

NSPRA's

Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the
Mount Prospect School District 57
Mount Prospect, Illinois

March 2010

NSRA

National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road
Rockville, MD 20855

(301) 519-0496

www.nspra.org

NSPRA'S

Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the

Mount Prospect School District 57

Mount Prospect, Illinois

March 2010

Copyright © 2010 by the National School Public Relations Association. All rights reserved. With the exception of the Mount Prospect School District 57, 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, 15948 Derwood Road, Rockville, MD 20855; www.nspra.org.

Contents

Introduction	1
Key Findings and Observations	6
Some Guiding Principles for Developing Your Communication Effort	9
Recommendations	11
Perceptions of the Focus Groups	38
Appendix	56

Introduction

Goal of the communication audit

As one of Illinois’ recognized leading school systems and communities, Mount Prospect School District 57 has earned a positive reputation with its parent community. District 57 is also fortunate to have a supportive and involved parent community that works with individual schools and staff to help students achieve at high levels.

The Board of Education and Superintendent Elaine Aumiller, Ed.D., recognize this and are committed to improving communication throughout the school system to sustain this relationship and continue to serve all students and constituents in District 57. This communication audit, an element of the school district’s strategic plan, was contracted for, approved, and supported by the superintendent and Board. It demonstrates the Board’s willingness to address communication challenges to improve educational opportunities for students.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek data, opinion, and perceptions, and from these to propose recommendations to improve the effectiveness and management of communication, public relations, and marketing throughout District 57. The recommendations presented in this audit are designed to enhance and improve two-way communication between the district and its internal and external audiences.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district’s communication effort or any other department or school, they are intended to build effective communication in a school system that is committed to continuous

improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all of its students and constituents to the best of its ability.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program, however — including a communication program — is to determine whether it is helping the organization work toward its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the auditor reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of the district's goals and objectives.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of District 57 provides an important foundation for implementing a comprehensive communication plan for the district. The audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of current communication and engagement efforts and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the overall communication effort. The audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future.

The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of focus groups and interview sessions representing a variety of the district's internal and external publics. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group/interview sessions were approximately 1 hour in length and were held October 21 and 22, 2009, with the following groups:

- Parents
- Parent leaders
- Business/civic/community members
- Principals
- Teachers
- Support staff
- Non-teaching professional staff
- Central office administrators
- Administrative assistants/office personnel (school and central office)
- Board of Education

Processes and procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communication from an “outside” perspective. The consultant for this communication audit was Rich Bagin, APR, executive director of NSPRA.

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the communication office submits samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., newsletters, brochures, reports, etc.) with various audiences. The auditor also reviews the district and school web sites. A survey of principals was also completed.

These materials and web sites are all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. In addition, the auditor reviews news clippings, demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, etc.

The core of the audit is the onsite focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the school system’s internal and external audiences. In our audit of District 57, the auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted several interview sessions with a foundation leader and a member of the media. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions.

Their responses are reported in the *Perceptions of the Focus Groups* section of this report. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the district’s current communication programming.
- Elicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns, and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of district communication.
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and to improve the management of public relations, communication, and engagement activities for District 57.

Following the review of materials and focus group perceptions, the auditor prepared recommendations, presented in the *Recommendations* section of this report. The recommendations focus on strategies the district can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve its overall communication practices.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations, and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, information, and communication 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 which earn public understanding and support.

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 that they wish to view the system and its work through the perceptions of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable in doing so.

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. 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.

Some of the comments noted in the focus group summaries may reflect concerns that will not be included in our recommendations, but they may be issues District 57 leaders will want to address in order to help resolve employee or community concerns.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this report contains recommendations for improving communication with District 57's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around the country.

Supportive quotes

The auditor took notes in each focus group session. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and would not be directly attributed to them. The focus group summaries are a synopsis of what was said in each group. Some comments are direct quotes from participants, while others are paraphrased for clarity. Any direct quotes will appear inside quotation marks, without personal attribution.

Copies to participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in 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, we recommend that each focus group participant receive a copy of this report for review and feedback.

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.
- **Some staff members expressed concern about a small minority of parents who are demanding and less than courteous in dealing with requests of staff members.** Guidelines or customer service procedures must be established and reinforced by the administration and board to help staff follow those guidelines and occasionally say, “No” to these parents who will not follow the guidelines.
- **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.
- **The local media representative noted that Superintendent Aumiller provides access and has been responsive.**
- **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.

Some Guiding Principles for Developing Your Communication Effort

1. Key messages are a critical part of any communication effort and you must decide what your key messages should be.

You have a wonderful starting point because your school district is viewed as one of the best. Now you need to continue working on that reputation and developing messages that strengthen and maintain that position — even during difficult economic times.

The identity and image of every school district and school should be directly related to its performance and its core values. As noted, you currently have an excellent reputation for the programs you offer to all your students. Your communication effort must continue to authenticate that reputation and also seek support to maintain the quality of programs you have developed.

2. Internal communication must be a priority.

No communication effort will be successful if employees do not become ambassadors for teaching, learning, student achievement, their schools, the district, and community. They also must receive all the operational information needed to perform their jobs. In addition, they need to feel that their input will be listened to in future decisionmaking on items related to their jobs. Staff members have the ability to make or break the image of their schools and the district. Employees who are negative, nonresponsive, or unable to provide timely and appropriate answers to parent and community requests will quickly undermine any communication effort. Employees should be provided with the information, tools, and training needed to support them in their roles as “Ambassadors for Achievement.”

