and outreach.
8. Strategically enhance PCSD's social media presence.

Recommendation 1:

Develop a comprehensive communication plan.

PCSD serves a wide geographic area with 33 school buildings, nearly 32,000 students and many diverse stakeholder groups among their students' families, their staff and the external community. There is a great deal of information to share daily about the district, its schools and its students, but PCSD communicators know that simply generating information does not constitute an effective communication strategy. Thus their aim in having NSPRA conduct a communication audit was to further the Communications Office staff's process of developing a comprehensive and strategic communication plan.

The PCSD Communications Office was a one-person department until two additional staff members were added in 2022. In contrast, many medium-sized school systems of 10,000 – 25,000 students have teams of between 2-7, according to a 2022 representative survey of NSPRA members. PCSD has successfully leveraged the skill sets of its relatively small communications team, but the creation of a strategic communication plan will help maximize their efforts and ensure both routine and long-term communication initiatives support broader district goals and objectives.

The team is already adept at developing and implementing mini communication plans to guide specific district efforts. One recent example is the plan for promoting community awareness of the E-SPLOST referendum, which resulted in 76 percent voter approval. Much like a single recipe in a large cookbook, mini communication plans for specific initiatives should fall within the framework of a holistic, year-round strategic communication plan and support achievement of that wider plan's goals.

Following are action steps that will support PCSD in its development of a comprehensive communication plan. Once fully developed, the plan will position PCSD to incorporate more communication best practices into every aspect of its communications program, at all levels. This strategic approach will ensure topics are addressed proactively and effectively, thereby maintaining stakeholders' confidence and trust.

Action Step 1.1

Follow traditional, proven public relations planning principles and practices.

A communication plan with clear goals, measurable objectives and strategies will maximize the number of stakeholders who are receiving information and thus impact their attitudes, beliefs or actions as a result. There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan but following the four-step process known by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement, evaluate) 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 to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of all district communications.

Research

Research (R) and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize relevant, top-line research findings in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit Report, 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. When developing a strategic communication plan, it is important to research all existing and regular communication and engagement efforts so that it can be determined where (and if) they fit into the overall plan.

Following are some additional data sources that might be tapped 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)

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

#1

Develop a comprehensive communication plan.

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 begins to come to life. This is the heavy-lifting phase of creating the communication plan, but completing the following steps will pay big dividends for the district.

- **Develop Goals and 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 the outcomes desired, stated in a way that can be measured later, which builds trust by establishing accountability.

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

  Objective: "By the end of the 2024-25 school year, the percentage of parents/families that rate PCSD communications as excellent will increase to 75 percent from 64 percent.

- **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, and easier for communications staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness.

  For example, if the measurable objective is for more stakeholders to believe that PCSD communications are excellent, a strategy and related tactics might include:

  Strategy: Develop mini strategic communication plans for each major initiative being undertaken by the district to ensure proactive communications are incorporated into each effort.

  Each of these plans might employ the following tactics.

  - The schedule and communication channels (e-newsletters, social media, print materials, community engagement activities) to be utilized to provide information in advance of decisions or changes being made.
  - Opportunities for virtual and/or in-person community engagement so stakeholders have the opportunity to ask questions, provide input and participate in decision-making (when possible).
  - The development of fact sheets and/or webpages for employees with information about each initiative so they are prepared to share accurate information with the community.

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

  Key Message: "Our community deserves to be consistently and proactively provided with the information they need to understand and participate in our processes and decisions."

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

  - Parents, broken down by school building, home language, level of active involvement, etc.
  - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals.
  - Business and community partners such as civic and faith-based community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, and real estate agents.
  - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislators.
  - Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children enrolled in PCSD 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 to implement planned tactics. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:
  - Equipment, software and subscriptions
  - Materials and supplies
  - Printing and duplicating
  - Print and digital advertising
  - Professional development
- **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of implementation (i.e., summative evaluation), the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to see if it needs modification (i.e., formative evaluation).
- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the Communications Office; with a small staff dedicated solely to communications, other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. It is vital to ensure each PCSD team member understands their roles and responsibilities for meeting the district's communication objectives.

As PCSD 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

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?

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 RPIE process because the research and planning phases will have helped to identify what needs to be done, when, by whom and with what tools and resources, along with a timeline.

Evaluate

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

NSPRA offers a number of resources that will help PCSD 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-communicationpdf?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 the plan.



Issues management is the ability to anticipate and prepare for a potential crisis before it occurs by monitoring trends. It is a proactive exercise in which communicators help shape the outcomes instead of waiting to react after an issue has erupted 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 described in the Key Findings and SWOT Analysis, some of the district's stakeholders are concerned that PCSD is more reactive to situations as they arise than proactive. 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

Include regular research on communication and public relations efforts as a component of the plan.

Effective public relations, communication and engagement programs are based on a solid foundation of ongoing research. Communication research helps to identify what stakeholders know or don't know, what information they want to receive, who the key audiences are for various messages and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. Allowing stakeholders to define their information needs, rather than assuming them, is an important step in determining what tools and processes will be most effective.

This communication audit is a significant start that establishes baseline data to guide PCSD leaders in developing a strategic communication plan, but ongoing research will be needed to ensure that communication remains relevant and effective. Research does not have to be expensive or require a professional researcher. There are a number of effective strategies that can be implemented with a minimal amount of effort.

- **Readership surveys.** Poll readers of the *PCSD School News* and *News from the Board* newsletters. The primary focus of communication vehicles should be the delivery of news and information about the school, based on what stakeholders say they want to know. Surveys could be conducted early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate effectiveness. Surveys might be offered as links in the newsletters, as standalone emails to readers or even as QR codes posted at parent-teacher conferences and open house nights.
- **Advisory panels, interviews and focus groups.** Conversations with parents, staff and community members can be used to gauge information needs, explore perceptions and identify issues and concerns. They can be informal by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions at a faculty, parent or advisory group meeting on another topic or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative the district is considering.
- **Student and employee exit/entrance surveys.** Short surveys given to parents withdrawing or enrolling students and to employees who are leaving or newly joining the district can provide valuable information for marketing and communication planning. These surveys should be designed to find out why they are leaving or what brought them to PCSD, what their expectations were or are, how best to communicate with them, etc. This information can also identify specific departments where communication efforts need improvement.
- **Satisfaction/climate surveys.** State Departments of Education often administer parent, staff and community surveys to get at perceptions around engagement and school climate. Districts sometimes do this on their own as well. The resulting reports frequently include data that communicators can use to refine their key messages to build more positive public perceptions and greater stakeholder trust. Be sure to look for and review this data. Also, consider including students as an audience for surveying. The PCSD student body constitutes a significant audience that could be targeted for communication.

Action Step 1.4

Continue to develop specific communication plans for campaigns and individual projects.

In addition to the overall communication plan for the district, project-specific communication plans should continue to be developed whenever key issues or initiatives (such as potential budget challenges or the launch of a new report card format) need to be addressed or implemented. While these issue or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, the same type of thoughtful planning around key issues affecting the school district is important. Think of these as "sub-plans" that, when completed, become a component of the comprehensive strategic plan.

