



Communication Audit Report:

Cleveland Heights - University Heights City School District

National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | www.nspr.org | [f](#) NSPRAAssociation | [t](#) nspra

Contents

Introduction	4
Key Findings	7
Observations and SWOT Analysis	12
Recommendations	15-57
Recommendation 1 & Action Steps	16
Recommendation 2 & Action Steps	20
Recommendation 3 & Action Steps	28
Recommendation 4 & Action Steps	34
Recommendation 5 & Action Steps	40
Recommendation 6 & Action Steps	44
Recommendation 7 & Action Steps	50
Recommendation 8 & Action Steps	53
Recommendation 9 & Action Steps	56
Benchmarking Against NSPRA's Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures	58
Appendix	61

Introduction

The Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District is located east of Cleveland in a suburban geographic area referred to as the inner ring. The district serves the communities of Cleveland Heights and University Heights as well as a portion of South Euclid. Its 883 employees provide educational and support services for approximately 4,800 students on 11 campuses.

CH-UH is a diverse school district with a majority of students designated as African American (72%). The remaining student population breaks down as follows: white (17%) multi-racial (5%), Hispanic-Latino (4%) and American Indian, Pacific Islander and Asian (1%).

The district's demographics may make the school district an attractive educational option for parents who seek to raise their children in an educationally and culturally diverse setting. CH-UH has a reputation for offering options for students of all abilities from special education and academic support services to International Baccalaureate, state-certified STEM programming and Advanced Placement programs.

The results of those programs are reflected in the Heights High School graduation rate of 90%, with over \$12 million in scholarships being offered to 2020 graduates.

The district is best known for its fine and performing arts programs. Student groups have won numerous state and national awards, and alumni from the district have achieved success in almost every field of entertainment and the arts ([Notable Heights HS alumni](#)).

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those

services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

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

In serving CH-UH, the goals of the NSPRA Communication Audit process were to:

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

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the CH-UH Board of Education and Superintendent Elizabeth Kirby, to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

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

It is difficult to measure public relations overall, but individual elements can be assessed. For example, it can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. However, the real measure of success is whether the communication program is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing recommendations, the auditor considered perceptions expressed in focus groups, as well as resource materials provided by the district, in the context of the district's [vision, mission, core values and goals](#).

Guiding Definition

NSPRA works to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication, engagement and marketing practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

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

Nature of the Audit

A communication audit will enable CH-UH to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit is Tim Carroll, APR. His vita is included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the NSPRA Communication Audit involved the Communications Department submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *Quality Profile*, *Weekly Update*, *Tiger Nation Month in Review*, #TigerNation news feed, news releases and videos). The auditor conducted a thorough review of these materials in addition to reviewing 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. In addition, the auditor reviewed the district’s demographic data, strategic plan, news clips and digital communication analytics.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the virtual focus group component, which is designed to gather perceptions from the district’s internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with Board of Education members, the superintendent and communications staff on Sept. 20-24, 2021.

For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited participants who 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. (These can be found in the [Appendix](#) of this report.) Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to specific individuals if used in the report.

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

- Business/Community Leaders
- Directors and Supervisors
- Elementary Teachers

- Non-Teaching Professionals
- Parents of Elementary Students
- Parents of Secondary Students
- Principals
- Secondary Teachers
- Student Leaders
- Support Staff

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

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by NSPRA Executive Director Barbara Hunter, APR; Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR; and Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR.

Assumptions

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

However, due to the nature of the review, some caution should be observed. 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. However, it is important to also note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. It

is also a "snapshot" (or view of the district) at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

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

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication responsibilities, and others may apply to other departments or all staff. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake. In short, this report should be viewed as a road map for making comprehensive communication improvements over time.

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

Copies to participants

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 involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that the findings of this report be shared with focus group participants.

Key Findings

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

District Image/Strengths

- CH-UH is a school district that prides itself on having provided more than 100 years of service to the cities it serves, the opportunities it provides to students and the quality of its staff. Staff, parents and community members pointed to the varied programs the district offers to serve their diverse student body,
- Diversity was identified by almost every focus group as one of CH-UH's key strengths. The discussion of diversity as a strength centered on the diverse student body and staff as well as initiatives such as the CH-UH Equity Plan. Several participants expressed the idea that education in a culturally diverse environment better prepares students for college and the workforce.
- Focus group participants also highlighted the quality of teachers as a strength. They were seen by parents and community members as well trained, supportive of students and "going out of their way" for students each day.
- The district's economic and racial diversity has led the school district to offer a wide range of academic and support programs for students. CH-UH offers programs that are often found in larger school districts such as International Baccalaureate (IB); Advanced Placement (AP); Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM); and Career Technical Education (CTE). The district also manages a variety of programs for at-risk students in pre-k through high school.

- Fine and Performing Arts education were listed as district strengths in most staff and community focus groups. Participants pointed to the variety of arts course offerings, especially at Heights High School. Many residents in the Cleveland Heights and University Heights area are supportive of and/or connected to performing and visual arts in Cleveland and local universities. Therefore, there is high interest in arts education, and the school district's programs are well supported. Instrumental music programs have been nationally recognized, and the list of Heights High School alumni includes a long list of artists, musicians and writers.
- The district sponsors high quality preschool programs, which have received five-star ratings from Ohio.

District Image/Challenges

- Focus group participants directly or indirectly cited the perception of the district being divided, with one part of the community engaged and another disconnected because they have moved their children out of CH-UH schools. However, both parts of the community are stakeholders and voters in CH-UH.
- Competition from private schools was identified as a challenge to CH-UH, and changes to the Ohio EdChoice Scholarship Program in March 2020 have exacerbated the problem. A total of 2,628 school-age children within the CH-UH boundaries have used vouchers through the EdChoice system to attend a private school, charter school or homeschool. (These numbers do not include data on students within the boundaries whose families pay out of pocket for private school instead of using the state voucher system.)

The district has not conducted formal research to examine the reasoning of parents who choose not to use CH-UH schools from the beginning of their child(ren)'s education. However, when

families leave the district, an exit survey is conducted to learn the reasons for the decision. In preparation for the current school year, CH-UH also worked with a market research company to determine parents' intentions for returning to CH-UH for the 2021-22 school year. Those who indicated their children would not be returning were asked to share their reasons for the decision.

- Focus group comments indicated that the perception of CH-UH schools in the community has declined. One reason cited was the low state rating of “D” that CH-UH received in 2018-2019. (This cumulative grade was based on performance and individual grades in six categories: Achievement, Progress, Gap Closing, Improving At-Risk K-3 Readers, Graduation Rate and Prepared for Success.) These grade measurements have not been used in Ohio for the last two years, and the district has made efforts to focus on broader measurements. However, those results remain a talking point in parts of the community.

Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, Ohio school districts will be measured by a 5-star system that takes the previous factors into account, in addition to others. This program will not be fully put into effect until the 2022-2023 school year

- Many staff members and knowledgeable community members indicated they understand that the state report card does not adequately “say who we are.” They believe the school district has had success in serving a wide range of students, but the perception of a school district in need of improvement is still a challenge.
- The results of a December 2019 voter survey align with the focus group findings that the district has a perception issue. A majority of respondents had a favorable opinion of the district’s elementary schools, middle schools and high school and reflected a high opinion of the teachers and

staff. However, only 49% rated the school district as “excellent” or “good” while 42% gave a rating of “fair” or “poor.”

- CH-UH has experienced financial challenges in recent years due to changes in state aid, local tax collections and unanticipated COVID-19 expenses. The EdChoice voucher system created by Ohio has also negatively impacted school district finances, with the district reporting \$9 million less in income from the state this past fiscal year. Community support for additional funding through tax levies has been mixed over the past 30 years. CH-UH voters have supported 12 tax levy proposals and turned down nine. Most recently, a proposal for a 7.9 mil increase in the operating levy was voted down in March 2020, and an adjusted proposal of 4.8 mils was approved in November 2020 by a 135-vote margin.

External Communications

- When asked what the Communications Department does well, administrators said the department was good at telling the school district story overall, as well as sharing positive stories about people and events occurring in the district. They also felt the district has done a good job in sharing its financial story and how tax dollars are spent.
- Community leaders commented that the department focuses on all schools and is consistent in its messaging.
- The Heights Family Academy, a resource for CH-UH families, was noted by parents as a particularly effective communications tool.
- Parents and community members indicated the department has good processes for emergency communications.
- Focus group respondents stated that the department does a good job of keeping them informed through emails, social media posts and push notifications. This feedback aligns with a 2020-2021 end-of-

year survey where the majority of parents (78%) indicated that communications from the district were “sufficient,” and 80% felt communications from their campus were “sufficient.”

- There is a perception that many great things are happening in the schools and the district is missing the opportunity to spread the word. Stories about the many innovative programs mentioned under “District Strengths” (such as fine and performing arts) are not shared regularly and widely, compromising the district’s image.
- Some focus group participants expressed frustration over the perceptions of CH-UH and observed a need for communications to help tell the whole district story. As one participant observed: “We have a better story to tell. We are not sharing it.”
- One of the biggest communications challenges, according to focus groups, is the real or perceived split in the community between those families who attend the schools and those who live in CH-UH boundaries but do not attend the schools. Some participants feel there are unspoken biases against the schools and students. They also felt that some of those biases may be racially or economically based. One participant summarized by saying, “We are a diverse community, but our district demographics don’t reflect that because so many have left for private schools.”
- Parents asked to be kept “in the loop,” even when full answers are not available, so that at least they know a response is coming. Regarding COVID-19 communications, one parent asked the district to “think on the level of parents and what they might need to know to avoid worries.”
- Parents indicated they prefer communications to come in the form of emails, texts and robocalls. However, they also noted a few areas for potential improvements. Specifically, some focus groups felt communications could be more streamlined, some felt there were too many communications (primarily text messages and emails), and others felt the timing of robocalls and text messages could be changed to reach parents when they tend to be available.
- Fighting misinformation online and in the community is a major communications challenge according to numerous focus group participants. They noted challenges such as: getting the correct information out in a timely manner, changing the narrative about CH-UH, fighting unspoken biases, and sharing the good news with others outside of CH-UH.
- The auditor identified the following three primary communication channels for sharing information with the external community:
 - *#TigerNation* utilizes a news feed platform to share stories that have appeared in the news media about CH-UH and its schools. It is available to all families, staff and select community partners/leaders, who receive it unless they unsubscribe. The frequency with which it is sent and the topics included can be customized by the user, although most do not customize it and receive it weekly, which is the default.
 - The *Weekly Update* is a newsletter emailed each Friday to all families and staff in PDF form. It includes highlights from the last week, announcements of upcoming events, and general information about timely district topics.
 - The *Tiger Nation Month in Review* is sent at the end of each month to all families, staff and a select group of community partners/leaders. It lists what has happened in the district over the past month and includes much of the same information appearing in *#TigerNation* and the *Weekly Update*.

- Some members of the Board of Education expressed interest in more targeted communications to key audiences, more interactions to build the district's reputation with taxpayers and seeking more vocal support for schools. They shared that the district used to have a key communicator list, but it doesn't use it any longer.
- Several staff focus group participants said information from Board of Education meetings was not readily available and they looked to other sources, such as union communications, for that information. Several participants in other focus groups said they appreciated the meetings being streamed and indicated that they watch them regularly.

Internal Communications

- Staff focus groups expressed a need for better communication from the school district in general and noted that messages are often vague or mixed. Staff focus group participants report having to rely heavily on email and word of mouth, rather than fact-to-face communications, and felt frustrated when relevant news was shared inconsistently across the district.
- Principals expressed they are sometimes "caught off guard" when asked questions by staff about information that hasn't yet been shared with them by senior leaders.
- Staff expressed a desire to know more about the rationale behind leaders' decisions. They felt decisions affecting staff were being made without their knowledge or input. One example cited was by a member of a committee whose name was on a committee report they had never seen.
- The timing of major communications and directives was an issue with most staff focus groups. They observed that important messages were sent after hours or on weekends with expectations that action would be taken by the following workday.

One example given was a September COVID-19 protocol letter to staff.

- The theme of trust was brought up by the elementary and secondary teaching staff. Specifically, it was mentioned several times that there is a need for trust to be regained after recent contract negotiations, as well as the perception that the school district is not being transparent in many communications.
- In the 2020-2021 end-of-year survey, only 23% of teachers indicated district communications were "sufficient," with 41% indicating district communications were only "sometimes sufficient." (However, 74% of teachers did express that communications from their supervisor were "sufficient most of the time.") This aligns with focus group feedback.

Website

- Comments regarding the website were generally positive or neutral, which is uncommon for many school districts. In general, people felt the site was helpful and a good resource. Others said it was too busy and needed to have information updated more regularly.
- Central office, campus administrators and support staff regularly rely on the website for information. Parents seemed to use it more as a portal to access the Infinite Campus system.
- Staff members felt the website's staff directory needed to be updated more frequently as staff members leave or change campus assignments. Parents overall liked the website but also said that campus pages and calendars are not always updated.

Attentiveness of Leadership

- Community leaders felt the district was open to hearing from them at public meetings and through committees. Parent opinions were mixed, saying, "It depends on

what part of the district you are in.” There was a feeling among some parents that community members being heard didn’t always represent the larger community, but the “loudest get the most attention.” Another parent said that “the south side gets heard but not always the north side of the school district.”

- Staff members felt district leadership does not listen to their concerns and that anonymous input from staff is not solicited. There are also concerns about repercussions for teachers who do speak out. Support staff members said there is no vehicle to let their ideas be heard by the district. Non-teaching professionals said they may feel supported by their supervisor but not by leadership at the central office level.

Student Perceptions

- Heights High School students were asked what makes their school a good school. Their responses included: a diverse school with different ethnicities and cultures, a welcoming environment for all, a wide class selection, and caring teachers and administrators. They said they love their teachers and administrators and they feel their voices are heard.
- When asked about school communications, they felt the use of Remind as a communication channel is adequate, but that text messages may be more effective. A suggestion was made to have a text message follow up an important school announcement such as picture day or exams.

