

NSPRA'S

Communication Audit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prepared for the
Mount Prospect School District 57

Mount Prospect, Illinois

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National School Public Relations Association

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Key Findings and Observations

The auditor identified several common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. In addition, the entire review of current materials and the assessment of what needs to be done to improve the communication effort led to the following key findings and observations:

- **School District 57 is seen as a very good school district.** Participants were quick to praise the achievement of students, the dedication of staff, and the community for their support of their schools.
- **The teaching staff's commitment to communication appeared strong** as many offer classroom newsletters and participate in the e-communication tools provided to them. The commitment is stronger than we have seen in other school districts across the United States. Your staff is definitely a communication plus as you move forward.
- **Some past performances by former board members and administrators and their inability to work together is still remembered by both internal and external groups.** Consequently, we observed that trust levels are not as high as one would expect in a smaller system where just about everyone can regularly be in touch with one another.
- **There seems to be a strong need for more consistent operating procedures at the administrative level.** Our snapshot indicates that staff at various levels are unsure of the correct process to follow and often call one another at different buildings to ask, "How are you handling this one?" Site-based management also adds to this situation, but it appears to be time to decide on some core policies and practices for common elements for every building.
- **The movement of the first grade and general overcrowding space issues was also a constant thread of focus group discussions.** There was acceptance that a decision was finally made, but now there were many questions about the eventual implementation of the decision. *How will it affect me (personal start times, my day care with my kids?)*
- **Trust has also waned on the issue of committees and inservice days.** We hear how it "used to be much better" as teachers and others actually felt that they had some input on making a decision. Now they say that a predetermined course is set and they have no real input and thus feel their participation is a waste of time.
- **Even though some gains have been made in the use of technology for communication, much more has to be done to become more efficient and effective.** Use of the current web site is minimal and needs attention if you want it to be a viable vehicle for your communication effort.

- **Your broadcast calling system was much appreciated.** The parent portal in the middle school was also seen as bright spots by your parent community.
- **Your outreach beyond your parent community was seen as minimal at best.** With a majority of community members not having children in your school, the non-parent community needs to be a primary target for your communication efforts as you move forward.
- **Superintendent Aumiller’s tenure is seemingly off to a good start.** Her leadership in the facilities reorganization plan and her going to individual schools to explain the effort was much appreciated by those who were aware of it. Her posting of her presentation on the web site was also a plus. But as one teacher noted, “I did not realize we had a web site.”
- **Internal communication is currently a weakness that should be a priority moving forward.** Many staff members depend on their own internal grapevine to learn what is going on. And more time was requested for actual collaboration discussion on upcoming issues as administrative groups meet.
- **Just about every internal group expressed confusion on the official calendar of the system.** Some now use the Google calendar; other use the Mac I-Cal and some parent groups expressed concern about conflicts among calendar dates with other schools as well as foundation activities. Other systems, much larger than yours, have created a workable calendar system. Someone just needs to address it.
- **Changing demographics in your community and the need to communicate with this audience is an important factor as you build your communication plan.**
- **Inconsistency in all levels of communication exists as no expectations have been set.** Moving forward, expectations and common tools should reduce the inconsistency now taking place.
- Feedback on currently published items:
 - The Prof*, the Newsletter for Professional Development in District 57—Not many recognized it because it had not been published this school year.
 - 2009-2010 Handbook and Calendar*—This was well received by staff and parents. It serves as the one constant, go-to communication piece for many parents.
 - School Digest*—It received mixed reviews. Some saw it as “old news” while others like the idea of “reporting accountability issues to the entire community.”
 - Web site—Many appreciated recent changes, but felt navigation was still too difficult and more freshness of articles and interactive sections were needed.

- **Capacity to do more at most staffing levels will most likely meet with resistance** as most staff members seem to be working at their maximum levels. An assessment may have to be made about what can stop being performed before new assignments are given. Contracted services may be an alternative way to implement some new tactics with little time consumption by current staff.

- **A data-base approach to communication is lacking and must be established to create efficiency and effectiveness.** Once established, new e-systems of communication will flow easily to target audiences.

- **A general concern about the future finances did not escape most focus group discussions.** Enlightened community members know that the economy is taking its toll on all government-funded institutions and they expressed concern that the district will need to continue to tell its school finance story regularly to maintain support for the system.

- **The most frequent responses on future communication challenges dealt with future budget allocations, the overcrowding and facilities issues, the changing nature of the community and an infrastructure for communication.**

- And finally, **your communication effort is episodic and your capacity is limited.** You may want to consider adding more time to a contracted employee to perform various assignments. Your superintendent can set the direction and fulfill many of the leadership responsibilities that come with communication. But the operational tasks of writing, implementing, and maintaining the communication effort must be ably handled by a skilled and organized communicator. Without that commitment, only small progress will most likely be made.

Recommendations

For a system your size, the ideal communication program would contain the following communication tools and elements:

- A strategic communication operational plan tied to your districtwide strategic plan.
- An internal e-newsletter for staff published once every 2 weeks.
- Database-driven, external, on-demand newsletters for parents, community leaders, seniors, and others.
- Feedback devices for these targeted groups as well as staff.
- An Opinion Leader Network that meets face-to-face periodically with leadership and also receives its own e-newsletter.
- A web site that provides parents and others easy ways to find the information they need.
- An electronic board brief wrap-up of school board meetings pushed to selected audiences and offered to all through a registration on your web site.
- Increased parent portal opportunities for all parents.
- Training and orientation of staff concerning communication expectations and the resources to provide them.
- A unified approach to providing district news through building newsletters and web sites.
- A branding overall look for District 57 communication vehicles.
- Planned visibility for the superintendent with school staff and parent groups in face-to-face meetings as well as e-mail messages to these groups on new directions or congratulatory praise for jobs well done.
- Monitoring and seeking engagement opportunities with new arrivals to your community who may not be fluent in English and aware of all District 57 has to offer them.
- Healthy collaborative relationship with chief operating officers of local government and service organizations such as the police, health agencies, and township leaders.
- Respected relationship with the media.
- A practical safety and communication-oriented crisis plan.