For example, for a finance campaign, consider the following key strategies and tactics that have been successful for other school systems.

- **Know your target audience(s).** Determine what groups you need to turn out at the polls. Include staff as a primary audience in your campaign. Every employee, including non-certified staff, not just teachers and administrators, should be well-versed on the need for a bond or tax proposal.
- **Identify opinion leaders** among staff, parents, business partners, community leaders, and civic groups and initiate a dialogue with them.
- **Learn what facts and key messages resonate** with stakeholders and move supportive voters to action.
- **Using this information, prepare key messages** and arguments in support of the proposal.
- **Incorporate social media into communication strategies and tactics.** The PCSD Facebook page, Instagram postings, Twitter feed, and app provide channels for sharing information quickly and easily.
- **Use multiple channels to deliver key messages**. Over the past 10 years, social media has changed the way elections are won or lost. However, you can't overlook more traditional one-way communication tools such as the news media and district and school websites.
- **Incorporate two-way communication.** Personal interaction and engagement with audiences are still some of the most effective tactics.

Examples of project-specific communication plans can be found under the Strategic Communication Plans section of the Samples and Resources area of the NSPRA website: https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans.

Action Step 1.5

Keep communication top-of-mind with district leadership.

Once a comprehensive, strategic communication plan has been developed, the public information officer should use the Executive Leadership Team meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep staff energized on effective communications and will also reinforce the belief that effective communication is a shared responsibility.

Recommendation 2:

Create organizational structures to support the communication function.

The day-to-day demands of a public school system can easily consume a majority of the Communications Office's focus, 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 delivering the district's key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools.

The PCSD Communications Office staff is a relatively new team. The public information officer started in 2021 with two new staff members joining the team at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. All hit the ground running from their first day in PCSD, but the urgency of current communication needs has not allowed much time for developing strong relationships between team members nor the opportunity to analyze the workflow of the department.

During interviews with the auditors, each member of the communications team expressed frustration with the reactive nature of their current work and the lack of time to do long-range planning. To quote one staff member, "We're too busy to take time to talk about what we are doing."

The following action steps are designed to help PCSD's Communication Office work efficiently and effectively, with a focus on supporting the district's goals and objectives.

Action Step 2.1

Begin with team building and solidifying roles and responsibilities.



There is value to any organization setting aside time for formal team building or "team mindfulness" activities. This is even more true when a team is relatively new and there is a large amount of work. Team building ensures all members are aware of the team's tasks, roles and dynamics, and that they are united in meeting shared goals and objectives.

The auditors recommend the Communications Office staff take a day or two away from the distractions of the office to focus on team development. During this time together, the group should focus on the following:

- Identifying the working styles of team members and discussing how those different styles can collaboratively contribute to department success. Consider using team assessment tools such as DiSC, Birkman and True Colors as a basis for reflection.
- Identifying and clarifying current responsibilities and determining if any shifts in duties would help the department work more efficiently.
- Identifying methods of oversight for communications developed outside the department such as school social media and department newsletters.
- Analyzing how time is being spent and how well it aligns with supporting the district's strategic plan. To do this, consider the following:

- What goal does the program, activity or service fall under?
- How critical are the ramifications of the program, activity or service to the strategic plan?
- What would happen if a specific program, activity or service were eliminated?
- Would eliminating it provide more time or resources for activities that would better support the strategic plan?

These conversations will help to frame how the team approaches communications going forward, and specifically how efficiently the team can address the recommendations and action steps in this communication audit.

Action Step 2.2

Incorporate time for staff reflection on objectives, strategies and overall progress.

Once a strategic communication plan is in place (see Recommendation 1), the Communications Office will have the foundation it needs to work efficiently and effectively in supporting the goals of the district's strategic plan. To help ensure the communication work remains focused on an ongoing basis, consider the following:

- **Monitor Progress.** Utilize part of regular staff meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This will keep staff energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with less impactful tasks.

#2

Create organizational structures to support the communication function.

- **Brainstorm Strategies.** These discussions can also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind and avoid jumping to strategies and tactics that are most familiar and comfortable for staff. For example, social media may be popular within the office, but meeting a particular objective might require a video, an app, a podcast or even an old-school flier to reach the target audience. Creativity should be encouraged in exploring new strategies and tactics to keep communications relevant and highly effective.

Action Step 2.3

Match staffing in the Communications Office with PCSD stakeholders' desire for information.

While it appears to the auditors that the two new staff members added in the past year are doing excellent work, they also appear to be already stretched thin by the volume of activities for which they are responsible. There is no one right level of staffing for a communications department, but it is important to match staffing levels with a district and school community's demand for communications. The demand is great in PCSD, and adding additional staff will help prevent burnout and contribute

to an improved standard of communication at PCSD. In interviews and focus groups with board members and administrators, expanding communications staff was identified as a need.

In NSPRA's 2022 member survey, of respondents with district enrollment of 25,000-49,999, 15 percent had 2-4 employees in their communications office, 46 percent had 5-7 employees and 34 percent had 8-15 employees. With its formal communications team of three, PCSD is on the lower end of communications staffing levels among districts of a similar size. (NSPRA members have access to a detailed biennial Membership Profile Survey with more data on the NSPRA website.)

Functions that could use additional staff resources include:

- Videography
- Graphic design
- Clerical/scheduling
- Community engagement planning
- Writing for day-to-day, planned communications

Resources regarding staffing, including sample job descriptions, can be found in the Staffing and Supporting Communications of the Samples and Resources area of the NSPRA website: https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Staffing-and-Supporting-Communications

Recommendation 3:

Review the number of parent and staff communication tools and consider a more streamlined approach.

Families face significant demands for their time and attention, both at home and at work. PCSD parents said in focus groups and in their SCOPE Survey open-ended responses that they often feel overwhelmed trying to keep up with school news along with everything else on their to-do lists. They want to know about their children's education and how to best support them, but they also want school communications to be brief, tailored to their personal needs and interests, and easy to access, follow and digest.

In addition to information overload, parent focus group participants described differences in what they receive from different schools and teachers, and how that information is conveyed. Specifically, as noted on pages 18-20 of the Key Findings, parents are frustrated by the number and inconsistency of platforms and messages used to share information at the school level.

PCSD can address these challenges by:

- Standardizing communication tools across the district and reducing the number of platforms/applications used by schools and individual staff to communicate with parents at the school level.
- Establishing protocols for sharing information, including who is responsible for communicating what, and how and when the information is to be provided.
- Consistently following a communication tools framework to support families as they move through each grade level, especially when they transition from elementary to middle school or when they have children in different buildings.