Observations and SWOT Analysis

Observations

Based on the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditor offers the following general observations:

- The Board of Education members are strong supporters of the schools and expressed support for the communications audit.** They had a good grasp on the challenges the district faces and had realistic expectations for communications initiatives. Their insight was very helpful to the audit process.
 - The supervisor of communications has the placement and experience to positively impact district and board communications.** Supervisor of Communications Cathan Cavanaugh is well respected and has been able to bring her previous experience as the CH-UH communications assistant to the job. Administrators recognize her role in helping the campuses and school district “get the word out.” The supervisor’s placement directly under the superintendent on the organizational chart is important. Her seat on the administrative cabinet also indicates the importance of communications to the staff and Board of Education.
 - Communications Department workflow should be evaluated.** Currently, the supervisor of communications and the communications assistant handle most of the communications tasks with support from a staff assistant. The department also includes a full-time Heights High School family and community liaison who specifically supports high school communications. Job descriptions are well written and very detailed.
- While Communications Department staffing is adequate for current responsibilities, adjustments may need to be considered as communication priorities are increased or enhanced.
- Stepping back and evaluating the department’s many projects in the context of the district’s overall Strategic Plan could help the Communications Department staff be more effective. Some tasks may be reduced or dropped so more emphasis can be placed on achieving district goals.
- CH-UH will benefit from continued visibility of the superintendent in the community.** Superintendent Elizabeth Kirby was appointed to lead the CH-UH school district in August 2019. The priorities and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic have limited her ability to be more visible in the community. As the pandemic subsides, it will be important for the superintendent to plan and attend formal and informal activities in order to meet more of the staff and community.
 - The academic success of students was not specifically mentioned as a CH-UH strength by administrators, teachers or community members.** Even in a school district where academic performance on state exams may need improvement, there are many students who are achieving great things. Staff should become familiar with and eager to talk about the success of their students.
 - Concerns about the flow of communication from the central office to the schools was mentioned enough to be identified as an area of concern.** The volume and urgency of COVID-19 communications has contributed to this problem in all school districts, but strategies to improve processes should be explored.

- A community and staff needs assessment survey would benefit CH-UH as it looks to increase community engagement and build trust with various employee groups.** End-of-year surveys for staff and parents have been conducted in recent years, and the district also conducted a survey in December 2019 specific to the 2020 levy proposal. However, a more comprehensive survey would be helpful in gauging attitudes on topics such as student achievement, academics, departmental services and leadership. The opinions of non-school-age parents and private school parents should also be sought.
- More research should be conducted on why parents choose not to send their children to CH-UH.** The number of students within the CH-UH boundaries attending private or parochial schools rose by 530 students in 2020-2021 compared to 2019-2020. The impact of at-home learning due to COVID-19 is quite possibly a factor in this increase, and some parents would send their children to religious schools, regardless. However, others make the decision based on their perceptions of CH-UH schools and this should be explored further.
- The CH-UH website has a wealth of information based on user preferences, but needs to be better organized and designed using more current web design standards.** The system for changing or updating campus and department web pages relies on a few people to keep up with many pages, which takes the ownership away from the campuses and departments. This system may maintain content control, but it can be inefficient for workflow. Expanding responsibility could increase efficiency, provided that responsible staff are adequately trained, at least annually, on website expectations and best practices.
- The CH-UH Quality Profile (annual report) is a well-designed and informative publication that gives a good snapshot of the district from year to year.** The online version should be more broadly shared and highlighted in digital communications to increase stakeholder knowledge of the district.
- The CH-UH mobile app could be more engaging.** The purpose of the mobile app should be fingertip access to important information for people who are not using a computer or large screen device, and the app should be made more inviting and easier to navigate. It should also provide app-based content and not just link to web pages.
- Identifying a unified message for the school district should be a primary goal of a CH-UH marketing plan.** A focus group participant's comment that "others are telling our story for us" illustrates the marketing problem CH-UH faces with competition from numerous private schools and the EdChoice voucher system.
- Internal communications need more attention.** There is a need for regular and concise communications directly with employees. While staff are included in the *Weekly Update*, *Tiger Nation Month in Review* and the *#TigerNation* news feed along with parents and the community, these are insufficient for keeping employees connected and feeling valued for the important role they play.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that affect the ability of [district acronym] to achieve its communication goals.

Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CH-UH has a variety of effective communication tools in place, including print publications, web-based programs and social media outlets. Staff and parents expressed pride in the quality and commitment of CH-UH teachers. Superintendent Kirby has a commitment to improving internal and external communications. The Board of Education members are strong supporters of the schools. The Communications Department is adequately staffed and utilized well within the organization. One of the district’s most successful programs — Fine and Performing Arts — is also one of its most visible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The “one thing” or key message that CH-UH wants people to know about them is not clear. The flow of communications to the staff and campus administration was expressed as a concern. While there are many communication tools being used, they could be more focused on the district’s primary mission — educating children. There needs to be deeper research into why a significant number of families are enrolling their children outside the school district. The Communications Department needs this data in order to develop a strategic communication and marketing plan.

	Opportunities	Threats
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pandemic restrictions are lessening, which will lead to more community outreach and communication opportunities. The Heights Family Academy is an excellent parent-school outreach program. There are several key (and untapped) populations within CH-UH who can help tell the school district story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Even though students and teachers are back in the classroom this fall, the global pandemic has hindered direct and face-to-face communications between the district and its publics, which may have eroded trust. The EdChoice Scholarship Program (voucher system) is a major threat to district enrollment and finances. Aggressive marketing by institutions accepting those students presents a major communications challenge for CH-UH.

Recommendations

The CH-UH communications program is led by the supervisor of communications, who reports directly to the superintendent. The supervisor and the communications assistant handle most of the district's communications tasks with support from a staff assistant. The Communications Department also includes a part-time Heights High School parent and community liaison, who specifically supports high school communications.

Communications staff have accomplished a great deal for CH-UH. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the district's communication program, but that should not detract from the many positive contributions of the department. In fact, if the district is going to realize meaningful improvements in

its communication program, the commitment and participation of the entire CH-UH administrative team will be required.

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

Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive communication plan that aligns with the CH-UH Strategic Plan.
2. Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.
3. Become more strategic in reaching external audiences.
4. Incorporate marketing strategies into a strategic communication and marketing plan.
5. Create a CH-UH crisis communication plan.
6. Strengthen the digital engagement of the community through social media, e-communications and video.
7. Enhance the website as a tool to tell the CH-UH story.
8. Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.
9. Create more opportunities to engage with long-time residents and alumni.

Recommendation 1:

Develop a comprehensive communication plan that aligns with the CH-UH Strategic Plan.

School communications strategies have changed significantly in recent years. Traditional media such as newspapers and local television news have cut back on staff and coverage, especially in larger metro areas like Cleveland. In their place is 24/7 access to news via cable networks and social media. As a result, school patrons have come to expect real-time answers and updates on issues and actions that impact their schools.

This rapid-paced environment puts pressure on districts with small communications departments to react and respond rather than take a more strategic approach. A highly effective communication program must be driven by a clear strategic vision and measurable objectives in order to not fall victim to only responding to the latest communication crisis or priority request.

The Communications Department manages a number of activities that help tell the school district story. Many of these are listed in the CH-UH District Communications Plan 2021-2022. The communication activities represent a great deal of planning and effort. However, what is missing in the plan is the connection to the school district's strategic goals or superintendent's priorities. It can be assumed that many of the listed projects would move the district toward accomplishing these communications goals, but some may not.

Therefore, when developing a communication plan, CH-UH should set priorities for how resources will be spent by determining if and how they fit within the district's overall Strategic Plan.

Following is the district's Strategic Plan goal that should inform a communication plan:

The CH-UH Strategic Plan Goal 3:

Family and Community Engagement, Partnerships and Communication: Families and community partners are welcomed and fully engaged in supporting and enhancing student learning.

Strategic Objective 1: Foster staff-family relationships that support student learning.

Strategic Objective 2: Optimize use of the community's assets and expertise to provide Community Learning Centers for students and improve District results. Complete implementation of the Post-Secondary Planning System as a tool for maximizing the use of community partnerships.

Strategic Objective 3: Improve communication with and among families, school leaders and teachers, and community partners.

Strategic Objective 4: Improve public perception of CH-UH Schools among stakeholders.

Strategic Objective 5: Foster a solid understanding of the District's equity initiatives among internal and external stakeholders.

A strategic communication plan should be developed that defines the communication goals, measurable objectives, strategies and tactics that will be used to help achieve this district goal and its objectives. The department might have some unrelated goals of its own, but the district goals must be addressed.

An effective strategic communication plan will:

- Help keep communication efforts on track and maximize CH-UH's communication resources in terms of both time and dollars.
- Focus on engaging people as well as informing them.
- Detail the particulars of each initiative to be undertaken, including specific action steps, target audiences, key messages,

time lines, designation of staff responsibilities, desired outcomes and specific evaluation criteria.

- Include a crisis communications plan for the department.

Action Step 1.1

Follow traditional, proven public relations planning principles and practices.

The CH-UH District Communications Plan plan should adhere to the industry standard, four-step strategic communication “RPIE” planning model, with the acronym referring to four key steps: research, planning, implementation and evaluation.

All four steps are critical, and cyclical, with evaluation of earlier efforts used to inform research and planning for future efforts.

1. Research (R) includes finding and documenting the history of a situation, and compiling any qualitative and/or quantitative data that might provide insights and understanding into the needs of stakeholders and the district’s desired outcomes.

Using research more consistently and effectively will build understanding of the varying communication needs of the district, schools and stakeholders. Research should include formal data sources such as web/social media analytics and census data, along with anecdotal evidence from listening efforts such as focus groups, surveys and informal discussions and possibly contracted third-party research. The [Research Resources section on the NSPRA website](#) provides a wealth of information about how to assess the communication needs of the district—from how to gain insights into how constituents feel about the district overall, to specific feedback on individual communication tactics.

This NSPRA Communication Audit is an excellent starting point on that research, with its compiled data on the communication preferences of internal and external

#1

Develop a comprehensive communications plan that aligns with the CH-UH Strategic Plan.

stakeholders. In addition, CH-UH already has additional data derived from community and voter surveys to use as initial baselines as well as enrollment data and the state school report cards.

Also consider using the following research sources:

- Local community demographics, which can be obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau (<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>) and local municipal websites.
- National public opinion surveys such as the PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>).
- Global communication trends, as documented for example by the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>).

2. Planning (P) follows the research phase, and includes developing timelines, strategies and tactics for addressing identified situations and setting both longer-term communication goals and shorter-term, measurable objectives. The planning phase should lead to clearly articulated goals and measurable objectives for communication based on desired changes in awareness levels, knowledge levels, perceptions and behaviors of key audience members. It should also identify strategies to achieve the identified objective as well as the tactics and tools that will be used to accomplish each strategy.

The planning phase should include developing key messages, identifying affected stakeholder groups, and determining the best ways to reach and build relationships with those groups. The plan should also identify specific tools and tactics for each audience, the resources needed to deploy those tools and tactics, and how they will be acquired.

Tips for approaching this stage of the process include the following. The best practice process for developing objectives is expanded upon in Action Step 1.2.

Think broadly in terms of the audiences to be engaged. These go beyond parents, students and staff and should also include:

- Business and community partners: civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, Realtors (an important audience who can be invaluable allies or damaging detractors), and others active in the schools and community.
- Elected officials: local government, county officials, state legislators.
- Non-parent residents: young parents, empty nesters, senior citizens and others without children in CH-UH schools.
- Media representatives: local newspaper reporters and editors, regional newspaper contacts, radio news directors and TV news reporters.

For each initiative, your plan should answer the following questions:

- 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 action (if any) are we trying to encourage?
- How will we evaluate and measure the outcomes?

The recommendations included in this report provide direction for beginning the planning process. The Heights Schools Foundation should also be part of the planning process since they have been closely aligned with the Communications Department on marketing and outreach activities.

3. Implementing (I) the plan is probably 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. While formal evaluation will come at the end of the implementation process, the plan should also identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase, building in checkpoint opportunities to modify the plan if and as needed.

4. Evaluating (E) the outcome is easier when measurable objectives are identified during the planning phase. If communications staff don't know what they want to achieve, by when and to what degree, it is virtually impossible to know whether they have succeeded in any meaningful way. Accordingly, the plan should identify evaluation measures that will be used to determine the success in achieving the articulated goals and measurable objectives. Examples of such measures include participation rates in school and district events, changes in stakeholders' opinions and perceptions as measured by the annual end-of-year survey, academic gains for individuals and groups of students, participation numbers, election results, etc.

Action Step 1.2

Make sure the objectives identified in the planning step are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time bound).

The objectives included in the district's Strategic Plan Goal 3 do not reflect all of the components of a SMART objective, which includes being specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound.

Specifically, they do not include the means by which the district will measure success and in what time frame.

This makes it that much more important for the communications plan to clearly spell out what success will look like. SMART objectives will allow the Communications Department to determine clearly and without bias when an objective has been met. It will also provide a means for evaluating the return on the investment of resources used to meet the objective.

Following is an example of a SMART objective that might be found in the strategic communications plan aimed at fulfilling the district's Strategic Objective 3: Improve communication with and among families, school leaders and teachers, and community partners.

By the end of the 2022-2023 school year, 85% of parents completing the annual end-of-year survey will indicate that the information they receive from the district is sufficient for their needs.

Action Step 1.3

Give fresh consideration to current communication efforts.

Evaluate the efficacy of current initiatives through the lens of how well they assist the district and the Communications Department in meeting goals and objectives. Consider each publication and communication tool used by the department, including the *Weekly Update* newsletter, the *Tiger Nation Month in Review*, the *#TigerNation* news feed, Board of Education updates, website content and management, and district's mass communication system (Blackboard). Also consider processes currently in place for issues management, media relations, crisis communications, etc.