3. People programs beat paper and mass media when it comes to engaging audiences to action.

People are persuaded to action by others whom they respect or perceive as knowledgeable. When interpersonal connections are made by credible opinion leaders and spokespersons, people are more likely to be persuaded to action. Influential peers, such as respected staff members or parent leaders, are often the most effective advocates for education. In a system and community of your size, this becomes an even stronger priority.

4. School building-level communication should be the major thrust of the communication effort.

Research in school communication shows that the local school is usually seen as the public opinion barometer of how well schools or school districts are doing. It’s a natural hub for communication with parents and others and should become a central focus of the communication plan. District 57 schools should continue their efforts to enhance the established lines of

communication with parents and also use the building-level communication as voice for district news.

5. Continue to use and enhance technology to support an efficient, timely and effective system of communication.

One of the more economical strategies to boost your communication program will be through the use of technology. E-mail, voice mail, web sites, broadcast messaging, on-demand e-newsletters for target audiences, and electronic surveys can all be used advantageously to improve and expand the district's communication infrastructure. Electronic communication and web sites are no longer "extras" in the toolkits of leading school districts. It is imperative that the district have an effective online presence because this is often the first impression today's families receive of the schools. It is also important for staff to understand that technology is an integral part of the communication effort and not just an extra to use if they feel like it.

While technology can greatly expand the district's communication "reach," it does not totally replace valuable face-to-face interactions. Communication must be multi-layered to be most effective.

6. Communication becomes part of the culture of leading school districts.

Leading school districts practice action-oriented communication strategies because they understand the critical importance of reaching key audiences with timely and relevant information. They also realize that engagement is a prerequisite for building support. This type of communication is often through the leadership of the Board of Education, the Superintendent's office and building principals. If they all set great examples, most staff understand that communication is a priority in the district.

7. Developing and maintaining a communication infrastructure will greatly enhance the efficiency and speed of the communication effort.

The most effective communication programs establish a communication infrastructure that helps leaders to quickly reach staff, community members, and key communicators in the community. Communication is a bit like a successful football team. You need to pay attention to the execution of blocking and tackling in order to be successful. Developing such a platform will eventually save you time and money.

8. You should not depend on others to tell your story. You need to tell your message early and often. You need to be proactive, not reactive.

Too often school districts are playing catch up as others have communicated their stories about your issues. In addition, when you create a void, your critics quickly fill it.

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.

Now the question is, How does District 57 move from its current program to accomplishing the list above? Our recommendations will hopefully help you do that.

Develop a Strategic Communication Plan.

Your communication effort must be tied to the six strategic objectives in your current strategic plan. Review each of the major key action steps for the objectives to see what communication effort will be needed to help accomplish the objectives.

A listing of just some of the action steps gives you an idea of why communication is needed. Sample steps are:

1. Implement the District Technology Plan.
2. Implement a Master Facilities Plan.
3. Continue to develop and implement Green Initiatives.
4. Deal with continued overcrowding issues.
5. Develop and implement the District's Professional Development Plan annually.
6. Develop a balanced operating budget.

From our focus group feedback, we are certain that most staff members are unaware of the elements of these programs. The more staff and community leaders can see where you are headed, the more involvement and respect will be earned by your district's leaders.

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective plan nor does it guarantee improved information flow. A well-designed plan will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of the district's communication dollar. It should also focus on involving people as well as informing them. Regular formal and informal research, knowing the system, understanding the problems, seeking stakeholders' opinions, evaluating what works and what doesn't, and determining how the system can improve are all important components of the communication effort. Without a plan, it is difficult to create an open dialogue, deliver the messages that are important to stakeholders, and build support for the schools.

An effective communication plan includes the four-step public relations process of research, planning, communication and evaluation, and addresses the following questions for every action or activity the district undertakes:

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know it?
- When do they need to know it?

- How are we going to tell them?
- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
- How will we evaluate the outcomes?

Think about these questions as they relate to the six action steps listed above. What do parents and staff need to know about your Master Facilities Plan now and in the future? What is it that you want them to do with the information you present? Where do they go for more information?

All are key communication questions you have to ask yourselves as you plan what to do in communication.

A strategic plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the district’s communication efforts because all projects are considered in terms of whether they support the district’s goals and objectives. It also helps to ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication that can overwhelm school systems and builds understanding and staff involvement in district communication efforts, encouraging the telling of the district’s story in “one clear voice.” A comprehensive strategic communication plan also provides a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability through evaluation criteria built into it.

However, remember that a plan is just that — it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in concrete. You will need to revise and adapt it as you accomplish objectives and as new communication challenges arise.

The following are some considerations for developing the strategic communication plan:

Action Step

Establish short-term and long-term goals for the strategic communication plan.

- **Define key constituent groups and assess communication needs and modalities for each.** The communication plan should clearly indicate key groups and the most effective communication vehicles to use with them. For example, the plan might indicate the following:
 - Parents:** Ongoing communication from school buildings on activities, calendar items, etc. Delivered through portals, e-newsletters, classroom newsletter, and web sites.
 - Non-parent community:** Regular updates on district building plans and a report card on accountability including fiscal management. Delivered through web site, e-newsletters, advisory councils, and local media.
 - Employees:** Regular updates on issues or decisions affecting the schools. Delivered through e-newsletters, e-mail, voice mail, and staff meetings.