PCSD is not alone in needing to address this challenge. NSPRA auditors have heard about it repeatedly from families in school districts across the United States. A back-to-school article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Why Do Schools Send So Many Emails? They Don't Have To," focused on the topic, with the writer, Julie Jargon, opining, "My kids head back to the classroom in about two weeks. So far I've received nine emails, five text messages and two newsletters from their schools, some of which directed me to other sites to fill out forms. I've received notifications of numerous Facebook posts but haven't had the bandwidth to look at them. Schools deliver information in multiple ways in an effort to keep families informed…but do they need to do this much communication? For parents and guardians, already crazed at work, managing school chatter can feel like another full-time job."

As PCSD thinks about how to streamline its communication tools, the article is worth reading, including the comments submitted by parents. Families will be much more likely to seek out and engage with school communications if they know what information to expect, when they should expect to receive it and how it will be delivered.

Action Step 3.1

Conduct a rigorous review of the tools used to communicate with parents.



In parent focus groups, there was extensive discussion about the variety of communication tools used by the district, schools and teachers and the difficulty in consistently being attentive to all of them. The district and schools use

email, text, social media and the website. To this list, teachers add ClassDojo, Remind123, SeeSaw, Canvas, Elemental, Infinite Campus and the student portal.

The first step in addressing this issue is to take inventory of all communication tools currently in use across the district. To make sure the list is complete, each school principal should be asked to provide a list of the communication tools used in their building.

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

Another consideration for the group is the potential for a holistic solution that integrates many communication capabilities into a single platform. A wide range of such products and features are available, including from Finalsite/Blackboard, the district's current mass communication vendor. Some of the other vendors often used by NSPRA members include Apptegy, School Messenger, Catapult K12, Edlio and Gabbart Communications/ ParentSquare. Some offer integrated features, such as one-click posting of messages on text, email, website and subscription-based messaging, and allow parents to choose what communication channels they prefer and when they wish to receive non-urgent communications.

If individual users were able to select how they want to receive information and only receive it that way, fewer would feel the frustration of getting pinged by email, text message, auto-generated calls and social media all at the same time.

#3

Review the number of parent and staff communication tools and consider a more streamlined approach.

From this analysis, the group will be able to develop a set of recommended communication tools for use by all teachers and schools as appropriate for student age groups. The list of recommendations should be shared with district leadership, who would make the final determination of which tools to keep and which to eliminate.

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

- **Remind stakeholders frequently to review and update whatever communication options you currently provide**, and tell them how they can subscribe and unsubscribe to information feeds. In some cases, a person may opt-out of a communication channel, like text messages for example, then forget they've done so and become frustrated when they miss urgent communications.
- **Notice and periodically track how stakeholders communicate with you.** If they are using email, they probably prefer email. If they are calling the district office, they probably prefer a phone call.

Action Step 3.2

Develop a guidance document for staff to establish a common framework for parent communications.

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

The guidance document will be more useful if it also includes:

- Basic formatting tips to improve readability and visual appeal.
- A list of approved sources of royalty-free visual content that won't violate copyrights.
- Templates or examples for common school-to-parent or teacher-to-parent messages.
- Summaries of relevant school board policies and state/federal laws that relate to sharing information with parents.

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

Action Step 3.3

Develop a plan for implementing the guidance document.

Ensure the successful implementation of the new guidelines by carefully planning platform transitions and adoptions. Be sure to develop a mini communication plan for the transition, too. Consideration should be given to the following:

- Budgets and timing to acquire or prepare additional technology.
- Timing and content of initial training and ongoing support for staff.
- Process and timing for introducing new technology and systems to students and families, including providing resources for learning how to use the systems and get questions answered.
- How to sunset any technology no longer being used, including archiving or moving over any content that may still need to be accessed.

Action Step 3.4

Regularly review and update the guidance document.

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

The process should also include school building principals and department chairs reviewing and discussing the guidance document with staff annually during back-to-school staff/department meetings.

Action Step 3.5

Clearly define the communication roles departments and individuals play in sending various types of information.



In principal focus groups, there was concern expressed that they are not always sure who is responsible for disseminating information. All PCSD leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the Communications Office staff. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at meetings of the Executive Leadership Team so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

Following are three steps PCSD might consider to help ensure communication responsibilities are clear:

- **Define communication roles for administrative staff.** Developing and annually reviewing a chart that clarifies administrators' communication roles and responsibilities (like the sample on the next page) can help ensure that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the strategic plan.
- **Produce a guide for district and school administrators** that sets clear communication expectations. Following are two examples:
  - 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
  - Assign responsibilities for communicating on specific topics. School level administrators shared that a summary of important meetings would be helpful should they miss a meeting or have to step out to manage a school issue. One way to address inconsistencies and improve communication follow-through after meetings is using a responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of "who does what" for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes for "FYI," "to be shared" and "confidential" to each agenda item. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If an item is marked "to be shared," then a discussion will be needed to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed.

Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes

FYI	
To be shared	
Confidential	

Example: Communication Roles Guide for Administrative Staff

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Communications Office Staff	District-level updates on: • Routine matters that impact more than one school • Urgent matters that impact any school • Major districtwide initiatives Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media • Video channel • News releases to media • Paid ad placements Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Administrative Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/ action briefs Board policy changes	Board webpages
Chief Academic Officer	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Chief School Financial Officer	Budget and finance updates Bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Chief Talent Officer	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 4:

Take advantage of the transition to a new website platform to incorporate improvements.

A school district's website is an integral part of promoting key messages that reinforce community loyalty and the district's brand to both internal and external audiences.

As the first point of contact for prospective students and families, a district's website sets the tone, conveys the district's success, and defines its aspirations and goals for continued academic excellence. District websites are generally also a common information source for community members without children and outside organizations such as the media and business groups. (This holds true in PCSD, where among the 21 community respondents to the SCOPE Survey, the district website was their most frequently used source of information about the district, surpassing both social media and word of mouth by 5 percentage points.) It is important for the website to express the personality of the district, while making information easy to find and accessible to all visitors.

In addition to the expansive district website, the district also maintains sites for each of its 33 schools.

On the SCOPE Survey, 73 percent of parents said they use the website at least monthly, with email, text messages, social media and newsletters being relied upon more often. Of employees who took the SCOPE Survey, 89 percent said they use the website at least monthly, and only email is used more often.

Despite the heavy reliance on the website, several participants in staff and parent focus groups expressed frustration with the site. A representative comment was, "Everything is there, but it's hard to find the information you're looking for."

As the Communications Office works to make the transition from PCSD's Blackboard website to Finalsite, the following action steps are offered to help inform planning discussions and to complement development efforts.

Action Step 4.1

Identify the features of an ideal PCSD website and discuss how the new platform can provide them.

Early on in the transition process, it will be important for Communications Office staff to internally reflect on the following questions:

- Who are our primary audiences for the district website? For the school websites? For any existing or desired micro-sites?
- 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?

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. It includes information about accessibility and ADA compliance, presentations about how to approach digital communications and links to award-winning websites. Spend some time reviewing this information and then find inspiration on these winning websites:

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

In addition, here is a recently unveiled website designed by Finalsite for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, one of NSPRA's 2019 communication audit clients: https://www.vbschools.com/

Action Step 4.2

Update and streamline the district website features.