Through this exercise, the Communications Department will be able to identify the efforts that are best suited to assisting the district and department in meeting their aligned goals and objectives.

Likewise, this process will help to identify the tools and processes that are *not* serving the district well, so they can be streamlined or completely eliminated. In doing so, the communications department will free up the resources necessary for new initiatives, which may be more successful in meeting the department's and district's stated goals and objectives.

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

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

View a blank communication plan template developed by a NSPRA Gold Medallion-winning district at this link: https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/communication-plan-template-pattonville-sd.pdf

Recommendation 2:

Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.

A pressing need overshadowing all other aspects of the CH-UH's internal communications effort is to build trust and connections with employees. Difficult contract negotiations between the school district and teachers in December 2020 and workplace changes due to COVID-19 have eroded trust between the two groups. This was expressed by many teachers within the focus groups, who felt there was a lack of transparency from administration and important decisions were being made without meaningful staff input.

Regardless of whether these comments fairly describe the intent of administrators, the perception alone is enough to hinder communications between the groups. For this reason, steps should be taken to build trust and communication between teachers, support staff and school administrators.

The first step in strengthening the communication program and increasing its effectiveness is to promote and continually reinforce a culture of communication so all faculty and staff feel part of a team and recognize their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the district.

The feedback from employees in the focus groups pointed to problems and frustrations common to many school districts across the country:

- There is no single, trusted source of information for staff.
- Messaging is not consistent or timely.
- While input is allowed, it is not always perceived as being considered.
- There is uncertainty about whom to go to with questions.

When employees feel they have been left out of the loop and have no voice in the decisions that impact their jobs and schools, morale plummets and positive ambassadorship evaporates. Employees who are well informed and have been involved in decision processes will feel they are important to the organization and will have a positive influence on external communication efforts as well as the overall environment of the district.

Effective internal communication and a commitment to authentic employee engagement need to be integrated as priorities in the district's Strategic Plan and set as an expectation for all administrators. Employees at all levels should be aware of district initiatives and issues and be able to share that information when the need or opportunity arises.

It should be noted that a lack of communication from the central office to employees is almost always identified by employees as a problem. However, as noted in the [Key Findings](#) and [Observations and SWOT Analysis](#) sections, communications from the central office to school administrators or school staff was identified as a problem by participants in each group.

Specific observations included:

- When asked how they receive school district information, the internal focus groups cited the best source as email and then word of mouth from supervisors.
- Teachers in the focus groups stated that school news often comes to them through the Cleveland Heights Teachers Union (CHTU) communications.
- It is the perception that departments send communications out to all staff or teachers not knowing the information may conflict with another department's message.
- There appeared to be limited use of the staff section of the district website for finding district-level employee information.

- It should be noted that the issues identified centered more on how decisions are communicated than the actual decisions themselves. That attitude and confidence will make building an improved internal communications system somewhat easier.

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

Action Step 2.1

Clearly define the communication role of all CH-UH departments and schools as being collaborators with the Communications Department.

The CH-UH Communications Department has a very specific role in planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information and messaging via the district's primary communication channels. The Communications Department staff also typically serve as the point of contact on crisis communication for the district and its schools. As a result, an effective communication program must be built on trust, relationships and regular interactions, which requires the active leadership of all administrators. All CH-UH district, department and school building leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the Communications Department.

For this to happen, communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at district leadership team meetings, as well as at regular principal and administrative meetings, so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications. By clarifying administrators' communication responsibilities and ensuring that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the district's Strategic Plan and integrated at all levels, CH-UH will create more internal trust and engagement

#2

Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.

among employees. This will also provide the Communications Department with more time and capacity to focus on developing other strategic communication initiatives for the district.

Action Step 2.2

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

Maintaining effective communication requires thoughtful, well-defined guidelines and protocols to deliver clear, targeted messages. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, information bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered.

To ensure CH-UH leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how the district and its leaders will communicate with staff.

For example, one expectation might be that CH-UH staff should receive important information at least 30 minutes before parents and the community so they can serve as frontline communicators and ambassadors for the schools. Consider the timing of these messages, keeping in mind that teachers are unlikely to check their email while actively teaching. Another expectation might be that any information employees need to act upon is delivered at least 48 hours in advance.

Other communication expectations for leaders might be to regularly communicate:

- Rationale behind decisions
- Articulation of how initiatives or decisions align with the mission, vision and strategic direction of the district
- Summaries of important meetings
- Practical details of district operations and policies that affect staff job duties

To demonstrate the district’s commitment to enhancing communication efforts, a communication component should be included in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently in place.

Action Step 2.3

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

The superintendent and supervisor of communications should work with the CH-UH leadership team to clarify the process for internal communications and to develop a list of available vehicles for internal communication. The process and list should be shared and reviewed with district administrators and school principals at least annually.

The internal communication process document might include:

- Guidelines for what information goes into a staff newsletter and what gets pushed out individually by departments or administrators. Ideally, routine and non-emergency notices that are relevant for most/all staff belong in a staff newsletter. Legitimately urgent information and information pertaining to subgroups can be sent via email.
- A system for developing talking points for all major initiatives, which all staff will receive simultaneously.

- An outline of procedures for how and when important information should be shared, perhaps in a chart that illustrates the order and timeline for communications (i.e., who is notified when and in what order).
- The district’s preferred communication vehicles for use in specific situations.
- Tips for effective inter-department and department-to-school communication.
- Templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.
- A requirement that time be set aside for key announcements during leadership meetings whenever possible. These meetings should include an agenda item that allows department and building leadership to share information that everyone on the team needs to know. As critical information sources for the rest of the staff, these leaders must be informed in a reliable, timely and thorough way.

One simple way to incorporate communication planning into meetings and other discussions is to add check boxes (FYI, To Be Shared and Confidential) to each agenda item, as shown below.

**Example:
Communication Planning Check Boxes**

FYI	<input type="checkbox"/>
To be shared	<input type="checkbox"/>
Confidential	<input type="checkbox"/>

The person facilitating each topic should clarify what category it falls into. If an item is marked “To be shared,” then a discussion will be needed to decide who will share it, with whom, when and how. The following communication grid could be employed and can also be used with councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated appropriately.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Action Step 2.4

Maintain and enhance the orientation program for new employees to ensure they understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors from the beginning.

Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, with the goal of creating a positive on-boarding experience that offers a solid grounding in CH-UH’s history and culture, while setting expectations for all employees to be informed ambassadors for the district. Fortunately, the CH-UH Communication Department already plays a significant role in the new teacher and administration orientation program.

Currently, the superintendent welcomes the new staff and talks briefly about the district’s strategic priorities and current initiatives. This immediate connection with top leadership demonstrates to the district’s newest employees that they are valued and helps to build trust and confidence.

The communications team, including the Heights Schools Foundation executive director, the family engagement specialist and the supervisor of community and school partnerships, provide a one-hour presentation, during which multiple topics are covered, including:

- The tools used to deliver information to various CH-UH audiences.
- The events organized by the communications team.

- An overview of the efforts made to retain and recruit students.
- The process used to welcome and acclimate prospective families.
- An introduction to the district’s customer service philosophy.
- The background and purpose of the Heights Schools Foundation.
- Family engagement strategies.
- District partnerships.

As opportunity and time permit, the communications department may want to consider incorporating the following additional components for acclimating new hires to CH-UH’s communication expectations and functions.

- **Seek out veteran staff in key positions to assist in improving the communications onboarding process.** Those who hold the institutional knowledge of the district and are respected among their peers can be invaluable resources for knowing what information should be shared with new hires, as well as how and when to share it.
- **Emphasize the important role of staff as communicators and ambassadors.** New hires should learn what it means to be an ambassador for CH-UH. Emphasize their responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their school. Review guidelines and expectations related to news media relations and social media, so staff protocols are clearly understood. Encourage staff to keep the Communications Department informed of newsworthy events happening in their classrooms.
- **Provide guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests.** Consider preparing a summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” to distribute to all employees.

- **Provide new hires with an orientation package that includes some of the components presented in the introductory session as well as information that will be helpful as they perform their job responsibilities.**

Possibilities for the orientation package include:

- An employee handbook and a current contact directory for all CH-UH departments.
- General information about CH-UH, the schools and unique programs.
- An overview of school district and local community history.
- A copy of the 2026 District Strategic Plan and information about key initiatives.
- A list of all communication vehicles (i.e., publications, website, intranet, social media, etc.), their purpose and when information or new issues are typically published or posted.
- Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor.
- Tips on being an ambassador for the schools and reminders regarding how CH-UH's success is tied to effective communications.

Action Step 2.5

Develop a Communications Handbook.

Consider developing a Communications Handbook to be used as an in-service tool for new staff orientation or communication workshops. The handbook could be shared and reviewed annually with principals and administrators, and sections could be highlighted as communication tips in staff publications. When all staff members are provided with the training and resources to answer questions and share information with parents, it will create a strong foundation that helps instill trust, counter misinformation and promote transparency.

Following are two examples of guides created for administrators that set clear communication expectations.

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

Action Step 2.6

Establish a procedure for gathering employee input on decisions that affect their jobs.

When possible, CH-UH leaders should seek employee input in advance when potential decisions will directly impact staff members and the schools. This request was brought forward in several staff focus groups during the audit. Setting a procedure for gathering input on all major decisions that impact staff will ultimately serve to strengthen trust and transparency throughout the district.

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

Here are several ideas to consider for expanding engagement in the district.

- **Seek input on all key issues and listen to that input as part of the decision-making process.** Do not ask for input

from staff if a decision has already been made. When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, staff can easily feel their input does not matter and that asking is only for the sake of appearances, thereby eroding trust.

- **Give staff input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or direction.** In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary but choose to seek staff input before finalizing it. When this is done and staff input favors a different solution or choice, leaders have an interesting dilemma. Requesting input does not mean district leaders must follow the suggestions, but the input must be given due consideration. If it is not actionable, then the reasons why should be explained along with the rationale for the final decision.
- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** In most cases, the Board of Education or administrators seek input to gather information in order to make a better decision. Confusion and frustration may enter the process if those asked for input mistakenly perceive they are making the decision. To avoid this situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used, and who will make the actual decision. If these positions are clearly defined on the front end of the process, it will be less likely that those providing input will misunderstand their role.

Action Step 2.7

Continue to celebrate employee contributions and successes.

A combination of formal and informal employee recognition is important to maintaining high morale and employee engagement. CH-UH currently sponsors an annual employee recognition program at the

end of each school year that honors Tiger Team Members of the Month, Teachers of the Year, Helping Hands of the Year and Administrators of the Year. In addition, those who have presented at professional conferences are presented with the Tiger Nation Award at this time.

Consider expanding recognition to award categories that don't single out just one employee in each category. Following are three you might consider:

- **Bright Idea Awards**—presented to any employees who bring forward ideas or programs that improves academic achievement or saves the school district money.
- **Bell Ringer Awards**—recognize any employee who has gone above and beyond their normal job responsibilities for the benefit of children or the school district. Give out 15-20 bells (school bells) each year to recognize any category of employee who does a great job every day.
- **Rookie of the Year**—presented to one or more first-year teachers who truly embrace the profession and do a great job for their school. (Perhaps this award could be sponsored by the Teachers Union.)

Action Step 2.8

Consider developing a communication source exclusively for staff.

The CH-UH *Weekly Update*, which was initiated in 2020-2021, the *Tiger Nation Month in Review* and the *#TigerNation* news feed appear to be effective tools for communicating events and happenings in the district. However none of these publications were mentioned as a primary source of information in staff focus groups.

In addition, while some information that is relevant primarily to staff is included in the *Weekly Update*, it is not the appropriate platform for sharing extensive information on topics that would be of interest only to staff and not other CH-UH audiences.

Consider a joint project with Human Resources to produce a separate, regularly scheduled communication for employees only. This would be a valuable platform that employees could come to rely on for the information they need to fulfill their roles as employees and ambassadors of the district. In addition, it reflects the district's belief that their contributions to the district are important and valued.

Action Step 2.9

Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.

Maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication. Research (including focus group and survey feedback) shows employees prefer face-to-face communication from direct supervisors to emails, memos and newsletters. Therefore, administrators and supervisors who plan and run meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction.

- Create a Superintendent's Communications Council.** Made up of representatives from all schools and key support areas, the group could meet quarterly with the superintendent to bring forth suggestions and concerns. Key administrative staff members could also attend during the year to briefly present information about key initiatives. Consider having members solicit questions from their school/group. (If this is done, the questions should be reviewed by campus principals so they can address campus level concerns, such as problems with the copy machines, at the building level.) A Communication Department staff member or administrative assistant could take notes and follow up with a summary of questions and answers—particularly ones that could not be answered immediately. While this is a common activity, each council reflects the superintendent's style and district needs, and CH-UH should do the same when creating their own council.
- Include all employees assigned to a school in faculty meetings.** Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important updates and share key messages at faculty meetings. Since students and their parents rely on teachers as their main information source, it is essential that staff have the information they need to fulfill this communication role. Include support staff in these meetings whenever possible and share these broader updates at the top of the meeting so those who do not need to be part of discussions related to instruction can be dismissed early.
- Share information in meetings in a way that allows staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed.** Some information can be easily disseminated through email. However, issues that need more explanation or could be contentious should be presented in person at staff meetings, where clarifying questions can be asked and answered.
- Create opportunities for employees of the administrative departments to interact with the superintendent, cabinet and each other.** To better integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a big picture view of employee issues and concerns, consider holding regular meetings of administrative department staff. Support staff in these departments are often left out of the communications chain and operate in silos. So, employees who work in different areas often have limited interaction with each other. Holding an all-hands-on-deck meeting quarterly or once a semester would provide valuable face time with the superintendent and cabinet and provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions about new initiatives and updates.

- **Cultivate internal key communicators across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department has team members who colleagues consider to be in the know and who are trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put these individuals to work by identifying and engaging them in sharing key messages through the district's key communicator program, (Action Step 3.3).

Recommendation 3:

Become more strategic in reaching external audiences.