- **Establish key measures for both short-term and long-term communication goals.** Evaluate results by setting stretch goals against benchmarked world-class standards. For example, a long-term goal might be:

By 2011-12, 94% of parents will rate the district overall as above average or excellent on the parent satisfaction survey.

A short-term goal:

By 2011-12, 73% of faculty and staff will read e-mail updates from the superintendent.

Continuously assess the effectiveness of the communication plan, message delivery methods, and information provided through progress towards the key measures.

Action Step

Develop a process for identifying and framing issues so that information is clear and consistent.

A key trait of school systems with strong communication programs is a consistency of message that is evident throughout all levels of operation and in all employee groups. Maintaining a high level of awareness and information-sharing becomes more challenging as a district grows more complex. A commitment to and expectation of ongoing, clear, and open communication must be expressed from top leadership on down.

While core value statements provide a foundation for communicating clearly and consistently, view managing the content and delivery of messages around key issues as the framework for the communication plan. Proactive communication involves identifying key issues facing the district; determining what stakeholders need and want to know about each issue as well as the best vehicle for delivering the information; framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and engaging stakeholders in helping to determine outcomes.

People appreciate hearing the “good news” about their schools, but trust and credibility are built through open communication about the business of the school system – good and bad. The public is interested not just in what decisions are being made about the education of students, but people also want to know the rationale behind the decisions, particularly in the area of funding and fiscal expenditure. It is important to foster open communication so that the school system is perceived as one that is transparent in sharing all the news.

Key issues and challenges that will affect communication in District 57 on an ongoing basis include:

- Facilities s planning,
- The overcrowding issue,
- Changing demographics, and

■ Building relationships with diverse new publics.

It may also be helpful to create a communications advisory council or various ad hoc issues teams to assess specific issues and frame messages. It is important that councils or issues teams be composed of parent and community members, as well as staff.

Educators often frame issues very differently from the public, and in order to connect with stakeholders, the district must understand the public’s perspective and messages must be presented in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences. A hypothetical fact sheet outline on the issue of Green Initiatives, for example, could include the following elements:

Issue at a Glance:	Implementing New Green Initiatives for District 57
Description:	To be fiscally and environmentally responsible to taxpayers while providing a quality education for students, District 57 is exploring options for maximizing the use green procedures throughout the school district. List key messages and talking points on this issue.
Work to Date:	Explain the status of completed and planned green initiatives. (This saves staff time in explaining what has been done on this issue in the past.)
Barriers to Progress:	List items like budget, timelines, approvals, etc.
Next steps:	Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. Next meeting dates listed, if appropriate.
Your involvement:	You can help District 57 with this issue by ...
Further info:	List contact.

You will have to update these fact sheets as changes are made, but they could become a “go-to” resource on key issues for all school staff, Board members, community and parent leaders, and other involved people. It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public.

Some suggestions for disseminating key messages internally include:

- Communicate messages to staff through face-to-face meetings, internal newsletters or e-mails, etc. Provide opportunities for staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.
- Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media.
- Include messages as headings on district and school web sites and publications.
- Share key messages with parent leaders and key communicators.

Whenever Board members or administrators are asked to respond to the media or speak to community groups, they should have a list of talking points related to their topic, or, if they are giving a general overview of the system, a list of programs and initiatives that directly support the district's initiatives as well as information on progress toward goals. Consider printing reference sheets or cards for staff to use. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that employees appreciate having the information to feel confident that they are truly voicing the school system's position and message.

Whenever the district must communicate specific information (i.e., special initiatives, crisis responses, program and policy changes), develop key messages to share with all staff and key communicators in the community. By being proactive and getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the frontlines of communication, the district can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the gap, thus co-opting the district's ability to communicate key messages effectively.

Action Step

Become more systematic with communication efforts.

One of the challenges in any school system is staying on top of what is happening in schools across the district in order to be proactive with communication. External audiences want information about schools in their neighborhoods; internal audiences want to see their school programs in the news and also learn about what is going on at other school sites. The following strategies have been effective in helping systematize communication efforts:

- **Include district news and key messages in school newsletters and web sites**

Research in school communication shows that the local school is usually seen as the public opinion barometer of how schools or school districts are doing. Schools are a natural center for communication with parents and neighborhoods and should be a major component of the communication effort. Including a district news page or heading in school newsletters is an effective way of getting important information in

front of parents. A contracted communication professional could prepare an information page or inserts and e-mail them to the schools to drop into school newsletters and web sites. These are the most effective vehicles for reaching parents with key messages and operational information about the district.

The school web sites should include timely district news plus links to the district's homepage. We feel a more effective strategy would be to include a "hot news" button on each school's homepage that would catch the user's attention and, once clicked, would link directly to new district information or key district messages. By including a direct link to current news and information on school sites, you increase the chance that the information will be read since the reader doesn't have to change web sites and search for the information.

To push information out to non-parent community members, principals should consider distributing copies of school newsletters to nearby doctor and dentist offices, beauty salons, and other businesses where people sit and wait for services. This would provide taxpayers with a closer connection to the schools and help build stakeholder support at a grassroots level.