Today, websites need to be engaging, energetic and user-friendly. Following are tactics that reflect best practices in website design and should be taken into consideration as PCSD brings new district and school websites online:

- **Condense and combine content.** While looking for ways to get visitors to the information they want with a minimum of clicks, also consider how some website content areas might be condensed, combined or eliminated to reduce the number of pages and to make it easier for users to determine where they want to go. While the most current news items should appear prominently, it is also advisable to determine through analytics what types of news are most regularly accessed.

#4

Take advantage of the transition to a new website platform to incorporate improvements.

- **Add a connection hub.** Provide a single spot showcasing how stakeholders can get digital and print information about PCSD and its schools. (See example 1, example 2.) Promote it on the district homepage.
- **Appealing photos can make a big first impression.** The website is text and icon heavy and could benefit from more student and staff faces.
- **Provide easy access to facts and figures.** Information such as enrollments, test scores, attendance, graduation rates, etc., can be featured in spotlighted, interactive graphics on the homepage and consolidated on one page to be linked in the Our District section.
- **Use the website to communicate the organization's personality**, including information and a video message from representative members of the school

community, including the superintendent, that is centered on the goals and mission of the district.

- **Spotlight user-generated content.** Incorporate pictures or video created by social media followers (with photo credits) or link to a district hashtag search with a robust amount of positive social media posts.

Action Step 4.3

Ensure web pages are routinely kept up to date and the overall site is reviewed at least annually.

Regular website housekeeping efforts and protocols should be established so that web authors are alerted to outdated links and content. All staff with site or department webmaster responsibilities should receive initial training upon assumption of the duties, 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 should be conducted, if warranted, to help reinforce principles outlined in the annual training.

In addition to regular updates, the district and school websites should be audited by PCSD staff annually to ensure content is current, accurate and complete. The results of those internal audits should be communicated to the appropriate administrators and webmasters as part of the district's commitment to ensuring a useful and robust website.

As part of that annual review, consider conducting website-specific research through formal user experience testing or surveys to broaden the audience that is able to weigh in on how they navigate and use the website. Continue to use web analytics to track which pages are visited most and least, how long is spent on those page, and how visitors move through the site. Consider deleting or re-organizing pages receiving few visits.

Action Step 4.4

Ensure website content meets accessibility guidelines.

Today most if not all school website providers launch websites that are fully accessible, but errors tend to build up over time once the content-creation reigns are passed over to school district staff. The Communications Office staff and any employees responsible for website content should become familiar with the federal Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and ensure that all content on district and school sites meets those guidelines. 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.

Website visitors with visual or hearing 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 alt-tagged. Some of these issues were identified on the homepage of the current website when the auditors tested it through https://wave.webaim.org/, as noted in the Key Findings.

Going forward, the WAVE tool can be used to identify issues on any district or school web page, and additional guidance on website accessibility can be found at these links:

- W3C–https://www.w3.org/
- Section508.gov–https://www.section508.gov
- UC Berkeley Tips for Making Your Website Accessible–https://webaccess.berkeley.edu/resources/tips/web-accessibility

Recommendation 5:

Develop and execute a plan to combat misinformation and disinformation.

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

Misinformation and disinformation occur around big issues and decisions facing the district and also in regard to individual students or staff members. The latter is particularly hard to address, as obligations to protect the privacy of individuals often prohibit full disclosure of the facts. (Action Step 5.5 provides suggestions on how to handle these situations.) Misinformation often develops as people try to fill in the gaps surrounding a situation. Accurate, timely and thorough information from the district can help greatly.

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 Communications Office and should be handled by a small group of district leaders working together.

Action Step 5.1

Monitor emerging issues.

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

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

- What is the issue and how widespread is its area of concern?
- How did we become aware of this issue?
- How might the issue impact the district?
- Is talk about the issue factually accurate?
  - If it is not accurate, what needs to be clarified/corrected, with whom and how?
  - If it is accurate and indicates that the district needs to take corrective action, what actions need to be taken?

Team members should follow area and national news coverage, scan social media posts and community forums, and talk with key

communicators in the community. In addition, district and school committees could be asked regularly to share issues they sense are emerging so the team can consider them as well.

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

Action Step 5.2

Develop quick reference fact sheets on potentially controversial issues.



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

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

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

#5

Develop and execute a plan to combat misinformation and disinformation.

Action Step 5.3

Build a network of digital ambassadors.



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

Today, when so much information is spread quickly via social media, an adaptation of that idea is to build a network of voluntary digital ambassadors, who can build trust and provide general communications support for the district by helping to share accurate information about issues as well as good news. PCSD is fortunate to enjoy healthy 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 (84 percent of staff and 64 percent of parents) provides a large pool of candidates to serve as ambassadors. Current School-Community Ambassadors may be able to fill in this need, but consideration should be given to expanding the cadre.

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

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

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

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

Action Step 5.4

Respond quickly to misinformation and disinformation.

Information relating to just one school or just one classroom can be addressed on a targeted basis. For information of broader interest, consider posting information on a fact-checking section of the website. The link can then be shared with those who have comments or questions, rather than responding to individual comments on social media posts, which sometimes ends up generating more attention to misinformation.

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

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

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

Action Step 5.5

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



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

This information should be shared annually with parents within start-of-school materials. Explore unique, eye-catching ways to communicate this important information such as through a colorful chart or infographic rather than in lengthy text paragraphs, so it is more memorable. In addition, make sure this information is posted on the website so that parents can be directed to it as needed. This allows the district to clearly lay out the legal restrictions it is obligated to follow, while also letting parents know that these are established rules that apply to all situations and are not decided based on the details of a specific event.

When a serious incident or crisis unfolds and statements must be made, use language consistent with these prior notifications to parents when acknowledging that certain details about the situation may not be able to be released. Where possible, include with the statements a link to the webpage with the illustrative chart/infographic about what information can and can't be shared. This reinforces a consistent level of understanding throughout the school year.

Recommendation 6:

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

PCSD is committed to improving communications with all its communities. This commitment was a common theme in all focus groups. Given the growing diversity of its population, PCSD should expand these efforts to ensure all families are receiving and able to understand essential information at the same time.

Translations should be routine for district-wide publications, special alerts and important student information that is sent home, either from the district or from schools. While it is not practicable, in terms of staff time and cost, to translate materials into all of the spoken languages, materials should be translated consistently into the district's predominant non-English languages. A good rule of thumb, in line with federal standards for health organizations, is to provide translations in a language if 10 percent or more of the district's student population has it as their home language. This same standard can be applied to individual building-level demographics so that translations are provided for home-to-school communication when the second-language population exceeds the 10 percent threshold.