Based upon the auditor's observations and interviews, the CH-UH Communications Department relies heavily on direct communication with stakeholders already affiliated with the district, such as parents, students and staff, through print pieces, online postings and social media. The risk with this strategy is that someone other than the district will fill the void and speak on the district's behalf amongst other groups. This problem was discussed by participants in several focus groups, who pointed to an online community forum seen by parents as a vehicle to discuss school issues. Parents acknowledged that it sometimes becomes a platform for misinformation and, as a result, a communications challenge for CH-UH.

The past 18 months of COVID-19 restrictions has understandably created a void in community outreach activities for the school district. Looking ahead, CH-UH should place an emphasis on community outreach events, when health circumstances allow it.

To that end, it is recommended that CH-UH look for more ways to engage the public in conversation through planned events or less formal means. Print, electronic and social media communications should continue, but more planning and emphasis should be directed toward face-to-face interaction with the public. As a result of so much important communication (and instruction) being online the past two years, it is important that the Board of Education and administration, with the help of the Communications Department, bring stakeholders together for meaningful conversations about their children and schools.

This recommendation aligns well with the desire expressed among board members, during interviews, for more targeted communications to key audiences and more interactions to build the district's reputation with taxpayers.

The following action steps offer strategies for improving community engagement efforts.

Action Step 3.1

Adopt a public engagement strategy to create dialogue and build trust about improving student achievement.

When asked about challenges facing the school district, most focus group parents and staff members identified EdChoice or vouchers. The school district has done a good job of outlining on its website the impact of EdChoice on CH-UH's image and finances. However, the 2018-2019 grade of D in the state rating system is mostly the result of student academic performance. The district has a responsibility to address both these issues and explain how they relate (or don't relate) to one another.

The topic of student performance was brought up by only two of the approximately 100 administrators, teachers, staff members and community members who participated in the focus groups. While the focus of this audit is on communications issues, solely improving communication and not addressing the issue at hand will only partially resolve the problem. However, one way that communications can help is through public engagement.

The concept of public engagement is compelling for education because it requires schools to engage stakeholders in meaningful ways that also foster civic investment in the education. At its core is active, intentional listening and deliberate dialogue. It requires all voices to be at the table and is successful when those stakeholders are involved in all phases of decision-making and share ownership of outcomes, from start to finish. This long-term strategy could have a significant impact on the school and community climate and ultimately lead to greater benefits such as higher enrollments and less voucher transfers.

If schools and parents are truly in a partnership to help children succeed, then finding a solution to this current challenge

must be part of that partnership. CH-UH has an opportunity to take a leadership role in this important conversation by creating the forum to discuss student achievement instead of reacting to detractors who will frame the story for their own purposes. In addition, this process often uncovers rumors and misconceptions the district can work to correct in upcoming communications.

Of course, an important early consideration is to determine if an engagement process would be viewed as beneficial by those participating. One way to assess this is to consider what Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, calls “Gateway Questions”:

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

If it is determined that an engagement process would be beneficial, a few factors are critical to success.

- **Leadership.** Deploying a successful engagement process requires leaders who understand and support the process. A number of organizations offer training and other resources such as books, session guidelines and facilitator manuals. One potential resource is the [Tools & Guides section of publicagenda.org](#). The district can also opt to bring in an external facilitator trained in public engagement to lead the initiative.
- **Timing.** Ensure stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process and not just brought in at the approval

#3

Become more strategic in reaching external audiences.

stage. To do this, the district must determine the outside deadline for a final decision and work backwards from that point, including the community engagement piece as a vital component.

- **Commitment.** The board and administration must be willing to listen to input and recommendations and act on the information gathered. This does not mean everything suggested will be implemented. It means giving thoughtful and authentic consideration to the input and closing the communication loop by reporting back on progress being made toward resolving the issue and the rationale supporting the final decision.
- **Organization.** The best format for any individual community engagement will be dependent on the topic and the outcome desired from the process. An excellent resource is the [Spectrum of Public Participation created by the International Association for Public Participation](#).
- Generally speaking, the district will want to consider the following:
 - **Who needs to be represented at the table.** This could include students, parents, community members, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, board members, and others.
 - **What structure will be most effective.** Determine the action steps, output format and timeline for the group. And, of course, schedule sessions at places and times conducive to attendance.

- **Set the stage.** From the outset, it is essential for everyone involved to understand the process and the purpose of the engagement process and to collectively agree to the ground rules.

- **Evaluation.** The district should document what community engagement activities worked and didn't work in order to refine the process so they become more effective and generate even greater visibility over time.

Through this structured, inclusive approach, CH-UH can:

- Encourage talking and reasoning.
- Uncover previously silent voices, as well as misinformation and rumor.
- Enhance understanding of different positions.
- Explore solutions possibly not previously considered.
- Evaluate options collectively along with the consequences of various decisions.
- Increase transparency.
- Build trust.

NSPRA offers the following resources for additional ideas on increasing community engagement:

- “Principals in the Public: Engaging Community Support” by Richard D. Bagin, APR—<https://www.nspr.org/content/principals-public-engaging-community-support>
- “The Politics of Authentic Engagement: Perspectives, Strategies and Tools for Student Success” by Kathy Leslie, APR, with Judy Taccogna—<https://www.nspr.org/politics-authentic-engagement-perspectives-strategies-and-tools-student-success>
- “The Politics of Authentic Engagement:

Tools for Engaging Stakeholders in Ensuring Student Success” (Workbook)—<https://www.nspr.org/politics-authentic-engagement-tools-engaging-stakeholders-ensuring-student-success-workbook>

Action Step 3.2

Use the superintendent of schools to tell the CH-UH story.

Like other outreach activities, the pandemic has limited opportunities for Superintendent Kirby to meet with community members as she would like. The recent completion of the district's new Strategic Plan offers a good opportunity to meet with community leaders and organizations about the school district's vision and plans.

The Communications Department should work with the superintendent to create a “road show,” highlighting school district successes as well as long-range plans. The road show could include a video or a professional PowerPoint presentation that visually shows the many faces of the district. Success stories should be included, but an opportunity to turn the conversation towards student learning and district goals should not be missed.

Schedule the presentations with business and community groups, parent organizations and other groups that may have an interest in CH-UH, and give consideration to including cabinet members who are adept at sharing certain facets of the CH-UH story. The presentation could first be shared with a representative group of staff members or a new Superintendent's Communications Council (Action Step 2.9).

In addition, the superintendent might also consider:

- Meeting with the local ministerial alliance or small groups of influential religious leaders.
- Expanding on the end-of-year recognition event by including the recognition of additional individuals such as teachers of the year, PTA award recipients, retirees,

bus drivers, even major student award winners such as National Merit finalists. Special awards can also be created for the annual event such as a Friend of Education award given to community members or the CH-UH Volunteer of the Year. Through this event, the superintendent is sending a message that she appreciates and recognizes the wide variety of contributions being made on behalf of the district.

Action Step 3.3

Create a CH-UH key communicator network.

Another strategy to create more dialogue with the community is a key communicator network.

A key communicator network is a formalized group created to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community, and it can be a useful communication tool. Although current social media platforms and communications technology have made it convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of CH-UH patrons and staff, it does not replace the value of personal communication with a small group of influential community opinion leaders.

Focus group comments indicated that a similar outreach program had been used at CH-UH in the past. We recommend CH-UH renew or create a key communicator network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with key stakeholders within the community. These individuals, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of ambassadors for the district. For example, this network would have been another tool for reaching out to CH-UH parents and community members with information related to COVID-19 during the past two school years.

Key communicator networks are effective because they are composed of respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents, they are perceived as having access to inside information, and they are

considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. You can use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas, a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

The CH-UH Communications Department or the Superintendent's Office would be logical places from which to coordinate a key communicator network. Much of it could be managed by the communications staff or an administrative assistant in either department.

The total group should represent as many segments of the community as possible and be perceived as people others go to for the real story. Considerations for selecting your key communicators include:

- Ask each principal, central office administrator and school board member to recommend two or three people—parents or community members—who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community, and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, ask those individuals who they consider to be opinion leaders in the community.
 - The program requires little time of its participants, so consider former board members, PTA council members, small business owners and influential corporate partners.
 - Include pastors from local churches, civic organization leaders and officials from the various cities served.
 - Consider having representation for residents who have chosen to send their children to local private schools instead of CH-UH. This may or may not be a practical solution, but as taxpayers and potentially influential people, it could be helpful to keep them informed.
- The group should be a manageable size to allow for productive meetings and relationship-building. (Several

community members who participated in the September 2021 communications audit interviews would be good key communicators, but the list should be expanded beyond that group.)

Begin with an orientation meeting where the superintendent can discuss the vision for the district and the participants' role as important conduits for information. Review the district's goals and strategic plan as well as any pertinent studies and reports such as this Communication Audit Report. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the group—one at the start of the school year to discuss upcoming plans and another at the end to review accomplishments. Depending on the number of leaders identified, it may be more effective to break them into smaller groups that meet at different times. This can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.

During the course of the year:

- **Send regular electronic updates to the CH-UH key communicator network.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information. Key communicators should receive any regular publications. In addition, updates sent only to key communicators can alert the group to breaking news, help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about major school district initiatives. The district's mass communication system (Blackboard) seems to be the most common e-communications tool, and a separate list could be created for your key communicators.
- **Encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about the school district or individual schools.** Key communicators should be given a hot line number or email (usually the Communications Department) to contact

if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need to be corrected. The spread of misinformation through local social media sites was identified as a barrier to CH-UH communications. This process may help in that area. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take appropriate action, and inform the key communicators of the district's response.

- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** Use a survey to ascertain whether the key communicator network is functioning effectively and meeting CH-UH needs as well as those of the participants.
- **Show your appreciation.** At the end of the school year, invite key communicators to a breakfast or luncheon, possibly at a new school or regional facility you want to showcase, to thank them for their support and involvement. Regardless of who coordinates the program, this event should be hosted by the superintendent and attended by the Board of Education to show support by top leaders.

A path to success for a key communicators network is making communications accurate but short. Minimize the time commitment of participants and create a sense that they are getting firsthand or inside information (within legal limits, of course).

Action Step 3.4

Develop a “Leadership Heights” program to engage high-interest stakeholders.

An excellent way to build awareness among community leaders and interested citizens in how CH-UH operates is to develop a “Leadership Heights” or “Tiger Leadership” program. This type of program is patterned after those offered by many cities to improve understanding and interaction with citizens, business leaders and elected officials. It appeals to those interested in building leadership skills and public visibility.

CH-UH has stakeholders across the system who are active in the schools and have an interest in how decisions are made. A leadership program would offer an inside view of how the school system operates and an opportunity to share information on educational goals, decision-making processes, budgets and funding, accountability, policy development and the challenges of educating a diverse population of students. All stakeholders are interested in how decisions are made, whether it is how attendance zones are determined, budgets are set or what factors lead to canceling school for inclement weather.

Following are suggestions for developing a successful leadership program:

- Limit the number of participants and schedule five to six half-day programs throughout the year, featuring different topic areas for each session.
- Consider including a Board of Education member in the pilot class. As classes cycle through, inviting media representatives to take part is also helpful in building understanding.
- Include a component in the program that seeks participants' thoughts and feedback on what they learned to tap into their wisdom and resources.
- Feature reports by graduates of this program at Board of Education meetings. Not only will this serve as a recruitment tool for the program, but it will allow the board to feature aspects of district operations not necessarily discussed on a regular basis at board meetings.
- View it as an opportunity to create a pipeline for knowledgeable, engaged future candidates for the board. When CH-UH creates advocates and ambassadors through programs such as this, it should use them to put a personal face on public education. Two districts with programs worth investigating are:
 - Clarksville-Montgomery County School System's (Tennessee) Leadership CMCSS program

(<https://cmceducationfoundation.wpcomstaging.com/programs1/leadership-cmcss/>), which is run by the district's education foundation.

- Allen Independent School District (Texas) Board Academy ([PowerPoint presentation](#)), which is overseen by the Board of Trustees.

Action Step 3.5

Consider additional outreach opportunities.

Here are several more community outreach ideas being used in other school districts that could be adopted for CH-UH purposes.

- **Seeing Is Believing**—Sponsor short school tours for community members or senior citizens that allow them to see teachers teaching and students learning.
- **Volunteerism**—Host a community volunteer day where the school district gives back to the community. Teams of employees and student groups tackle volunteer projects on a designated morning.
- **Thank a Teacher**—Expand the program already provided by Reaching Heights by soliciting short testimonials from parents and community members about teachers who made a difference in their lives—even if those teachers are retired or no longer alive. Getting hundreds or thousands of community members to reflect on a good teacher is the goal. Publish the testimonials online or in a newspaper segment.
- **Record History**—Host a day where teams of middle or high school students visit with senior citizens to record the town's oral history (Action Step 9.1).

Recommendation 4:

Incorporate marketing strategies into a strategic communication and marketing plan.

As noted in the observations, a majority of focus group participants from the staff and community were unable to identify the “one thing” that makes CH-UH unique. Many pointed to quality fine arts programs and diversity as district strengths, but neither are effective selling tools by themselves. One focus group member summarized the need for a marketing plan by saying, “We don’t know exactly who we are – others are telling our story for us.”

The purposes of a strategic marketing plan are to build the perceived value of CH-UH programs and increase awareness of that value proposition among potential new families and job applicants. There are 11 private and parochial schools located within the CH-UH boundaries, along with at least 26 other Cleveland-area schools that serve students who live within district boundaries, according to recent EdChoice data. Many of these schools employ marketing strategies to recruit students, and enrollments in these schools directly impact CH-UH finances and programs. Therefore, the school district should move toward a strategic marketing plan that tells the district story and gives parents, as well as job applicants, solid information before they make enrollment or employment decisions.

A coordinated branding and marketing plan for CH-UH would also help tie communications activities into the CH-UH Strategic Plan (Goal 3 - Objective 4).

Action Step 4.1

Define the desired brand for CH-UH.