- **Conduct readership surveys of district and school newsletters** – The district and the schools should conduct regular readership surveys of newsletters and web sites. The primary focus of publications should be to deliver news and information about the local schools and the district based on what parents say they want to know. We suggest you conduct surveys early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes. Web surveys are a quick and easy tool for this purpose.

- **Establish clear expectations for communication efforts** – For communication efforts to be successful, it is critical that all administrators clearly understand their roles in disseminating information. One suggestion that has worked for other school systems is to include a discussion of communication strategies for important items on administrative council agendas. For example, if a change in start times for schools is on the agenda, part of the discussion should include talking about what must be communicated and to what audiences so that you deliver a consistent message. Focus group feedback noted that inconsistency was a problem and this tactic may help remind administrators and supervisors of their role in communication.

Another suggestion is to note that communication will be a stronger criteria on the annual evaluation of supervisors and administrators.

Action Step

Develop targeted communication plans for specific initiatives as needed.

In addition to the overall strategic communication plan, the superintendent should develop specific communication plans for any major district initiatives or projects planned for the year, as noted in the action steps of your strategic plan. This communication strategy also applies to any unexpected developments or crises that might arise during the year.

The superintendent should work with those administrators and departments responsible for various projects to develop communication plans and guide them, as time allows, with implementing communication strategies. This type of solid planning will help the district avoid the controversies that can arise due to poor communication. NSPRA can provide samples of strategic communication plans, if you need them.

Action Step

Continue a program of ongoing feedback and research.

Your current use of climate and satisfaction surveys need to be continued as it gives you some benchmark data to use in planning your programs. But it is important that you do more in working with your target audiences when it comes to communication. Too often educators communicate information in a language that is not easily understood by our audiences. Throughout this report, we have recommended a number of interactive feedback devices and your communication effort will be better served with feedback from your audiences. Good research will save you money as it cuts waste in communication by allowing you to be more direct in your communication effort.

Action Step

Review and update the crisis communication plan.

Your current crisis plan covers the necessary safety features of your students and staff. But in today's world, the way you handle communication during a crisis is often the biggest reputation-maker or breaker for today's school systems. It is clear that school districts must be prepared at all times to deal with the unexpected. From terrorist threats to weather events to health epidemics, a current crisis plan is a must and employees must receive training to understand their roles and function effectively in a crisis.

Crisis management has many aspects — preparation, response, communication, and post-crisis support. We recommend that District 57 review and update its current crisis communication plan and make crisis management inservice a yearly activity.

Communication should be a major component of the overall plan. Poor communication with staff, parents, news media and the community in a crisis situation can do more damage to the district's reputation than the crisis itself. The crisis plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at both district and building levels.

The role of the superintendent and/or designated spokesperson should also be clearly spelled out in the plan. The organizational structure may vary depending on the type of crisis, but staff members should be designated to be in charge of various communication responsibilities. These should include:

- Leadership advisement
- Internal communication
- External communication
- News media
- Communication command center
- Telephone bank
- Research and media monitoring
- Counseling and support
- Donations and volunteers
- Special events (i.e., memorial services).

It is critical that a crisis plan also include proactive crisis management planning along with a consistent, well-coordinated plan for disseminating information about an incident and providing support in the aftermath. The manner in which the district manages and communicates about a crisis can create a long-lasting impression, either negative or positive.

Given the heightened awareness about safety following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School, and severe natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados and fires around the country, we believe it is important for all school districts to have a clearly delineated plan in place.

Also, update the plan to include important provisions such as procedures for Shelter in Place in case of a chemical incident or attack, or an event such as the sniper shootings that occurred several years ago in the Washington, D.C., area. Closely involve the superintendent's office in coordinating crisis management and communication.

We also strongly recommend that the district invite representatives from local emergency response agencies (for example, police, fire, hospital, military, behavioral health services) in your jurisdiction to help develop the crisis response and communication plan.

NSPRA's *Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual*, revised in light of what was learned at Columbine High School and other high-profile incidents, could be a model for the district to either adopt

(it is available on disk so that it can be tailored to your district needs), or from which to extract important communication principles in crisis situations.

Another important component of a good crisis plan is staff training. All employees must receive inservice training in the completed plan and procedures. It is critical for everyone to know and understand their roles and responsibilities in a crisis to ensure the safety of all students and staff.

Major Recommendation

Establish an Infrastructure for communication.

One of the current communication weaknesses you now have is the lack of infrastructure to communicate your messages in a timely fashion. One of the first best steps you can take is to begin attacking this problem. To be successful you must make sure a critical communication infrastructure is in place.

In an era of transparency and instant communication, District 57 must be able to reach all key stakeholders within a 30- to 60-minute timeframe with critical information. As you look to the future of your communication program and the infrastructure needed to support it, consider the following NSPRA checklist :

- Do you have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, political, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and nonprofit organizations?
- Do you have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?
- When news breaks, can you get information posted on the district web site within minutes?
- Can your central office team quickly provide talking points and develop key messages for the superintendent, cabinet, principals and Board?
- Do you have a bank of crisis messages and letters posted on the employee intranet or in a shared-file that principals can access at any time and adapt to communicate more effectively with parents?
- Does your technology management system give you reports that show which groups and individuals the district has contacted through e-mail and whether they are accessing the information you are providing?
- Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive district news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts, and other communication?