It is also important for the entire community to be made aware of the changing demographics of the district. Some survey respondents appeared to not understand the racial and ethnic makeup of the district and were therefore confused by the emphasis on equity. PCSD should consider the following:

- Any strategies and tactics that are developed in regard to improving communication with non-English-speaking parents and students should be informed by input from the affected families and students as well as from educators, including what is contained in this audit report.
- To ensure translations are culturally appropriate, accurate and grammatically correct, continue to give preference to human translation service providers (e.g., OnStaff translators, Alboum Translation Services, Transact Services) over digital methods (e.g., Google Translate, Microsoft Word Translate) where feasible.
- Continue to discuss, identify and address the critical communication needs for these families during all phases of the school year.
- Explore ways to develop communications that appeal to the particular interests of these families.
- Create a feedback loop for these families to measure the effectiveness of new and ongoing communication strategies.
- Incorporate tactics that will ensure all staff are aware of how, why and when to access various language services.

Another reality for many school districts, even after the pandemic shutdown, is that the increased use of digital communications can be a challenge for families with limited or no access to free, reliable home internet. PCSD is fortunate to be able to provide students with access to technology in the classroom and at home. However, this does not solve all of the potential issues. Consider the following recent national data, particularly as it pertains to communicating with parents and families:

- Approximately 40 percent of Black American households in the nation do not have high-speed, fixed broadband (even if service is available).

- Many focus group participants shared that there are portions of the county that are completely without reliable internet service.
- Only 69 percent of Black Americans and 67 percent of Hispanic Americans have desktop or laptop computers, compared with 80 percent of White Americans.

Other important findings from focus groups participants included the following:

- School staff pointed out that translation responsibilities sometimes fall to a Spanish-speaking staff member whose primary job isn't as a translator, and some schools do not have bilingual office staff members at all.
- Students are also called upon to translate.
- ESOL teachers are not always available because their teaching responsibilities need to take precedence over interpretation, and many ESOL teachers are not bilingual and can only navigate basic conversations in Spanish or other languages.

As with parents in general, non-English-speaking parents want to receive safety information faster and more consistently, even about activities considered mundane or routine such as fire drills. In short, they want to be kept up to date about all aspects of the school and district that directly affect their children.

Action Step 6.1

Develop a key communicators network among non-English speakers at the school level.

One-on-one and face-to-face communications are highly valued within all parent populations, but these can be particularly important when there are language barriers and/or cultural differences that make building relationships more difficult. For that reason, it is suggested that PCSD create a key communicators network at the individual school level specifically for families of non-English-speaking parents.

A key communicator network can provide a conduit for two-way information to flow between parents and community members and the school. Non-English-speaking, bilingual and multilingual key communicators can be equipped with timely, accurate and translated information about the school to share with their circles in the community. Similarly, they can gain feedback from the broader community to bring back to the schools and district to inform future decisions and processes. A key communicator network also can serve as an early warning system the school can use to identify emerging issues and concerns in the community. As they serve in roles more closely connected to the school, key communicators can help to counter negative or inaccurate information shared by the media or word of mouth.

This is especially important in non- or limited-English-speaking communities. When there is a vacuum of information from reliable sources, rumors and misinformation flourish. Alternatively, key communicators can share information using the terms and colloquialisms of their non-English-speaking community. This builds goodwill and trust between parents

and the schools because the information feels authentic and as if nothing is being hidden.

Following are suggested methods for establishing a key communicators network of non-English speakers:

- **Host exclusive events for potential key communicators** and introduce them to the methods that the district uses to disseminate information in multiple languages. Involve native speakers/ translators among staff in planning, hosting and speaking at the event.
- **Provide dual-language materials and messaging to the key communicators** and encourage them to share that information with families they know at religious gatherings, in local ethnic restaurants, at support services offices, at grocery stores, at community centers and in other gathering spots. Hearing the same information from multiple sources and within a similar time frame helps parents feel confident and more willing to trust the accuracy of the message.

Action Step 6.2

Increase methods for effectively reaching non-English speakers.

PCSD has translated versions of newsletters, fliers and some videos in English and Spanish. Consideration should be given to translating additional materials, perhaps in more languages than are now commonly translated. 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. PCSD will also want to consider these factors and adopt guidelines for when translated versions of communications will be developed.

#6

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

In addition, as PCSD increases its outreach to non-English speakers, draw from research about how to better connect with various racial/ethnic/cultural groups. For example, radio is consistently the most used tool for media consumption among Hispanic and Latino individuals of all ages, according to the Hispanic Marketing Council's 2023 market guide. A method for the Communications Office to explore might be to compile a list of local non-English radio stations and to develop targeted, translated news releases and public service announcements—in ready-to-use audio file and print form—to share with those outlets. Radio is local, mobile, widely popular and, as mentioned in a 2023 North American Network webinar on earning radio media coverage, "If you can think of a language, there's probably a radio station that broadcasts in it."

Following are just a few examples of recent articles on the topic:

- How Organizations Can Improve Worker Buy-in on Diversity Efforts: https://time.com/charter/6306528/how-organizations-can-improve-worker-buy-in-on-diversity-efforts/

- Hispanic Consumers Feel Brands Fail to Understand Them, Study Says: https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/387544/hispanic-consumers-feel-brands-fail-to-understand.html

- Why You Need to Include Spanish Media in Your Outreach: https://www.prsa.org/article/why-you-need-to-include-spanish-media-in-your-outreach

Action Step 6.3

Continue to expand on PCSD's inclusiveness efforts for diverse families to encourage engagement.

Research and the experiences of other school districts have shown that families cannot be fully engaged and support their child's academic progress if they do not understand the language that the school system uses to communicate. Following are suggestions for increasing the engagement of diverse families and their sense of inclusion in PCSD:

- **Conduct cultural competency training with all staff** so they are comfortable with and have a better understanding of the students and families with whom they will interact in the schools. Be sure the training includes modules on cultural and socioeconomic differences in communication expectations and methods.

- **When communicating major initiatives, expand outreach programs to include neighborhood gathering places**, including religious centers and non-profit support organizations. Non-English speakers and minority populations may be more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable.

- **Conduct and heavily advertise twice-yearly "getting to know you" meetings with non-English-speaking parents** that include the superintendent of schools, building principals, resource professionals and translators. These informal meetings should be geared toward answering parents' questions and hearing their concerns. Consider providing childcare and a meal at these meetings to increase attendance and create a more relaxed, inviting atmosphere that encourages engagement. Make it clear in those translated communications that parents' presence in the schools is truly welcome; some newcomers may be arriving from countries where parents are actively discouraged from participating in their local schools.

NSPRA's Diversity Communications Toolkit is another helpful resource in expanding communication to diverse audiences. The publication is available to association members as a free download on the NSPRA website under the Samples and Resources section in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion area at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Diversity-Equity-and-Inclusion.

Recommendation 7:

Elevate Board of Education communications and outreach.

School boards hold a unique position in public education. They represent the community's interests as elected officials but are also charged with acting on behalf of the students and school district. This sometimes places the board in between competing interests. To build and maintain community support, ongoing communications about board decisions and initiatives are important.

Engaging the public in conversations about their schools can help build a foundation of trust and strengthen stakeholders' connections to local education. Highlighting a school board's activities and decisions, as well as its commitment to keeping stakeholders informed, is an important component of those conversations. Today, this best practice is a regularly recommended strategy for more effective district communication programs.