The first step in this process is to clearly define the district’s brand—what it wants to be known for in the community and what differentiates it from other districts and private schools in the area. It is not a logo or

tagline, although both elements are part of communicating a brand.

If budget permits, consider using the services of a branding consultant to assist in defining the brand and developing the logos and materials needed to communicate it. During the branding process, clearly articulate a desired brand and develop messages that tell the district’s story and can be easily communicated by all employees and parents. Some of this work may have already been done by the CH-UH Strategic Planning Committee.

Following are methods for identifying and clarifying the brand.

- **Identify the district’s value proposition.** A school district’s value proposition is the promise to its audience. What are the benefits to students attending the schools, or even the benefits for parents who are a part of the school community? What is it about the schools that sets them apart from the competition? Think about the district’s unique identity. Does it offer something that no other schools in the area are able to provide? The district should be able to give its value proposition in one concise phrase or sentence (tagline) and use this message consistently across all media.

As a comparative example of this, simply scroll to the bottom of the CH-UH homepage and take a look at the taglines for Reaching Heights (Our Passion: Excellent Public Education) and for First Ring Schools Collaborative (Advancing Education Together). Compare those to the lengthy district mission statement. Which ones clearly, simply and memorably communicate the organization’s value proposition?

These articles offer examples and insight into corporate value propositions.

- [16 Companies Who Absolutely Nailed Their Unique Value Proposition](#)
- [21 Value Propositions You Wish You Had](#)

#4

Incorporate marketing strategies into a strategic communication and marketing plan.

- **Identify the district’s brand identity.** A brand identity is crafted based on an organization’s value proposition, how it wishes to be perceived by others and how it actually is perceived; essentially, it is the district’s personality. Start the process by reviewing district and school goals, defining the strengths and weaknesses of the district and its schools, and determining whether CH-UH is meeting the expectations of students, families and employees. The impact of district rating(s) in the State of Ohio’s current A-F grading system and the upcoming 5-star rating systems will need to be considered based on community knowledge and perception of the state systems. School critics often focus on these ratings, but the district is rightfully looking at a much broader way to measure their schools than a single state benchmark.
- **Determine how the district brand will be conveyed.** This includes the logo, fonts, colors, etc., and how these elements will be used. A brand identity helps create a memorable and positive experience for anyone researching the district.
- **Create a brand guide to share with others.** A brand guide helps to ensure message and design consistency throughout all print and digital channels. In a school setting, where hundreds of employees represent the district, a brand guide will give some logic and teeth for enforcing the brand. The brand (or style) guide should include district colors, logo or logo variations, elements for the proper layout and design of materials, as well as preferred fonts and writing styles.

CH-UH has started this important process through the development of [Brand Standards](#) for using the district logo.

Following are two excellent examples of brand guides:

- Highline Public Schools—<https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/communications/brand-guidelines>.

- Harvard Community Unit School District 50—<https://www.cusd50.org/page/harvard-cusd-50-identity-guide>
- **Manage the brand.** Once brand guidelines have been established, clearly communicate the district’s brand identity, standards and expectations to stakeholders, particularly staff, volunteers, families and outside vendors. This can help to ensure that nothing is produced without consistent brand messages and graphic elements in place. School districts are different from companies in that individual schools often see themselves as independent organizations and may create graphics independently of the district. Publicizing the brand guidelines and explaining their purpose to principals can help manage the district brand. CH-UH’s move in recent years to Tiger Nation, where all students are Tigers, will make this process much easier and acceptable at the campus level.
- **Consider designing a new CH-UH logo.** The current district logo depicts the classic facade of Heights High School, which is an icon in the community. The image might also send the message that the district is rooted in the past and has not changed. With the diverse community CH-UH serves and the trends in graphic design, it is a good time to consider updating the logo to reflect an innovative, inclusive learning environment. Emotions are often attached to a school or district logo, particularly among those involved

in its creation, so this change may not be possible, but it is worth discussion as part of a broader marketing plan. If you do look at a change, consider holding logo-specific focus groups and hosting conversations with parents, students and staff before any changes are made. The cost and time commitment to introduce a new logo can be significant, so consider phasing in a new logo over a year or several years, focusing initially on materials that can be updated easily such as the website and print publications.

Action Step 4.2

Market a CH-UH education.

Once the district's brand is clarified and brand identity elements (e.g., logo, tagline) are developed (Action Step 4.1), the district can begin marketing itself to prospective families. Marketing elements, as suggested throughout Recommendation 4, can be incorporated into an overall annual or multi-year strategic communication and marketing plan. But give consideration also to planning a campaign specific to marketing a CH-UH education to prospective families.

The campaign goal might broadly be to have currently non-enrolled parents and families desire to have their children educated in CH-UH.

Just like strategic communication plans, marketing campaign plans are most effective when grounded in research. For qualitative data, review the key findings and observations of this audit report relative to the district's image among parents and families. For quantitative data, consider CH-UH's current demographic and enrollment trends districtwide, in specific school neighborhoods and for priority programs. Conduct market research on neighboring competitive school systems to determine their enrollment trends and to identify their marketing strategies as well as any data suggesting which strategies have been most successful for them.

Then identify campaign objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART). For example, one objective might be to see a certain percentage decline in out-of-district enrollment among resident families by next September.

Follow the RPIE process ([Recommendation 1](#)) and select strategies and tactics targeted to the preferences of specific audiences. Develop a plan that includes professionally produced materials, a detailed timeline and a reasonable budget for marketing where paid placements are necessary. This enrollment marketing campaign is an area where the branding consultant (Action Step 4.1) might be brought on again in a marketing consultant capacity.

As NSPRA's top program award, the Gold Medallion recognizes superior educational public relations programs and campaigns grounded in strategic communication best practices. Following are two Gold Medallion-winning marketing/branding campaigns that CH-UH should review for further inspiration around strategies and tactics:

- Technical College High School: Evolving the Brand, Establishing the Why, Chester County Intermediate Unit, Downingtown, Pa.—https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/award-submissions/gm-low-chester-county-tech_evolving-brand.pdf
- Branding the District, Troup County (Ga.) School System—https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/award-submissions/gold-medallion-19_ga-troup-county-school-system-low.pdf

Be sure to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies and tactics throughout the campaign, as well as at its conclusion, so the district can refine its marketing efforts for maximum effectiveness. For example, targeted advertising on Facebook in a certain neighborhood might not get enough click-throughs to an enrollment marketing webpage to justify the ad spend, but a radio spot in that neighborhood might lead to a lot of calls to the enrollment office and be worth the cost. Evaluation should be an ongoing process,

and when done regularly, it will maximize the district's marketing effectiveness and minimize wasted use of limited financial resources.

Action Step 4.3

Use a “Points of Pride” campaign to highlight the successes of CH-UH students.

Focus group participants were generally positive about CH-UH and the quality education program it offers. However, as previously noted, some expressed the district was not “telling its story” as well as it could be. For example, the district's fine arts programs were frequently cited as a strength, but they are not featured prominently on the website or most social media posts.

One way to shine a spotlight on regular student accomplishments is to clearly, consistently and frequently share “points of pride” that highlight successes. Student performance on standardized tests are one measurement of success, but there are many others on which the district and schools can focus. These include awards that students and staff have received; graduates who have gone on to receive advanced degrees or achieve significant professional accomplishments; service projects students have completed; and business investment in the schools. A majority, but not all, student accomplishments come through Heights High School. Having a communications staff member on site at the high school should be a help in gathering and disseminating these smaller success stories.

Key to this effort is sharing points of pride with internal audiences. Teachers and support staff should know positive information about the district and its schools, so they are prepared to answer questions with pride, whether they are at work or in the supermarket checkout line. Points of pride can be used by employees, key communicators, Board of Education members and real estate agents as they answer questions about the schools. The points can serve as a guidepost for parents who are deciding if their children will attend the CH-UH schools.

The Heights Schools Foundation has already tapped into the district's history. Those efforts should be expanded either through the alumni association or the foundation. Are there successful graduates from more recent years that could be highlighted? Highlight these standouts through video, graphic posts and special publications.

Some ideas for communicating successes and sources of district pride include:

- Develop a speech or presentation around the Points of Pride that can be delivered to civic organizations, parent groups, and other appropriate audiences.
- Develop a Points of Pride section on the homepage of the website. Update the list monthly. Encourage schools to do the same on their individual websites. Also consider identifying the elementary and/or middle school these successful students attended.
- Develop a flier or brochure on Points of Pride and distribute it to real estate offices, elected officials, businesses and other key audiences. Use it as a handout for speeches and in information provided to new families and employees.
- Solicit alumni to submit testimonials on what an education in CH-UH has meant to them. Include these testimonials on websites and in publications and share them with key audiences. Create short video testimonials on social media.
- Continue supporting The Heights Wall of Fame activities and look for ways to share its stories beyond the annual induction event.
- Post Points of Pride history items and photos on social media for Throwback Thursday, Wayback Wednesday, etc.
- Highlight one or two Points of Pride at each Board of Education meeting.
- Create short one to two minute videos highlighting Points of Pride ([Action Step 6.2](#)).

Action Step 4.4

Enhance branding with micro-campaigns.

One way to enhance branding efforts is to deploy micro-campaigns that illustrate the brand. These are smaller, more focused initiatives centered on specific events (like the first day of school) or a targeted audience and are designed to boost the district's brand profile. Review the school calendar for special events that lend themselves to a campaign or craft a campaign designed to attract the attention of a specific target audience. Following are some ideas for micro-campaigns that could be developed to demonstrate the district's value proposition and promote its brand:

- Collect and post short profiles of current staff on the district website and social media. Highlight employee volunteer activities to show they are active community members.
- Film and share short videos of employees talking about what it is like to teach and work in CH-UH.
- Expand the use of branded yard signs beyond those indicating that a student is graduating or moving to the next level of schooling. These signs go a long way in saying, "I support public education and am proud of my local schools." Feature brand hashtags to encourage online engagement.

Action Step 4.5

Build a solid outreach program to Realtors.

CH-UH should look to build relationships with Realtors because that relationship is beneficial to both parties. Realtors are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community, and they play an important role in creating a positive first impression of the schools. Timely and useful marketing materials can be very helpful to real estate agents who frequently answer questions and provide school district facts to potential new families.

Keep in mind that when it comes to selling a school district to prospective home buyers, Realtors are subject to the Fair Housing Act. This federal law protects people from discrimination because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability or familial status during housing-related transactions such as buying or renting a home. It also means Realtors can't tell parents one neighborhood has better schools than another or that one home is in a more desirable district than another.

However, Realtors can provide families with third-party tools that empower them to decide on their own whether a home and its schools are a good fit. This is where CH-UH can work to promote its value proposition for potential families. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year at a school. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Many real estate groups host monthly sales meetings, where guest speakers—such as the superintendent—can address a large number of members. Provide them with information packets, a checklist of the information available on the district website and a link to a special district webpage set up just for prospective families. When planning these events, keep in mind that a Realtor's schedule is tight and meetings should be short and relevant to their needs.

Many Realtors today send families to online school rating websites to get information on local schools. Two of the major sites Realtors send parents to are GreatSchools.org and Niche.com, both of which profile public and private schools serving preschool through grade 12 based on state test data and factors related to student progress and college readiness. Self-submitted, anonymous reviews from parents, teachers, students and community members appear below rating details. Communications staff indicated that CH-UH has a paid account with Niche.

The communications staff should regularly review CH-UH campus and district ratings on both of these sites and also coach principals in how and why they should check to see what the site is telling potential families and employees

about their schools. Building principals should be informed about how to “claim” their school to add general information that will help demonstrate what makes their schools special. They might also consider encouraging parent-teacher association leaders to add positive school reviews.

Action Step 4.6

Add a marketing emphasis to the onboarding process for families new to CH-UH.

The communications staff should review the process new families go through to visit and enroll in CH-UH. This area is frequently overlooked as a marketing opportunity because school districts tend to repeat the same process year after year. With a year of unprecedented changes due to the pandemic, the 2022-2023 school year might be a good time to enhance the process with a greater emphasis on brand marketing.

The district website has a great deal of useful information on the schools, registration requirements, schedules, etc. These online resources can be augmented with offering virtual and in-person orientation meetings, in appropriate languages if necessary. At these meetings, branded information packets can be offered (print or digital) and surveys can be conducted to evaluate brand perceptions while also determining the best ways to communicate with new families. A “Learn About Your Schools” program could also be packaged for new families at locations more comfortable for them such as community centers or churches.

Action Step 4.7

Evaluate first impressions of CH-UH campuses and programs.

An old saying is: “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” and this applies to schools as well as individuals. Even residents who never step foot in a school form an opinion just by observing the basic upkeep

of the property. Is the lawn mowed? Is the signage in good condition? Is the building in need of new trim or a little paint?

As part of a strategic marketing effort at the building level, encourage principals to assess the first impression that visitors get when calling or visiting a school. Consider the appearance of school offices and lobby areas that visitors see upon entering buildings as well as the welcome they receive from front-line staff. While employees are well-intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception based on how a phone is answered or whether they are welcomed when entering a school office. Security protocols are more commonplace in schools, so buzzing into a campus or signing in through the office is expected, but take a look at that process as well. Is it user-friendly? Are employees practicing good customer service at these security points?

The Communications Department has articulated the [CH-UH customer service mission and philosophy](#) on its website landing page. This is a good starting point and this information should be shared regularly with staff. In addition, communications staff could offer to consult with principals on their assessments and help brainstorm possible solutions to first-impression issues that may be addressed through communications (e.g., better signage, staff training in customer service).

Recommendation 5:

Create a CH-UH crisis communication plan.

An unexpected crisis or major incident can have a devastating impact on a school district. Whether it is a natural disaster such as a tornado or a violent incident such as a shooting, local and possibly national media attention will be focused on your schools. The Communications Department must be prepared to deal with communications while other administrators deal with the actual event and its aftermath. The speed of today's communication technology adds another layer of challenge. The ability of students and staff to call or text as an incident is taking place can relegate CH-UH to a communication observer rather than a valued information provider without proper preparation and plans in place. For example, in a recent school shooting incident in Texas, parents and the media were notified by students almost immediately—before the district had an opportunity to provide official information.