- Do employees, parents, reporters, and community members turn to your web site first for current news and information about the district and the schools?

We trust that the above questions will prompt you to begin looking at this database-driven approach to your communication program.

Action Step

Develop a Key Contact Management System for e-newsletters.

We recommend that you develop a key-contact management system and also look into software or companies that will manage the time-consuming tasks of keeping your contact list current. Many provide a full-service package that will enable you to produce a number of e-newsletters targeted to specific audiences. You can even track whether people are opening the information and hopefully reading it.

You can establish groups (seniors, opinion leaders, parents) and send them e-newsletters. You can also have any interested community member sign up for a free subscription to a parent newsletter on your web site. The plus of “pushing” it to the community is that they do not have to remember to come to your web site to receive the news. Some providers also give you the capability to send your news directly to smart phones and business e-mails where permitted by employers.

Your technology platform should also accommodate your staff distribution list. We urge you to consider an outside firm to develop and maintain this system as attempting to maintain this system on your own leads to a frustrating and time-consuming task.

Action Step

Implement a PR Network or Cadre.

Implement a PR Network or Cadre to help identify information needed for content for the various external and internal newsletters.

Ask each principal and department head to appoint a staff member to serve as representative to a district PR Network or Cadre. This group will help the district gather news and information about their schools or departments and disseminate key messages to staff. They can also assist in reporting rumors and emerging issues. These representatives are responsible for notifying the central office about important happenings at their schools (i.e., events, awards, student and staff accomplishments, special interest stories, etc.).

Create a news tip sheet or referral form that Cadre representatives can complete and submit for consideration. You can sort submissions sorted into categories (i.e., for use in internal or external publications, or for the district’s web site.)

The best PR Cadre representatives in schools are people who know what is going on and who have a nose for news — the library media specialist, an enthusiastic teacher, a guidance counselor or school secretary or clerk. The most important attribute is that they have a passion for their schools and want to help build a positive reputation. If feasible, you may want to offer training at the beginning of the year that provides guidelines for what constitutes a viable news story and tips for tying stories to district and school goals and objectives. We also recommend holding an appreciation reception or meeting at the end of the year to celebrate positive communication achievements.

Major Recommendation

Focus on internal communication.

School districts in today’s rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for achievement and student success. Districts seeking to implement change find that it occurs most quickly and efficiently when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. This is especially important with a district’s internal audiences. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of the responsibility for this role. Employees who are informed and involved take greater pride in their job performance and function more effectively.

While many recommendations in this report include specific activities, a shift in behavior is also recommended. The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts. We believe a strong emphasis should be placed on improving internal communication throughout the district. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to communicate about a decision or issue, it is essential that this communication process begins with staff. Staff members in the focus groups indicated that they often don’t receive information in a timely manner. Inconsistency abounds. Some call colleagues in other schools to find out what they know. Confusion dealing with calendar issues — which one to use — was also a common thread in the focus groups.

Action Step

Expand and improve communication with employees.

Some strategies for improving communication with employees include:

■ **Create a regular e-newsletter for employees.**

The district currently does not have a regular internal publication for communicating with all employees. Previously, *The Prof*, attempted to fill that void, but it was a print monthly and was not that well received by focus group participants.

Currently, District 57 uses e-mail and the web site to communicate with staff electronically. We recommend creating an e-newsletter rather than a print publication. Not only is this more cost-effective, staff focus groups cited timeliness as an issue with communication. An e-newsletter eliminates delays due to printing schedules. Focus group participants indicated that they would welcome this type of communication from the district.

Deliver this internal e-newsletter on a regular timeline (you will need to decide what works best for your capacity, but our recommendation is once every 2 weeks.)

The best employee e-newsletters have something for everyone unless there is a major focus on one issue that must be covered. Most school district employees normally appreciate receiving the following types of information:

- Schedule and policy changes
- Administrative decisions or discussion of issues
- Curriculum committee minutes and updates
- Timely test score information.
- Updates on key challenges and goals
- Explanation of district philosophy and direction
- Updates on projects or programs
- Background and resolution of campus incidents (i.e. bomb threat)
- Key messages and communication tips on sharing information with parents and the public
- Highlights of special events, activities and awards at each school.
- Reminders from HR on personnel items.
- Praise of staff and highlight accomplishments of staff and students

Often e-newsletters allow you to write short introductions that link to a full story. Doing so helps keep the newsletter lively and does not look overwhelming to the casual reader. Tracking systems will show you which articles are well received and you can adjust your content based on the tracking data you receive.

An electronic newsletter would also allow the district to provide links to national and state reports or other sites for those interested in more indepth information on specific topics. Special "Alert" editions could also be published as needed (i.e., on time-sensitive or crisis topics). NSPRA can provide samples of school district internal e-newsletters upon request.

In instances where employees do not have access to a computer, it is important that printed copies be sent through inter-office mail for posting or distribution. If supervisors are responsible for printing and posting, we recommend copies be provided in a PDF format for this purpose because it will save paper and offer a more reader-friendly publication format. Another option is to set up a computer

kiosk in staff lounges (particularly in departments such as maintenance, grounds and transportation) for employee use.

Conduct regular readership surveys to ensure that the newsletter is delivering the information staff members want and need. You can easily conduct these online through a link in the publication or through a follow-up e-mail.