PCSD board members expressed a desire for stakeholders to have more opportunities to engage with the district, noting low attendance at the early fall meetings on E-SPLOST (special purpose sales tax for education) and most formal board meetings.

Focus group participants also expressed an interest in increasing communication about issues the board is addressing and increasing engagement. Following are representative comments:

- There was a perception that, "Board members have specific schools to visit, but they don't show up."
- "I want the board to give me resources to know what's going on at their level."
- "I think we could know more about critical decisions that are being made."
- In a staff focus group, it was noted that, "Board members jump in to answer parent complaints without talking to us."

The following action steps offer ideas to enhance the board's ability to communicate and engage with its stakeholders.

Action Step 7.1

Increase the visibility and availability of information about PCSD finances and school facility improvements.

Community members want to know how their tax dollars are being spent, and financial information about local schools can sometimes be difficult to communicate. Focus group participants regularly articulated that information about finance and capital expenditures is something they would like to see. Yet, the auditors observed that there is a wealth of detailed financial information on the district website, and the district and board should be commended for the efforts made to coordinate multiple public meetings preceding the E-SPLOST vote. The adage, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink" is often the case when attempting to communicate financial data.

As a result, districts must be creative in how they share this critical information, and strategies for doing so should be a priority goal in the strategic communication plan as it is developed (Recommendation 1). As public school finance can be a complicated issue, it will be important to break down how PCSD receives its funding and what impacts the various revenue sources. The key will be to simplify concepts and facts into easily digestible

pieces and to share them through a variety of channels over time. Possibilities include:

- **Developing infographics** to explain financial information and concepts in a simple, engaging, colorful, at-a-glance format. The PCSD FY2024 Budget Overview is a great launching point, but it still likely may overwhelm readers, especially if it's only viewed on a computer screen.
- **Reimagining the website section dedicated to the CFO/Business Department** when the website is redesigned to include inviting graphics, easy-to-understand displays of budget information, financial FAQs and a process for asking questions.
- **Creating brief videos** explaining potential upcoming financial challenges, how they may impact families and other residents, and where to go for additional information. These might feature soundbites from the superintendent and or chief of staff or chief financial officer and/or animated illustrations of financial concepts for a more edutainment feel.
- **Writing an op-ed from the superintendent or chief financial officer** for submission to the *Dallas New Era* at least once a year highlighting key facts about the budget and how the district is putting students first in their financial decisions.
- **Planning an ongoing social media campaign** to share financial information in bits over time—through post text accompanied by graphics, photos or videos—with links to find more details on the district website.
- **Preparing talking points and a "quick facts" sheet** for board members and district leadership so they feel prepared to answer questions about finances. As appropriate, give examples of how students are impacted by financial decisions and challenges. Staff, parents and even the broader community will care more about financial challenges and how to address them if they understand the personal impact it will have on students and staff.
- **Including information about the district's finances in every newsletter.** An extensive article is not always required. Sometimes it can be as simple as including an interesting financial fact within a larger education story, a summary of items being discussed by the board or the answer to a frequently asked question about finances.

The idea is to keep the topic of the district's finances front and center for stakeholders over time and to give them the ability to absorb facts as they are presented or dive more deeply into the details.

Examples of how other districts have addressed these challenges can be found in the Budget Communications category of NSPRA's members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Budget-Communications.

Action Step 7.2

Create a Board of Education policy on communications.

Board communications are addressed in the PCSD Board Code of Ethics - Board Norms and Protocols; however, a specific and separate policy on the topic could provide more explicit guidance and expectations. An official policy for communications can help focus district leaders and staff members on the importance of effective, strategic communication. It can

also demonstrate the board's commitment to transparency, responsiveness and engagement with stakeholders.

Board communication policies take many forms and can be tailored to the specific needs of the school community. A good policy should include a statement of purpose for communications followed by board expectations. It also should establish guidelines, set expectations for the actions of the board of directors and staff, and outline what information stakeholders can expect from the district. In conjunction with a strategic communication plan (Recommendation 1), the policy helps ensure and protect the district's commitment to ongoing, proactive communication.

Following is a sample of how a school board policy establishing communication as a priority might begin:

> *The Paulding County School District and its Board of Education believe that planned, two-way communication is the foundation of a strong relationship between the school district and the community. It is the responsibility of each board member and each district employee to actively build positive long-term relationships with community members to build strong minds, strong hearts and a strong community.*

This general statement could be followed by a list of general expectations, with the following provided as examples to consider:

> *We will engage the community in the mission of our schools by:*
>
> 1. *Providing accurate, timely information.*
> 2. *Requesting feedback on important issues.*
> 3. *Involving affected stakeholder groups in the problem-solving/decision-making process whenever possible.*

#7

Elevate Board of Education communications and outreach.

> 4. *Listening to the ideas and viewpoints of citizens.*
> 5. *Adhering to a practice of open, honest and constructive communication with citizens and news media.*

The policy could then go on to state specific expectations regarding communication in various circumstances, as currently outlined in the Board Norms and Protocols. These currently include guidelines for communicating among board members and with the superintendent, communicating with the news media, communicating on social media, and communicating with staff.

These expectations should be reviewed annually and in public. Doing so will convey the importance the board places on effective communication and inform the public about what behaviors and actions they can anticipate from their board members.

Cambridge-Isanti Schools in Minnesota has a robust "Communications and Public Relations" policy worth considering as another model: https://www.c-ischools.org/about-us/policy-manual/policy/~board/policy/post/910.

Action Step 7.3

Provide prompt summaries of school board meetings for all audiences.



Public meetings are the most recognizable role of the Board of Education, and their decisions impact many if not all staff and families in the school district. Therefore, it is important that access to information about board meetings and subsequent actions be readily available to the community.

Focus group participants knew that board meetings were live-streamed, and some indicated they regularly watch them live. *News from the Board* receives high readership from staff, but parents and the community do not currently have access since it's only distributed internally. This disparity of information is reflected in the results from the SCOPE Survey.

- 81 percent of parent participants indicated they rely on the school board for information less than monthly or never, rating it only above local news and media as a source of information.
- 56 percent of staff participants indicated they rely on the school board for information on at least a monthly basis.

A simple step to increase the knowledge base of parents and other community members is to develop board meeting summaries that include information about what discussions took place and what decisions were made. This provides the district and the board with an opportunity to be the first and best source of this information. Providing a brief summary immediately after each regular meeting demonstrates transparency and allows the district to frame the conversations. Summaries can be linked in district and school newsletters, posted on the website and emailed on a subscription basis to those who request it.

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

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

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

Additional resources are available in the Training section of the Samples and Resources area of the NSPRA website (https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff), including the on-demand webinar: "Help Them Help You: Communications and School Boards."

Recommendation 8:

Strategically enhance PCSD's social media presence.