Currently, CH-UH has the *District Emergency Response Checklist* that generally identifies crisis communication responsibilities from the superintendent down to the emergency response team. However, given the heightened awareness about safety following high-profile events, it is helpful to have a more detailed plan in place. In speaking with various CH-UH Communications Department staff members, there was no clear plan of what to do in the event of a crisis, particularly if the director was unavailable.

The following action steps are offered as a guide for reviewing the emergency response checklist and developing a comprehensive crisis communication plan.

Action Step 5.1

Assign responsibility for specific crisis communication steps.

A crisis management plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels. The organizational structure of an emergency response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should still be designated to take charge of specific communication responsibilities, including:

- Leadership advisement
- Internal communication
- External communication
- News media relations
- Communication command center operations
- Electronic communications (website and social media posts and monitoring)
- Rapid Communication System notifications - Blackboard (voice and text)
- Research and media monitoring
- Donations and volunteers in the event of a natural disaster
- Special events (i.e., memorial services)

With a small communications staff at CH-UH, responsibility for gathering and disseminating critical news during a crisis may need to be shared with other administrators and departments.

Action Step 5.2

Emphasize preparation and training.

Being truly prepared for a crisis requires preparation, planning and training. In a crisis, one will react as one is organized and trained; and knowing what to do can be the difference between chaos and calm, or even life and death. School staff members face unusual demands and are often overwhelmed by the extent and magnitude of an incident. The Ohio Emergency Operations Plan uses the Incident Command System (ICS), a standardized

management approach that allows for a coordinated response among school staff. Under this model, the public information officer (CH-UH's communications supervisor) would serve directly under the incident commander.

If a crisis plan is a necessity, putting it into practice is an absolute must. Schools have stepped-up crisis response training, from table-top scenario discussions to active shooter drills with local law enforcement and fire-safety partners. Since communication is a vital component in managing any crisis, the communications department staff must be included in these training exercises.

Action Step 5.3

Take advantage of social media capabilities for crisis communications.

With the explosion of social media and digital communications, no school system should rely on any one source for sharing information about an incident. Emergency preparedness plans must account for multiple approaches to disseminating information throughout the crisis via traditional and the newest communication vehicles available. When it comes to crisis communication today, authorities on school safety and crisis management suggest the following simple approaches be taken in regard to social media:

- **Before the crisis ... engage and anticipate.** Social media is a tool to engage parents and stakeholders in conversations. By doing so early (before a crisis), schools establish a community of participants (for example, friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter, etc.) and a familiarity as the go-to source for information. In an emergency, people will seek information wherever they can find it. Do CH-UH parents know where to go for information in the event of a real emergency?
- **During the crisis ... communicate.** While social media provides an opportunity to share information with stakeholders

#5

Create a CH-UH crisis communications plan.

quickly and easily, it also enables two-way communication. In today's world, people crave dialogue and social media can fulfill that need. However, this presents a challenge for school leaders, by placing the ability for instant communication in the hands of everyone—students, parents, and staff members. Assigning one staff member to monitor your social media posts day and night during a crisis may be necessary to keep accurate information flowing. Remember that the bottom line is less about saying the right things and more about doing the right things. So make sure what you are doing in a crisis is being communicated on a regular basis.

- **After the crisis ... communicate.** Re-engaging on social media platforms may be the best opportunity to regain the trust of stakeholders and reconnect the community after a crisis to help in the recovery effort. The more schools engage in social media from the beginning, the better positioned they will be to anticipate and communicate to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

Keep in mind that social media is a place for engagement and conversation. In situations where the district is not willing to discuss a particular crisis situation, the best approach might be to have social media posts direct people to a webpage statement.

Action Step 5.4

Involve community agencies and identify available resources.

To be as well-prepared as possible to face a crisis or emergency, school districts work closely with representatives from local or

county emergency response agencies (i.e., police, fire, behavioral health services, etc.) during a crisis. The same should be true of the CH-UH Communications Department. Build a rapport with the public information officers from police, fire and county agencies that might be responding to a crisis. Add them to your contact list and prepare “emergency group” text addresses in advance of a crisis. In addition to local resources, many states offer assistance in developing a crisis response and communication plan under the federal Safe Schools program.

In addition, NSPRA offers a resource that is helpful in developing a crisis communication manual – *The Complete Revised Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools*. It is available as a CD or digital download at <https://www.nspr.org/products>.

Action Step 5.5

Create a communications crisis scenario to be used as a template.

Create a general outline of how the Communications Department will respond in the event of a crisis. While all crises are unique, and therefore will be responded to differently, this outline will keep CH-UH from starting from scratch when a crisis does occur and tensions are high. As an example, the outline below shows how a four-person team from a school information office might respond in a crisis.

1. Communications Department is notified of incident

- Communications supervisor gathers and verifies information.
- Public information specialist travels to the incident site if allowed access by emergency responders.
- Administrative assistant searches media/ social media for mentions of the incident.
- Administrative assistant handles incoming phone calls.

2. Prepare information for release

- Communications supervisor begins to create talking points and a district statement.
- Communications supervisor determines who the spokesperson will be.
- Public information specialist relays relevant on-site information to director and prepares the media staging area.

3. Release information to the community and media

- Communications supervisor sends talking points and official statement to the administrative assistant and superintendent.
- The supervisor or an established spokesperson handles on-camera interviews.
- Communications supervisor handles incoming media calls.
- Administrative assistant sends talking points and the district’s statement to all employees.
- Public information specialist provides the district’s official statement to media members on site.
- Public information specialist publishes the statement on the website and social media.

4. Continue to monitor situation

- Communications supervisor continues gathering information from sources and prepares additional statements and/or a press release, as appropriate.
- Public information specialist sends new information to the communications supervisor if there are updates from the site of the crisis.

- Administrative assistant updates website/social media as needed.
- Administrative assistant sends updates on the situation and/or messaging to receptionists.

5. Debrief once situation is completely under control

- All Communications Department staff debrief at the central office (or established command center) to evaluate response and determine what additional communication is needed, such as procedures for the next school day, etc.
- Administrative assistant continues to review media posts.
- Public information specialist calls reporters if corrections are necessary.

Recommendation 6:

Strengthen the digital engagement of the community through social media, e-communications and video.

CH-UH regularly employs social media and e-newsletters as communications tactics. The social media channels are well followed or “liked”; however, focus group participants had mixed opinions about whether or not social media was a good source of CH-UH information. There is a system for posting on the district’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts, but the process appears to favor volume over purpose.

A review of the CH-UH social media sites on October 13, 2021 showed the following:

- The CH-UH Facebook page had 4,520 “likes.” The district posts frequently with an emphasis on announcements and “calendar items,” averaging one or more posts per day during the school year.
- The CH-UH Twitter account had 2,007 followers and also averaged one or more posts per day during the school year.
- The CH-UH Instagram account had 1,609 followers and is used by the school district intermittently.

What is lacking is a defined purpose for the social media communications and the two e-newsletters: the *Tiger Nation Month in Review* and the *Weekly Update*. A strategy should be part of the larger CH-UH strategic communication plan so the content and timing of these communications are more intentional with information targeted toward engaging the intended audiences.

CH-UH outsources video production for its bigger projects. However, opportunities are being missed by not using shorter and less highly produced video to tell the district’s story on a day-to-day basis.

Action Step 6.1

Enhance the district’s social media content strategies.

Consider content. CH-UH Facebook and Twitter posts are professional and easy to recognize. However, using the October 13 snapshot, there seem to be an abundance of information posts (parent nights, musicals, college fairs, etc). Although Instagram posts showed greater variety, the two main platforms are being used primarily as electronic bulletin boards rather than tools to build upon the district’s brand. A more strategic approach is needed to make the posts more meaningful. While the announcements and reminders are helpful and important, CH-UH should also be seen as a place where learning is taking place, and this should be reflected in the posts.

Because so many current and prospective families use social media to gather information about schools, CH-UH has an excellent opportunity to showcase learning that takes place every day, as well as the major awards and accomplishments. Pick stories that further your communications agenda. For example, post a short photo story about high schoolers preparing for the rigorous AP exams or feature a teacher of the year’s philosophy on teaching rather than simply showing recognition photos of the winners of various competitions.

Consider engagement. Facebook likes are a good measure of how many people have stopped by your “storefront” but the number of engaged followers is a measure of people who “handled the merchandise.”

Award-winning NSPRA member, Shawn McKillop, APR, encourages using social media to engage audiences by considering how those audiences use it. “Social media is entertainment, so don’t underestimate the edu-tainment value in school PR.” Based on his work managing communications and community engagement for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, he offers the following advice for engaging audiences:

- Understand when your audience is online. Be social during evenings and weekends. There are many apps that allow you to schedule the release of posts to push content at times your audience is likely to be online.
- Tag people and partners so they receive the notification. It validates the relationship.
- Leverage times like a snow day or other days of significance to engage your followers in your message.
- Repurpose content. Share interesting and relevant articles. Tell stories.
- Contests and pledges drive activity and interaction. Prizes are great incentives.

Social media followers will ultimately drop off if they have no interaction with your Facebook page. The more comments and likes you receive; the more followers you will ultimately have. Therefore, give people a reason to click and smile.

Here are more tips for increasing engagement with your social media audience:

- Use a personal tone appropriate to the audience. Lighten the reading load on Facebook and talk to people in a more conversational tone.
- Encourage user-generated content. Some ideas might include:
 - Ask followers to post old Heights High School prom photos each spring.
 - Ask Heights graduates to post selfies from their colleges, giving a shout-out to their high school.
 - Ask alumni to post selfies from their workplace.
 - Ask sports fans to nominate the community's biggest Tiger fan each fall.
 - Run a trivia contest with a prize.
- Look for ways to make your standard announcement posts more engaging. For

#6

Strengthen the digital engagement of the community through social media, e-communications and video.

example, promotion for the upcoming high school play “Matilda” could show a poster or photo from previous musical productions going back five or 50 years. A caption can highlight the old photo and still put a plug in for the new musical. Combining that with the current post would only increase readership. Also, including a link to the musical webpage would be better than asking readers to pull the information they need from a graphic.

- Extend your reach by promoting posts or pages. Targeting a demographic or geographic area for a specific announcement or news item can be very effective and cost efficient if used properly.
- Highlight a parent volunteer of the month.
- Highlight a “Big Wheel” bus driver each month.
- Collect and post quirky statistics such as the number of chicken fingers served or bus miles driven.
- Post infographics. Venngage (<https://venngage.com>) is a good (and free) infographic tool.
- Show your personality and have fun. Social media is meant to be social; it is not a newspaper.

Special Tips for the CH-UH Facebook Page.

Aside from mass communication announcements via Blackboard, CH-UH’s most used communications tool for reaching parents is Facebook. Here are some strategies for making Facebook more effective for the school district:

- Include the district logo on the district’s Facebook accounts, but brighten up the entry page with a rotating banner photo. Many school districts use this space to showcase candid photos that are fun but have no immediate news value. [View an example from Minnetonka Public Schools](#) in Minnesota.



- Look for ways to highlight board of education and superintendent actions or involvement in the community on Facebook. Showing district leadership in the schools and community can send a positive message, and the CH-UH site had very little mention of the board or superintendent in their official roles.
- With schools that date back over 100 years, CH-UH should regularly feature old photographs and historical stories to increase engagement. 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. Consider running a look-back feature once a week.
- Share Facebook posts from other sources that highlight school programs. Acknowledgment by outsiders is an effective message to send.

Action Step 6.2

Use video to engage the community in the CH-UH story.

Video is a powerful way to share your message and let parents and prospective school families “see The Heights” for themselves. CH-UH shares high quality videos on its YouTube channel and relies mostly on outsourcing video production work for its bigger projects such as the *Public Is For All*, *The Heights Gets Pumped* and *CH-UH Is The Best Place To Work* videos. Many of the videos, including these three examples, are more than a year old. (The CH-UH YouTube page’s highlight video is the *Public Is For All* production and was first posted in February 2018.)

These are good as part of an archive of events and should be continued. What is missing are videos that reflect the strategic plan communication goals by telling stories about students learning and teachers teaching.

One suggestion would be to train a current Communications Department staff member to shoot micro videos with an iPhone and professional accessories such as a tripod, light and microphone to produce professional quality short videos. This would be low cost, and the larger productions could still be outsourced to the production team the district has been working with.

Focus on short one-to-three minute videos to tell your story. They get a wide viewership on social media and attract more attention when children’s faces are easily recognizable. A video series like “A Minute In The Heights” could showcase anything from a kindergarten music class to a robotics demonstration. A quick lead-in for each one could be followed by the teacher explaining what the viewers are seeing. These could be done bi-weekly or more frequently on an iPhone and posted quickly to social media with little editing. Look for stories that don’t always include awards or recognition. Find those teachers who are helping students learn every day.

Another consideration would be to hire a video and graphics specialist into the Communications Department rather than contract video and graphic services out. That has budget implications that may not be practical at this time, but should be considered for the long term.

Action Step 6.3

Redesign the CH-UH mobile app with user needs in mind.

Mobile apps have dropped in popularity and importance as responsive websites have become easily readable on tablets and smartphones. Still, there is a purpose for mobile apps. They should give fingertip access to important information for people who are not using a computer or large screen device and provide information unique to and presented within the app interface.

Following are observations and recommendations to consider:

- The CH-UH app home screen does have a menu option, but it should be navigable from the start.
- Most of the content is being pulled from Twitter or the website, but the mobile app should have quick facts that users on the go can access. These would include the school year calendar, important department phone numbers, facts and figures about the school district and news headlines. Few, if any, people want to go to an app to get to a website they could just as easily find on their phone browser.
- The app includes access to Infinite Campus and a current events calendar, which is good.
- The staff directory is searchable, but only email contacts are available. Phone numbers for the campuses and departments would be helpful.
- It appears the tiger logo is used next to staff member names when no photo is available. When there are a lot of them on a single screen, it makes the page busier than it needs to be. Consider ways to ensure more of these photos are available and/or consider using a different visual in place of the tiger.
- Placing social media feeds in a mobile app is redundant since most users will have those apps on the same device.