■ **Develop standards and expectations for staff communication**

While expectations exist for how teachers and support staff should communicate with parents, you should also establish expectations for how the district will communicate with employees. As frontline communicators, employees should receive important information *before* the media and public. The focus should be on delivering the information employees need and want to know, which includes the rationale behind decisions; articulation of the vision and direction of the district; summaries of important meetings; and the “nuts and bolts” of district operations that affect them.

All administrators should clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner and be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. However, for administrators to communicate effectively, they must not only receive critical information of importance to district operations, but also clear directions on how and to whom it is to be disseminated.

■ **Continue opportunities for face-to-face communication.**

Focus group participants noted that Superintendent Aumiller’s presentation on moving the first grade class was the best form of communication when it came to the upcoming decision for that move. It helped these participants understand the choices considered and the reason for the decision. They also expressed more interest in talking to Dr. Aumiller in a question-and-answer format.

There are many ways to provide information, but changing perceptions and behavior — and building trust and employee morale — requires two-way communication. Research tells us that employees prefer face-to-face communication over any other source, and the focus groups reflected this as well

■ **Develop guidelines for using e-mail.**

With the advent of voice mail and e-mail, parents and community members have much greater access to teachers and district office personnel. While most of us would agree that this has made it possible to communicate faster and with more people, it has also created an expectation of immediate response that can interfere with work flow and cause feelings of stress.

We recommend the district evaluate current use patterns in the schools and district office and involve staff in developing guidelines for keeping e-mail communication manageable. These should include setting reasonable timelines for responding to requests from other departments, restricting the distribution of “all user” messages and non-essential information, and e-mail etiquette. E-mail is an essential communication tool in today’s world, but it is important for the district to ensure that it remains a useful tool and not a time-wasting burden.

We suggest the district and each school create a committee of parents and staff to develop a set of guidelines for voice and e-mail communication. These should address response times (i.e., all calls will be returned within 48 business hours) and expectations for using these communication tools, such as what constitutes unreasonable demands of a teacher or principal’s time.

Once these guidelines are determined, they should be widely distributed to staff and parents. They should also be included in student handbooks and on the web site.

Action Step

Emphasize the role of employees as Ambassadors.

One excellent way to create employee “ambassadors” is to include a communication component as part of an orientation program for all new employees — teachers and support staff. This provides an opportunity to emphasize the importance of relaying accurate information and facts to the public, instill an understanding of District 57, and also remind them that it is their responsibility to regularly read district communication because it is also part of their job.

Review with them the ways to gather information and give feedback to the district. Orientation should not only provide new employees with important information related to employment (i.e., salary and benefits, certification requirements, attendance policies, etc.), it should also acquaint them with district and community culture and procedures and help them feel part of the team. Employees new to the area and school system may be unfamiliar with local customs and communication styles and this can help them feel more comfortable in the community.

Focus group participants indicated there is limited training and orientation provided for new employees, particularly for support staff and those who join the system mid-year. We suggest that you develop an orientation program that supports the district’s communication efforts in addition to providing important training on district systems and operations.

All employees should receive a clear message that communication is an important part of their jobs and not just a function of the principal or communication office.

Give new employees an orientation packet that includes general information about the district, its mission, goals, and objectives; an employee handbook; tips on being an “Ambassador”; and any required forms. It

is very important to include support staff because they are also key communicators who are viewed as credible sources of information by the community. With an increased emphasis on effective communication, it would also be beneficial to give all district employees — not just new hires — “District 57 Ambassador” packets at inservice events at the start of the school year. Employees who feel neglected or left out of the communication loop will appreciate receiving a “tool kit” of district information to use in their daily interactions with the public.

Action Step

Provide customer service and parent conference assistance.

As noted earlier, we found your staff to be exceptional in the way your teachers and principals communicated with parents regularly. The one area needing some guidance involves how to deal with unreasonable requests by parents. Some staff members noted that saying “No” to some parents when rules were broken was a difficult situation for them to navigate. Most reported that they do all they can to please some unreasonable requests, but they requested more support from building administrators to deal with these situations.

You can secure greater employee buy-in for improving customer service by involving staff directly in establishing standards of service for the district and schools. Standards of service provide clear guidelines to follow and also give you a way to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts. NSPRA can provide you with sample standards upon request.

Indications are that your district performs well in delivering parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and other community meeting venues. Parent focus groups told us they want even more or to start providing the parent portal to the elementary level. Most school districts would be envious of the parent support and engagement you have developed in your system. The challenge is to maintain the effort as best you can.

Action Step

Create a collaborative team to study and create procedures.

Focus group participants in most internal groups indicated that they needed more procedures so they all could be on the same page when it comes to some ongoing operational issues within your system. This request is an aberration — most staff members normally want fewer procedures than more. But they pointed out time after time that procedures were lacking.

Our recommendation is to put together a task force to first agree on what procedures are needed and then decide the best ways to craft those procedures by review of the group. This can become a trust-building exercise as you need to involve staff in helping guide what the procedures should be.

The entire calendar issue, (*Which platform do we use?*) should also be decided through staff involvement.

Major Recommendation

Expand your outreach with external audiences.