Participants from all focus groups shared positive comments about the district's social media and how it has improved over the last two years. On the SCOPE Survey, it was one of the most highly rated sources of information for stakeholders, only behind email, text messages and the website, with 55 percent of respondents indicating that they refer to social media for information about the district on a daily or weekly basis. SCOPE Surveys results from other districts rarely show this level of support for social media as an information source. In addition, the active engagement rate with the district's Facebook page has nearly tripled in the last three years.

These positive trends are likely attributable to having someone in the Communications Office dedicated to posting and monitoring social media and the addition of School-Community Ambassadors. The following action steps are designed to assist PCSD in further enhancing this already successful facet of its communication program.

Action Step 8.1

Develop social media post content strategically.

The PCSD Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram accounts are professional in appearance and easy to read. The photography is especially eye-catching, which helps engage social media readers. The three main platforms have a good mix of announcements, recognition and news. All that is needed is a more strategic approach to developing content that supports the district's and the Communications Office's goals and objectives.

Consider incorporating the following best practices:

- **Do not share identical post content on Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram.** It is efficient and logical to carry posts across the platforms, but the three sites should also take into account the differences in the intended audiences (e.g., teens on Instagram, parents on Facebook, news media on Twitter/X). For example:
  - Tweak longer Facebook post content for more headline-style posts on Twitter.
  - Use only photos and hashtags captions for Instagram.
  - Make use of short video reels that appeal to each platform's primary users.
  - Adjust the district's post tone with the primary audience for each platform in mind.
- **Add commentary when reposting messages from the schools.** It is a good strategy to repost messages from individual schools, but adding supportive comments when reposting to the district feed can make them more engaging.
- **Depict learning taking place that highlights district goals in action.** For example, post a short photo story about students' use of 1:1 technology or feature a Teacher of the Year's philosophy on teaching rather than just showing a recognition photo of the winner.

NSPRA's tactics-focused webinar series "Mini Labs" includes professional development on topics such as "Instagram Stories" (October 2023), "TikTok Tips and Tricks" (June 2023) and "Twitter and School Districts" (February 2023). Be sure to have staff who are NSPRA members take advantage of these and future training opportunities, with on-demand recordings

available at https://www.nspra.org/Professional-Development/Webinars/On-Demand/On-Demand-Professional-Development-Library.

Action Step 8.2

Focus on creating engaging posts on the PCSD Facebook page.

It has been said of social media pages that likes are a good measure of how many people have stopped by your organization's "storefront," but the number of engaged followers is a measure of people who "handled the merchandise." Social media followers will ultimately drop off if they have no interaction with your Facebook page, largely because of how algorithms determine what organic content gets featured for each user. The more overall comments, shares and reactions you receive on posts, the more likely that existing followers will see your content in their news feeds.

To give people a reason to click and comment, consider these strategies:

- **Encourage user-generated content by:**
  - Asking followers to post old local high school prom photos during prom season.
  - Asking recent PCSD graduates to post selfies from their colleges, giving a shout-out to their high school.
  - Asking older alumni to post selfies from their workplaces.
  - Asking high school sports fans to nominate the community's biggest sports fan each fall.
  - Running trivia contests with prizes.
- **Look for ways to make your standard announcement posts more engaging.** For example, promote an upcoming high school play by showing a poster or photo from previous musical productions from five or 50 years ago. A caption can highlight the old photo and still put a plug in for the new musical.
- **With a school district that dates back more than 100 years, PCSD should regularly feature old photographs and historical stories to increase engagement.** Posts for Throwback Thursday are a good start for this and can be elevated by animating a photo into a GIF or by turning several photos into a now-and-then video. Really old photos are fun, but the ones that gather the most engagement are ones where people know the subjects. Followers love to tag themselves and friends.
- **Post infographics.** Appypie (powered by AI), Canva and Venngage are helpful infographic-creation tools.
- **Share posts from other sources that compliment or highlight school programs.** Acknowledgment by outsiders sends a positive message to parents, students and staff, but use of existing posts from other organizations can expand the post reach.

#8

Strategically enhance PCSD's social media presence.

Action Step 8.3

Make sure stakeholders know where to find district-sponsored social media.



PCSD is to be commended for tracking district- and school-sponsored social media platforms closely, including having administrative rights to those sites. To make sure stakeholders are easily able to find official PCSD sites and can determine which are—and are not—district-sponsored, publish all the of the links on the district's website. Here is an example of how one district shares this information: https://www.cnusd.k12.ca.us/cms/One.aspx?portalId=211960&pageId=1225159.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

Questions for All Groups:

1. What do you consider to be PCSD's greatest strengths?
2. When it comes to communication, what does the district do well?
3. In what ways can communication be improved?
4. What is your best source of news and information about PCSD and the schools?
5. Is the information you need easy to find or access?
6. What is the best way for the school district to deliver important information to you?
7. Are the district's social media accounts helpful sources of information for you?
8. What is the greatest communication challenge facing your district now or in the future?
9. As an employee/ parent/community member, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner?
10. What additional information would you like to receive that you don't get now?

Additional Questions: Parents

1. Is the parent portal helpful and user friendly?
2. Do you read the school district publications?
   - Is the information provided helpful and informative?
   - Is there additional information you would like to receive?
3. What is your overall impression of the school district website?
   - Are you able to find information you need for work (as a parent)?
   - How often do you access the district or campus website?
4. Are you familiar with district video and broadcasting projects?
   - Do you have access to programming through cable or YouTube?
   - Have you watched a school board meeting streamed on the district website?
5. Do you feel that district leaders provide opportunities and truly listen to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
   - What kinds of engagement opportunities would interest you?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. Are current communication vehicles effective in delivering information?
2. How can district leaders be more proactive in communicating with you?
3. What is your overall impression of the school district website?

Additional Questions: Administrators and School Board

1. As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job?

2. What are the greatest communication challenges in your role?

3. How can the Communications Office better assist you with your school/ department communications?

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 communication 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

PCSD's NSPRA Communication Audit Report was developed by a team with extensive backgrounds in developing and managing communication and public relations programs for school districts and education agencies. Following are brief descriptions of their experience.

Elise F. Shelton

Lead Consultant Auditor



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

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

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

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

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

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

Tom Scheidel, APR

Consultant Auditor



Thomas Scheidel, APR, has been actively involved in creating media and sharing ideas for over four decades. He has worked at a variety of radio and television stations, producing programming for local, regional and national markets. He has run his own media and event production company, servicing corporations, nonprofit agencies and educational institutions.

Since 2011, Tom has been employed as the public information coordinator for the Allegan Area Educational Service Agency in Allegan, Mich. From 2016-19, he served as the Mideast Region vice president for NSPRA and is a current board member of the Michigan School Public Relations Association. In 2020, Tom received the NSPRA Learning and

Liberty Legacy Leader Award. He earned his accreditation in public relations in 2022.

Tom is an accomplished and award-winning filmmaker. He holds a bachelor's degree in Broadcast and Cinematic Arts from Central Michigan University.