The lack of comments about the mobile app from focus groups suggests there is low awareness of the tool. If the app analytics suggest it is a valuable communication tool, a sustained awareness campaign should be used to promote downloads and use of the app. Adding something immediately useful such as the new football schedule or a recently released school year calendar can put a spike in downloads if the mobile app has this information prior to other sources being published.

Following are some promotional tactics used by other school districts as part of their mobile app awareness campaigns:

- Articles, banners and icons on district and school homepages
- Articles or ads in district and school newsletters, parent handbooks and printed calendars
- Multiple promotional posts on social media, scheduled at different times to best reach stakeholder groups on each platform
- Presentations during board meetings, staff meetings, parent-teacher group meetings and open house/orientation events
- QR codes, which have become popular again during the pandemic, leading to the app store printed on the back of administrators' business cards, yard signs and fliers sent home in students' backpacks
- "Download Our App" reminders on digital marquees/road signage

Action Step 6.4

Monitor other social media sites being operated under the district's name.

A Communications Department member should regularly scan the social media pages being hosted within the school district. Quality control of sites at the lower levels (schools and departments) is needed so staff and patrons can rely on them. If social media pages are found to be outdated or inaccurate, an email to the appropriate staff member or supervisor is suggested. If necessary, the pages can be turned off until they are updated.

The Communications Department maintains a list of all social media accounts, including all logins and passwords, that are operated under the school district's name. This list should be reviewed and updated as needed on a regular basis to avoid sites being locked due to retirements and resignations.

Action Step 6.5

Target specific audiences in e-newsletter communications.

The CH-UH *Weekly Update* e-newsletter is sent electronically to families and staff. The *Tiger Nation Month in Review* e-newsletter is sent to these same audiences, as well as select community members, and contains much of the same information. Neither communication channel was identified as a top source of school information by focus groups.

Following are suggestions for making these communication tools more effective with stakeholders:

- **Consider a reader survey** about the *Weekly Update* and the *Tiger Nation Month in Review*. Ask people what type of content they want to see and whether they believe a weekly newsletter is necessary or if bi-weekly would be preferred. Analyze open and click-through rates on the document as a whole, as well as within linked stories, to help identify popular topics.
- **Highlight teachers teaching and students learning.** Big recognitions such as state titles and awards should always be celebrated, but they don't always reinforce the district's mission. For example, the sample *Weekly Update* e-newsletters from September 10 and 17 included the following stories: Vaccine / COVID-19 / CPR Training / Strategic Plan / Staff Scholarship Opportunity. There were no stories about people or students learning. Stories about people, especially ones with photos, attract readership.
- **Engage readers.** Give them quick one-question surveys or ask them to comment on a new idea or program. E-newsletters are like social media platforms: people want to feel connected to the content or they will likely pass by it.
- **Consider a redesign of the *Weekly Update*.** E-newsletters should be designed with digital readers in mind. The *Weekly Update* is currently designed as a print newsletter that is being sent digitally.

Sometimes newsletters become too familiar, especially when they arrive frequently. Readers see the header, maybe glance at the first story or two and then move on to the next email. A fresh look with a few photos and attention-grabbing headlines would help increase readership. There are numerous companies such as Smore, Constant Contact, AWeber, MailChimp and Benchmark that provide low-cost newsletter and marketing templates that are modern, customizable

and mobile-responsive. Photos, graphics, district colors and mailing lists are easily integrated.

A more modern e-newsletter template is pictured below (right) next to the *Weekly Update* (left). A similar amount of work is required to generate content for both pieces, but the modern template has greater visual impact, which better engages readers.



Recommendation 7:

Enhance the website as a tool to tell the CH-UH story.

The CH-UH website is one of the district's most important communications tools. It is regularly used by parents and employees as well as prospective school families. It is also the most common information source for outside organizations such as the media, education agencies, associations and business groups seeking facts about the school district.

Focus group comments regarding the website were a mix of positive and negative, but most acknowledged it as a good resource for finding school information. Frustration was voiced by those administering the customer management system about the difficulty of making simple changes. In addition, a few specific problems were noted that could easily be addressed such as outdated staff lists and staff pages.

The website's responsive design works well on phones and tablets. The site also meets most of the ADA Section 504 accessibility standards, which is a major accomplishment and ongoing challenge for the web design team. When tested with the [Wave Accessibility](#) tool, some pages were tagged as having "very low contrast," redundant links and PDF link errors. These are common in a large website that has hundreds of people creating content. More importantly, artwork was tagged, page colors were readable and links were working. Other highlights of the district website, in the auditor's opinion, were the posted videos, the graphic news links, the EdChoice information, the CH-UH "Parent Hub" and the Finance Department's "School Funding: Learn More" column.

The NSPRA Communication Audit process uses best practice benchmarks to evaluate school district websites. Following are additional auditor observations, as well as recommendations for resolving issues and enhancing the website based on these best practices.

Action Step 7.1

Develop the CH-UH website homepage as a marketing tool.

The CH-UH website needs to be where visitors go for information, but it also needs to help people get excited about schools and programs. To make a strong first impression, the website needs to immediately communicate the district's brand, market its education program and pull visitors in to learn more ([Recommendation 4](#))

Consider a redesign that gives the site a more modern, appealing look that markets a CH-UH education. This is a major undertaking and may require several years of planning and implementation. However, because the website is the first point of contact for many visitors and parents, it should reflect the desired image of the total school district.

Action Step 7.2

Update and reorganize the homepage.

The district website is frequently the first impression a prospective parent or business has of the school district. Looking from the outside, there is very little in the rotating graphics or school news that focuses on the school district's core business—students learning and teachers teaching. For example, none of the 10 rotating slides on the home page depict students in classrooms with teachers. This does not minimize the value of extracurricular activities, but showing students in learning environments such as classrooms or labs emphasizes CH-UH's mission of *providing a challenging and engaging education*.

Graphically, the home page is overwhelming with 25 different visuals for the reader to take in when visiting the page. In the space above the fold (entry screen), the four information boxes on the right compete with the rotating photo slideshow. These four items, including EdChoice and Chooseheights.org, are

important and need a place on the homepage. However, it might be better to simplify their presentation.

A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the homepage of the website would be a useful resource for the public and staff. Use common terms in questions to help users find the appropriate information. Keep it current by frequently asking central office, school secretaries and other staff about the questions they are most often asked by callers.

FAQs can also be used for “myth busting” and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another prominent spot on the homepage for easy access. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be clearly visible near the homepage and not buried deep within the website.

Action Step 7.3

Update and reorganize key landing pages within the district website.

The CH-UH website has a wealth of good information about programs and activities. However, consideration should be given to reorganizing and updating the content.

- Add a separate tab for a facts and figures section under the District / Overview pull down menu. District enrollments, test scores, graduation rates, employee numbers, etc., should be readily accessible. Whether parents are shopping schools or a media contact is verifying enrollment, it is best to feature the most commonly sought data in one place.
- Provide easier access to the Board of Education information ([Recommendation 8](#)). “Board of Education” is listed under “District,” but citizens looking for board meeting streams, policies or agendas may

#7

Enhance the website as a tool to tell the CH-UH story.

not know this is where they should look for that information.

- The superintendent page should be updated. This might be a good location to archive “Messages from the Superintendent” and include information about the strategic planning process. The “District Cabinet Members” page is very helpful in outlining responsibilities for each key area.
- Since visitors to the “Family Resources” section on the homepage could likely be new to the schools, less familiar links or terms such as Infinite Campus, Kindernet, Naviance and Reaching Heights should have a short explanation next to them. For example, Infinite Campus (Student Management System); Reaching Heights (Community Resource Guide), etc.
- Consider adding a section on the history of CH-UH under the “District” pull-down menu. The district’s 100+ year history would make a good connection to alumni and the senior citizen population. A collection of old photos with a short narrative would be attention-getters and provide stakeholders with opportunities to feel reconnected with the schools.

Action Step 7.4

Make better use of individual school websites.

Because the school-level websites are managed by the Communications Department, the campus pages are very structured and formal. This keeps them up to date but leaves little opportunity for the schools to show

some personality. This is particularly true of the Heights High School page, which should go further to distinguish itself as the district's showcase institution. Photos of each building on their campus web pages would be helpful. A small photo rotator with pictures of instruction and activities would also help "sell" the idea that these are vibrant places of learning.

While the campus template has a Twitter feed built into it, not all schools make use of it. Three elementary campuses had Twitter posts from more than a year back. The high school posts were up to date, but only two posts have been made this year. There should be a function to turn off the Twitter feed if it is not active.

The same district news is featured on every elementary school site. It might be helpful to have a portion of the page set aside for district news and another section available for schools to post their own news. For example, on the Noble Elementary site, the header says "Noble Elementary News & Updates," but it is all district news. The secondary schools are making better use of the news sections.

Action Step 7.5

Ensure brand consistency and quality standards on program websites.

The Athletics website is up to date and features numerous boys and girls sports. Operating a district program page outside of the district-branded website is not recommended, but it can work if brand and quality standards are consistently applied. The current arrangement appears to work well for both Communications and Athletics.

One issue is that the page has no easy link back to the school district's home page. Consideration might be given to moving the Athletics page to E-SchoolView so that it can be edited by the communications staff if necessary.

Although the Career and Technical Education (CTE) program also manages a separate

webpage, it is housed on the E-SchoolView platform and the Communications Department has access to make corrections, additions, etc.

Recommendation 8:

Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.

The Board of Education is to be commended for including communications in board policy.

In Policy 0118: Philosophy of the Board, the Board of Education “reaffirms its intent to maintain two-way communications with citizens of the District. The Board shall keep them informed of the progress and problems of the School District, and the citizens shall be urged to bring their aspirations and concerns about the District to the attention of this body.” The policy also spells out the Board’s “obligation to determine and assess citizen desires.”

As mentioned previously, the pandemic has reduced or eliminated many opportunities for school officials, including board members, to interact in person with community members. This recommendation for expanding and enhancing board communications includes both in-person and virtual strategies, and it is assumed that the in-person activities would be considered when appropriate and safe.

Action Step 8.1

Make the Board of Education more visible on the website.

It is recommended that a direct link to the Board of Education section be prominently displayed on the district’s homepage. The CH-UH Board of Education page is a good resource for the staff and community, and easy access to past meetings and documents is helpful. Providing contact information and short bios for each member also reflects best PR practices.

Possible additions to this section of the website for consideration include:

- More information about specific board member activities and initiatives that are ongoing (if any).

- Photos of board members performing their duties—at a meeting, visiting schools, recognizing students and staff—in addition to the formal portraits.
- A link that allows patrons to contact the Board or the school district with a question if they do not want to contact individual members.

Action Step 8.2

Promote and archive board meeting summaries.

Focus group participants knew meetings were live streamed and some watched them live. The *Board of Education Meeting Summary* publication was also cited as a useful resource. Beyond this, many commented they received information about board meetings from a variety of sources, including the CH-UH website, the teachers union or community websites.

Public meetings are the most recognizable role of the board, and decisions there can impact many or all families in the school district. The board meeting summary is an excellent tool that can be used to enhance the community’s knowledge of board discussions and actions even further.

- To expedite the distribution of a *Board of Education Meeting Summary* after each meeting, the summary should be created in draft form before the meeting, so the document can be updated with board actions and made available quickly after the meeting.
- Beyond posting to the website, the summary can also be shared via links on social media and emailed to Key Communicators (see Action Step 4.4), particularly when action is taken on significant items, such as the calendar, budget, negotiations and COVID openings/closings.
- The Communications Department should archive the summaries on the website, so patrons can quickly access information

about past meetings without working through actual board meeting minutes.

Once these steps have been completed, the Communications Department should promote the ease with which this information can be accessed.

Action Step 8.3

Create more opportunities for dialogue between the board and public.

School board members in many communities take part in events and meetings that bring the public and board together for conversations. These meetings build trust with the elected officials and can lead to long-term support when handled properly. They are also more effective when the school district is not currently seeking public support for an initiative, such as a levy increase, and is not in the midst of managing an issue that is creating divisiveness within the community.

Public engagement ideas the CH-UH Board of Education might consider are:

- **Community forums.** A community forum model for public engagement offers an opportunity for stakeholders to gather for discussion on a topic of broad interest, and it also provides district leaders with an opportunity to disseminate additional information. Participants' feedback can provide the district with valuable insight on what information should be communicated more broadly to provide greater clarity on a topic. Make sure attendees understand the purpose of the forum is to gather feedback, not to reach consensus or make a decision.

To ensure everyone in attendance has the opportunity to ask questions and to avoid individuals from taking over the conversation, consider presenting information about the topic and then breaking attendees into smaller discussion groups moderated by administrators

#8

Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.

and board members. If necessary, board members could pair up and rotate attendance at different meetings so a quorum is not reached.

- **Adopt a school.** CH-UH Board of Education members regularly visit campuses and attend events. Consideration might be given to assigning campuses to board members. They could still visit any or all campuses they wished, but would pay special attention to one or two schools each year. This means they would focus on that campus' activities and be seen there on a regular basis. In addition, the knowledge a board member gets from focusing on a single campus can provide good insight to the whole board when more information about a particular school is needed.
- **Write the board.** Citizens wanting to contact the Board of Education currently may send emails to individual members. Some school boards have Ask the Board or Tell the Team links on their websites. These allow community members to write the entire board in a single message. Questions can still be referred to administrators, but this gives board members insight into their community's concerns. It is also more inviting for citizens who do not know which board member to contact. The option does not eliminate the ability to write to individuals; it just provides another communications avenue.

Action Step 8.4

Develop a School Board Academy for potential board candidates.