Most of your taxpayers do not have a direct connection with your schools. Senior citizens, new empty-nesters, private school parents, and others are investing in your school and community and need to feel and understand how important and accountable the schools are to your award-winning community. The turn in the economy also adds more of a focus on the impact of taxes on the lives of those who do not have a direct connection with District 57.

It would be beneficial for District 57 to develop key messages for these groups and provide opportunities to regularly share this information and also provide an interactive format with some of these audiences.

Some ways to do that follow.

Action Step

Begin a Key Communicator or Opinion Leader Network.

An Opinion Leader Network can be a real asset for a school district in terms of providing strategic information to influential community members, stimulating two-way communication and promptly damaging rumors. Consequently, we strongly recommend that you view this recommendation as one of the better low-cost items that you can implement.

- To organize an effective Opinion Leader Network, ask each principal, each principal's secretary, central office administrator, and Board member to recommend two or three people, parents community members, who are well known and respected in their neighborhoods or the community and who will volunteer for this task. In addition, add the names of local leaders of well-known organizations or businesses in the community. The total group should represent as many segments of the community as possible.
- Each person should receive a letter from the superintendent explaining the opinion leader concept and inviting him or her to participate. Follow-up phone calls can be made to encourage participation.
- Opinion leaders should meet two or three times a year with the superintendent or superintendent's designate. Depending on the size of the group, these meetings could be broken down into smaller groups and held at different times. At these meetings, the superintendent should outline District plans, explain the background of issues—both current and potential—and respond to questions. It is a great setting for the

superintendent and others to strengthen credibility and trust with key leaders in your numerous communities.

- Between meetings, each opinion leader should receive a brief e-newsletter, as well as copies of other district publications that will keep them informed of successes, initiatives, events, and issues. The e-newsletter should provide short, timely updates on Board actions and the rationale behind decisions, key messages to share with the community, and updates on education-related legislative issues. In addition, the e-transmission of your monthly Board agenda and Board Brief wrap-up should be sent to these opinion leaders in your community.

An opinion leader's role is to provide up-to-date information about school issues to those he or she regularly come in contact with. When someone in the community needs more information or a rumor needs correcting, the key communicator should be able to call the superintendent's office to secure the needed information. The opinion leader can then get the correct information back to the community and hopefully head off a potential problem. In cases where widespread misinformation exists, the superintendent's office can address the issue through your web site and other e-newsletters.

An Opinion Leader Network is an excellent feedback device to help keep the district aware of community issues. It serves much the same role on a Districtwide basis as a PTA/PTO executive board does in helping to keep the principal aware of parent and community concerns.

Also note that a viable and effective opinion leader program is much more than just an e-mail list serve. It is a key relationship-builder and trust-builder for your school district. That's why the small group meetings with members of the network are critical to its success.

Action Step

Expand communication with senior citizens.

Senior citizens are a growing and important resource for today's schools. Not only can they provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors, and mentors, as voters they also have a great impact on the school system. School districts can benefit by finding ways to serve the growing population of seniors while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students in collaboration with your principals and their teachers.

Do not be quick to stereotype seniors. Many recently retired professionals also may be able to provide some advisory council roles on fiscal matters that could help your district.

Some other ideas to consider include:

- Create a cadre of “parent mentors”— once-active parents whose children are now grown — to help new parents navigate the school system and work as partners with their child’s teacher.
- Make sure the official “heads” of senior groups receive your e-newsletters and print publications.
- Include representatives from the senior community in the Key Communicator Network.
- Include seniors on future bond and levy committees.
- Allow grandparents to join students for breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria.
- Urge schools to send performing groups to senior centers.
- Send extra school publications to senior centers.
- Contribute school information to senior residence and community center newsletters.
- Provide informational materials for doctors’ offices in areas of the district with a high number of senior residents.
- Consider going to a center, demonstrate what programs you have that are a success, and also communicate your main messages and offer a question-and-answer segment as part of that presentation. Come with your own questions and answers to get it started. “Frequently, I am asked about math programs in our schools ...well ...that is one area we are proud of and we have the test scores to prove it ...”

Action Step

Use technology to extend outreach.

As noted in the earlier recommendation, you need to develop the technology infrastructure to be able to communicate with selected audiences in a quick fashion. As you plan your program, you may want to consider a number of distinct groups who want specialized information rather than the information parents want and need. In addition to the Key Communicator group, you may also want to develop e-newsletters, housed on your web site, for those interested in business and facilities topics, green initiatives, and other topics. Major messages could include the need for continued investment in the schools to maintain the tradition of excellence you have well established. Another message is to remind non-parent groups that if the schools start declining, property values will most likely decline as well.

Implement opt-in newsletters.

Leading school districts offer taxpayers the ability to register for these newsletters through their web sites. They can sign up for a listing of:

- The next board agenda,
- The wrap-up of your board meeting,
- The latest edition of a parent e-newsletter, or
- A progress update on facilities or business issues.

Once these items are ready, they will be automatically sent to those who have registered for them. Some school districts also permit RSS feeds of this information to those who requested it.

Add special sections on your web site

You will need to add a special section on your web site to alert residents of these new e-newsletters for selected groups. Much of the information for each newsletter will be similar, but just positioned differently to give “subscribers” the info they requested.

If you can provide an interactive section on your web site for questions from constituents and have the capacity to monitor and answer them, it could aid in helping to get your messages across.