Sheba Clarke

Audit Assistant



Sheba Clarke currently heads the Public Relations Department for the Grandview C-4 School District near Kansas City, Missouri. With a foundation in broadcast journalism, she seamlessly transitioned into PR, leading successful initiatives, including the district's inaugural communication plan and a historic rebranding effort, earning the 2023 Greater Kansas City Golden PRISM Award.

Clarke is an active member of the Missouri Schools Public Relations Association (MOSPRA), a former MOSPRA Regional Director and serves on the Board of Directors for the Greater Kansas City Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Additionally, she plays a key role on the Inez Y. Kaiser Memorial Scholarship committee, honoring the trailblazing figure who founded the first major PR agency led by a Black woman in 1950.

Sheba studied Journalism and Mass Communication at Iowa State University. Guided by a quote from the late journalist Sydney J. Harris, her communication philosophy revolves around the distinction between 'information' (giving out) and 'communication' (getting through).

Susan Downing

Communication Audit Coordinator



Susan Downing, APR, has spent her career in marketing and communications. Today she serves as a communication audit coordinator for NSPRA. Prior to joining the association, she served as communications director for the Ladue School District in St. Louis, Missouri, for 11 years, after serving on the district's Board of Education for five years.

Downing's communications career began in the private sector working in the financial industry before transitioning to education in 2009. Every position she's held has required the successful development and implementation of communication, marketing and organizational strategic plans based solidly on research. She earned Accreditation in Public Relations in 2018. She is also an accomplished writer, and since her retirement from the Ladue School District in 2020, she has assisted various organizations in strategic planning, project planning and writing.

Downing continues to be active in the management and leadership of her own state chapter of NSPRA, the Missouri School Public Relations Association (MOSPRA).

Downing also served as an audit assistant on the PCSD's NSPRA Communication Audit.

Naomi Hunter, APR

Communication Audit Surveys Manager



As NSPRA's communication audit surveys manager, Naomi Hunter, APR, oversees NSPRA's in-house survey service for communication audits and reviews.

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

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

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

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

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

Mellissa Braham, APR

NSPRA Associate Director



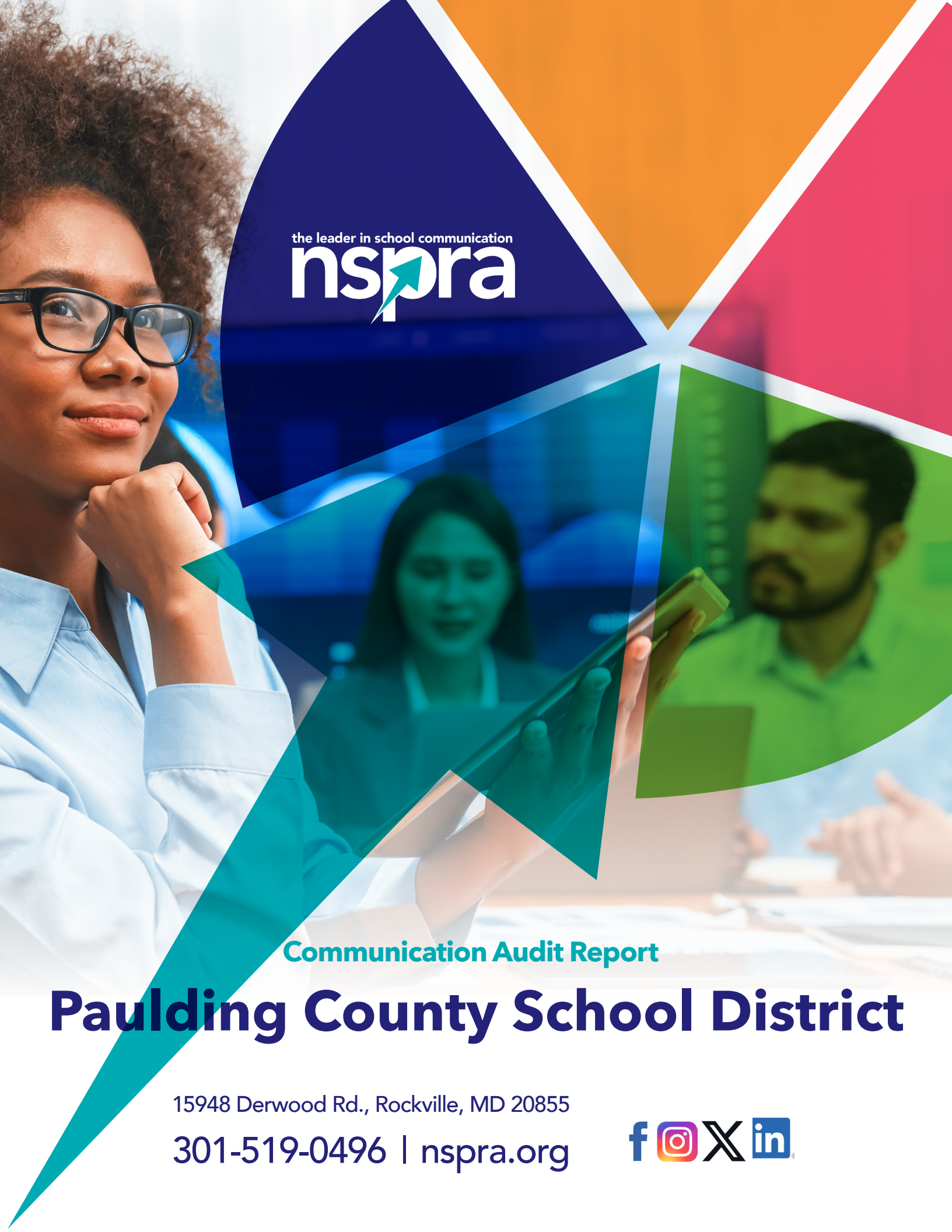
Mellissa Braham, APR, has more than 25 years of experience in public relations, working primarily in the education and healthcare sectors. As NSPRA associate director, she is responsible for coordinating the NSPRA Communication Audit, NSPRA Communication Review and SCOPE Survey services. In addition to managing staff, she coordinates programming for the NSPRA National Seminar, oversees chapter relations, contributes to member resources and develops association products.

Prior to joining NSPRA, she supported dozens of school districts across New York state during her 12 years with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service. In her multifaceted role, she served as a trusted strategic advisor, communications professional, regional project leader, mentor, trainer, facilitator and communication auditor.

Her work was honored with an NSPRA Gold Medallion in 2013 and an NSPRA Golden Achievement Award in 2016 as well as more than 50 national and state publication awards during her time with BOCES.

She is an accredited public relations professional (APR) who has presented multiple skill sessions at the NSPRA National Seminar on topics such as communication audits, school closures, grassroots advocacy and effective public meetings. She has presented at the annual conference of the Association of School Business Officials, Intl., to state-based district and school administrator associations and to NSPRA chapters as well.

Before entering the field of public school PR, Mellissa provided communication services for a hospital and a law firm in New York, a mortgage company in Maryland and universities in Texas and New York.



Communication Audit Report

Paulding County School District

15948 Derwood Rd., Rockville, MD 20855

301-519-0496 | nspra.org