Regardless of the candidates who choose to run for the Board of Education each year, it is in the best interest of the school district to build relationships with them. A half-day School Board Academy scheduled for the start of the election filing period can accomplish several goals for the district. The academy can:

- Educate candidates about election laws and filing timelines.
- Provide factual school information as candidates begin campaigning.
- Build a positive relationship with candidates or citizens thinking about a future school board run.
- Clearly outline the responsibilities and expectations of board members, possibly dissuading potential candidates who can't meet these demands.

A School Board Academy is relatively easy to create and manage. Set aside a Saturday morning or weeknight for any citizens eligible and interested in running for the Board of Education. The academy can include brief presentations by the board president, superintendent, key cabinet members and the district elections officer (if applicable). The event should be hosted by the board president, with one board member outlining the duties and time commitment of serving, but the administrative cabinet members will present most of the information. Binders with the presentations and all election information can be prepared in advance, and time should be allotted for questions and answers.

Recommendation 9:

Create more opportunities to engage with long-time residents and alumni.

Community pride was listed as one of the CH-UH strengths by focus group participants. The Heights Schools Foundation and its work with the Communications Department should be commended for their leadership in managing an alumni association and carrying on Hall of Fame activities that build awareness and public support. Connecting to long-time residents such as senior citizens and alumni is one more way to build relationships with the community.

The backgrounds, income and diversity of this group can be as varied as your student population. Therefore, standard strategies like school activity discount cards and grandparents' days may not always reach that population. Cleveland Heights and University Heights do not have a significant senior population according to city demographic reports, which show 11.7% of residents over age 65 in University Heights and 13% in Cleveland Heights. However, thousands of residents still fall into the senior citizen category.

An active program to engage seniors, as well as alumni, will help build support for CH-UH, especially in future levy elections.

Action Step 9.1

Build a history for CH-UH.

The Heights Foundation and Communications Department have produced several high-quality publications that highlight school history and notable alumni. This base can be expanded upon by creating a formal history of the school district that can be:

- Used in future publications.
- Featured at alumni or homecoming events.
- Converted into a multi-media online presentation.

- Used as a community presentation, especially at civic clubs and senior centers.
- Used by grade-level teachers for community and school history units.

Cleveland Heights, South Euclid and University Heights all have historical societies that maintain their community's history, including some school history, but the district can also help write its own story. Here is a list of ideas for gathering and celebrating school district history at the district and campus level:

- Collect and digitize historical school photos. Solicit them through Facebook using old photos to attract attention to the posts. Historical photos attract viewers on Facebook and Instagram, especially when followers are asked to tag the photos, so share photos on "Throwback Thursdays" or as part of a micro-campaign.
- Produce an oral history of the school district by interviewing long-time residents. This could be a meaningful project for high school students.
- Publish old-time yearbook pages online. This creates buzz and promotes social media engagement.
- Create a separate CH-UH history page that is accessible on the website. This resource might also be helpful to grade-level teachers who teach community history.
- With the notoriety of high school athletic and fine arts programs through the years, separate mini-histories could be organized for those areas. Old-time music and athletic photos are very popular and fun to present at events.

Action Step 9.2

Create connections and expand communication with empty nesters.

In addition to retirees, there is a population of adults who no longer have a direct connection to the schools but pay taxes and possibly follow school news. These adults can sometimes be tapped to provide a variety of services as

volunteers, tutors and mentors. They can also have a positive impact on the district as voters. School systems can benefit by finding ways to serve this growing population while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students. Some ideas to consider include:

- Recruit “parent mentors,” once-active parents whose children are now grown, to assist new parents in navigating the school system and to mentor them in how to work effectively as partners with teachers and the schools.
- Promote involvement opportunities in community newspapers and local radio as well as through religious groups and senior centers.
- Reach specific populations by seeking retired or non-working community members within those groups to help spread the district’s messages.
- Create a print publication about the school district volunteer opportunities and make it available at the senior center and senior living communities. Also provide informational materials for doctor/dental offices or other businesses where people sit and wait for services.
- Include empty nester representatives on advisory councils and committees and in the key communicator network ([Action Step 4.4](#)).
- Encourage the high school to create student organizations that are affiliated with civic groups such as Kiwanis (Key Club) and Rotary (Interact). Many club members are senior citizens, and there are good opportunities for the two groups to work together.
- Encourage student groups with an interest in technology to teach interested community members new communication skills. With more seniors wanting to connect with family members on Facebook, Zoom and other platforms,

there is an excellent opportunity for young experts to share their knowledge. A high school computer club could host a senior technology day where students work one-on-one with adults to help them better understand technology. (The current pandemic creates a barrier for activities like this, but they could be planned in future years.)

- Make annual presentations at active adult and community centers on today’s innovative educational programs and include students from different grade levels in the presentation.

Action Step 9.3

Host a CH-UH Legacy Day.

An easy way to reach senior citizens is to host a Legacy Day event. While class reunions focus on former students from specific graduation years, the Legacy Day event includes anyone who lived in the school district before 1990, for example, to attend. This draws in both former students and parents who may not have attended school in town, but who raised their children there. For the cost of refreshments and some balloons, a school can attract several hundred people. A formal program is not necessary, although recognizing dignitaries and event sponsors would be appropriate.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's 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. The work was organized into critical function areas, and to date, rubrics have been completed for the following:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Branding/Marketing Communications
- Crisis Communications
- Bond/Finance Communications

While it is difficult to quantify the value of public relations and there is no agreement on the best tools and methods, in the spirit of traditional benchmarking practice, NSPRA sought to identify top performers in each critical function area based on results and gathered research in each area to develop the rubrics and suggested measures.

Benchmarking against the rubrics differs from other parts of the communication audit process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews or discovered in district materials. Instead, it addresses how a communication program is doing compared to national standards of excellence in school public relations.

The following pages reflect the auditor's assessment of where CH-UH falls within these standards. The purpose of this section of the communication audit is to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level by moving from "emerging" or "established" to "exemplary," as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the complete *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website (www.nspr.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking).

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging/Established

The CH-UH School District's overall communication effort falls somewhere between the Emerging and Established categories. For a district this size, the district is presented professionally. The writing and visuals for print pieces and videos are high quality and better than many other small school districts. The program is noted as emerging because there needs to be a transition from the technical to the strategic.

Maintaining a variety of communications tools can be time-consuming and planning suffers. As this audit report identifies, CH-UH needs a strategic communication and marketing plan that aligns with the district's strategic goals and objectives. This should be a priority for the school district to undertake in the next 12 months because these plans will drive the majority of the Communications Department activities going forward. It is commendable that the supervisor of communications is a respected member of the executive team who reports directly to the superintendent and provides advice and insight on major issues.

Internal Communications – Emerging

Carrying out an effective internal communications program is challenging but important to the district. Issues of trust and accusations of a lack of transparency show the need for a different approach to staff communications because doing what has been done before is not likely to build the trust and cooperation needed to move forward. That is why this area falls into the Emerging category.

In addition to the audit recommendations and action steps, CH-UH could consider these best practices:

- Helping employees manage their information overload by standardizing official vehicles for internal communications at various levels, deploying these communications on a set schedule and creating a common internal calendar that holds important dates for school district deadlines, meetings, testing schedules and events.
- Creating new ways of gathering input from staff members either through surveys, focus groups or advisory committees. Any strategies employed in this area should include the ways the information gathered will be shared with participants and staff.

Parent/Family Communications – Exemplary

At this time, CH-UH's parent and family communications program would be considered exemplary by the auditor. CH-UH uses a variety of online and e-communications tools to reach parents. These include the *Tiger Nation Month in Review*, the *Weekly Update* e-newsletter, the *#TigerNation* news feed, the annual *Quality Profile*, the new parent information packet, the district website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, a mobile app, a mass communications system

(Blackboard) and a student information system (Infinite Campus).

While there may be opportunities for improvement, the school district has a good system for communicating with parents that was acknowledged by the focus groups. The one weak area was face-to-face community outreach activities. This is a priority of the superintendent and will be expanded once limitations from the global pandemic lessen.

One suggestion would be the creation of an online system for parents and other community members to ask questions or express concerns/suggestions in a format that will lead to prompt responses from staff. A general email address can be set up, and the Communications Department can be responsible for checking for input on a daily basis and sending the information/request to the appropriate person or department for response. Alternatively, AI-powered website features such as K12 Insights' Let's Talk can automate this process.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging

This was an area of concern identified by leadership and community members in the focus groups, and this audit report includes a number of recommendations for improving CH-UH's marketing. The recommendation and action steps included should help raise CH-UH's profile, make its brand more identifiable and move it into the Established category. Best practices in this area include:

- Clearly identifying what the selling points are, creating a unified story for CH-UH and then making all staff aware of that story.
- Using storytelling (via video, social media, print and interpersonal communications) to help target audiences emotionally connect with the CH-UH brand.
- Providing training for key school and central office personnel, particularly

administrative assistants, to ensure consistency of applying brand guidelines.

- Conducting periodic reviews of district and school communications (print, electronic and social media) to ensure the focus remains on instruction and student success. This does not exclude all other topics, but it keeps the focus on the district's primary mission.

Crisis Communications – Emerging/Established

The *CH-UH Emergency Response Handbook* and checklist show that a comprehensive crisis management plan is already in place. The one component that needs to be added in the context of this communications audit is the actual role of the Communications Department during a crisis. An analysis of current communication functions suggests that a more detailed breakdown of the roles of each communication staff member in various crises is also needed ([Recommendation 5](#)). This would be an internal document that details what each staff member would do in the event of a campus or district crisis.

Bond/Finance – Emerging

The school community narrowly supported a \$4.8 mil operating levy increase proposition in November 2020, after a \$7.9 mil increase was turned down by the community in March 2020. Prior to these efforts, the last successful proposition approved by voters was in 2016.

It is hard to gauge exactly what impacted the March election because of the COVID-19 shutdown. However, communication efforts for the November 2020 election were intensified, and more creative ways were used to reach parents and voters. Therefore, CH-UH's bond/finance communications fall into the Emerging category.

The district's finance information on the CH-UH website is thorough and easy to understand by patrons, and the inclusion of a primer on Ohio school funding is also helpful for those wanting more details.

The finance information pages are organized and give the appearance of transparency. The auditor is not aware of Ohio's specific state regulations, but the finance pages appear to meet all of the typical state legal requirements for posting financial information.

It is recommended that the financial section of the website include information about how the latest operating levy increase, as well as previous successful elections, will positively impact CH-UH.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions	62
What Is NSPRA?	64
Auditor’s Vita	65

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you consider to be CH-UH's greatest strengths? What strengths would you share with a parent considering moving to the district?
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 CH-UH and the schools?
5. What is the best way for the school district to deliver important information to you?
6. Website
 - What is your overall impression of the school district website?
 - Are you able to find information you need?
 - How often do you access the district or campus website?
7. Social Media
 - Are the district's social media accounts (Facebook – Twitter – Instagram) helpful sources of information for you?
 - Which do you use most often?
 - Do you use the district's mobile app?
8. 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?
9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system in the future?

10. Do you have any final comments or suggestions that could be used in this communications audit?

Additional Questions: Staff

11. As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
12. Are current communication vehicles [name employee pubs] effective in delivering information?
13. How can district leaders be more proactive in communicating with you?
14. Website
 - How accessible is employee information online?
 - Are you able to conduct school research / gather data from the website?
 - Does the website improve / build upon the image of CH-UH?

Additional Questions: Administrators

11. As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so you can be effective in your job?
12. What are your greatest communication challenges in your role?

Additional Questions: School Board

11. How would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
12. What do you see as the role of the Board in communications?
13. Do you feel people have and use opportunities to provide input and express their views on important decisions?

Additional Questions: High School Students

11. What do you like most about your school?
12. High School Experience
 - What has been the best part of your high school experience so far?
 - What could be improved?
13. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?
14. How do you learn about what's going on at school and around the district?

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.nsprapro.org, which offers the online NSPRA Gold Mine; resources on topics such as crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.; salary and career surveys; and more.

With more than 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. The association offers useful communication products and programs as well

as an annual [NSPRA National Seminar](#), the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America. NSPRA also offers a [National School Communication Awards](#) program, which recognizes individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Auditor's Vita

Tim Carroll, APR **Consultant auditor**

Tim Carroll, APR, currently teaches public relations and electronic media at Texas A&M University-Commerce. He served as the chief information officer and director of public information for the Allen Independent School District in Allen, Texas, from 1995 until retirement in 2020. He previously served for 14 years in a similar position with the Penn-Harris-Madison Schools near South Bend, Indiana, for a total of 39 years in school communications.

In addition to his school PR responsibilities, he also served as the Allen ISD community services director overseeing community education, after school and preschool programs.

Carroll has been an active member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) since 1981, receiving the association's prestigious Barry Gaskins Mentor Award in 2011 for service to the profession. He is also past-president of the 500-member Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) and received that association's Professional Achievement Award in 2006. He is a former executive director and past president of the Indiana School Public Relations Association (InSPRA) and received a Ball State University Department of Journalism Special Citation for service to Indiana public schools in 1993.

He received his Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) in 1985 and worked with the NSPRA Accreditation Committee for 11 years. Since 1985, he has also served on state and national PR committees and presented over 90 workshops and conference sessions.

Carroll has also written numerous articles for NSPRA and contributed chapters to *The School and Community Relations* textbook. He is a journalism education graduate of Murray State University in Kentucky and earned a master's

degree in educational public relations from Glassboro State College in New Jersey.

He has previously served as an adjunct faculty member at Texas A&M University-Commerce in the public relations department and at the Indiana University-South Bend campus.

He wrote a weekly newspaper column called *The Flipside* for five years and produced a weekly music radio show for seven years in the Dallas area.



Communication Audit Report

Copyright © 2022 by the National School Public Relations Association. All rights reserved. With the exception of the Cleveland Heights - University Heights City School District, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission from the National School Public Relations Association.

National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | www.nspra.org |  NSPRAAssociation |  nspra