Another section of the web site, could include a *Here’s What We Are Working On* which could include updates on key issues following *The Issue at a Glance* recommendation earlier in this report.

Consider other social networking opportunities.

In addition to the web site and e-newsletters, you may want to establish a Twitter account to be used for emergency situations and invitations to selected meetings held by the school district. The staffing capacity to implement this as well as possible Facebook sites are most likely down the road because you would need a full-time employee to monitor and edit these new vehicles.

Action Step

Revamp and reduce the frequency of *School Digest*.

Because of the increased frequency of your e-communication efforts, we recommend cutting back the frequency of *School Digest* to just two times a year because your database approach should reach more constituents than in the past.

School Digest should continue to be a major accountability piece for District 57. One issue could be a mini-annual report talking about your accomplishments but also listing the challenges you are facing. Use the print publication to drive readers to your web site and the new feature of signing up for selected e-newsletters.

The second edition could focus on key messages that fit into your strategic plan. Just remember that is more than listing your strategic plan, but demonstrating what staff and students are doing that fit into making your school district one of the best in the area for now and for the future.

Action Step

Use a variety of communication and engagement vehicles to target external groups.

In the focus group of Board members, we heard the frustration of the community not attending special opportunities to meet with the Board including the past “Bagels with the Board” and other events. We applaud your willingness to reach out, but people do not normally get involved until an issue ignites them.

The concepts of “public engagement” and “transparency” are compelling for education because they require us to engage our stakeholders in meaningful ways that create a civic investment in our schools. However, public engagement is only successful when the process involves stakeholders in all phases of decisionmaking, from start to finish, and this requires a timeline that allows for real dialogue and shared ownership of outcomes.

Timing is critical to successful engagement initiatives. To include opportunities for parents and community members to participate in dialogue with the Board and administration on major program and policy changes that affect the schools, the district must factor this into decisionmaking timelines. While it is difficult to put exact start and finish times on any given issue under discussion, one way to begin is to determine the outside deadline for a final decision, and then work backwards from that point.

The bottom line for planning is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process, and not just brought in at the approval stage, after the bulk of development work has been done. It is also important to evaluate what works and what doesn’t to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future.

The other factor to consider is that not every decision requires an engagement process. One way to assess this is to consider what Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, calls “Gateway Questions” that lead to engagement:

- *Is this a problem that affects me?* – People first have to connect the problem or issue to what they deem valuable before they will get involved (or engage).
- *Can I do anything?* – Even if they feel the problem is serious, they have to 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.

Some considerations for involvement are:

- **Hold study circles on “hot topics.”**

Large forums don’t often lend themselves to indepth discussion of specific topics of concern due to the format and large numbers of people involved. Study circles are facilitated groups that involve 10 to 25 people in discussions on a particular topic. They provide an opportunity to surface all sides of an issue as well as some underlying concerns that may affect the outcome. NSPRA can provide more information on coordinating study circles.

- **Conduct listening lunches (or coffees).**

Because most opportunities for the public to interact with the school system involve citizens coming onto district “turf,” taking the school system to the public can often be an effective way to encourage engagement. One example is for the superintendent, administrators and Board members to establish a monthly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversations about the school system. Consider teaming up with local coffee shops, restaurants, or other community venues and set a regular time and day (i.e., every second Tuesday from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.). Board members and administrators could rotate attendance.

To be most effective, provide a structure for the conversations by designating topics — for example, one date might focus on facility planning, another on the budget or state legislative issues, etc. Open-ended “venting” sessions are not particularly useful, and it also is important to honor the district’s chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

The key is to meet with community members on their turf to listen to concerns they may have about issues affecting the district. It should be clearly stated that these “listening” events are just that — no decisions will be made based on conversations that take place. Position them as opportunities for the Board and administration to gather opinion research and information.

- **Provide opportunities for public input that don’t require attending a meeting.**

As mentioned earlier, offer a section on the district web site that allows constituents to record their comments or reactions to a specific question, issue, or proposal before the Board.

A public relations maxim, “An invitation to everyone is an invitation to no one,” rings true for many school district trying to build attendance at events and meetings. One of the participants of the business/community focus group noted that the reason he

attended was that he received a letter addressed to him that was signed by Superintendent Aumiller. He had never attend any other meeting in your system. The personalized approach does work!

And a final note on public engagement is that what is critical to the success of any public engagement strategy is the Board and administration's commitment to listening to input and recommendations, and taking action based on all the information at their disposal. While this does not mean every recommendation made by a citizen or staff committee will be implemented, it does mean that you will consider input in the context of how it furthers the district's strategic plan. It is also imperative that the district follow up with its stakeholders and report on the outcomes of these engagement processes to close the communication loop and build credibility and trust in leadership.

Action Step

Improve communication with non-English speaking populations.

Focus group participants noted that a growing Polish community segment creates new opportunities for District 57 to effectively teach and communicate with these students and their parents and their community. You will need a variety of communication vehicles to reach this important audience.

Traditional publications and e-newsletters may be ineffective in reaching non-English speaking and immigrant populations and the district should research the best ways to communicate with the different ethnic groups it serves. Some strategies for connecting to non-English speaking stakeholders include:

■ Include a bilingual component to targeted communication vehicles.

At minimum, the district must reach out to Polish community leaders and seek their assistance on the best ways to communicate with their leaders and their families.

The district must work with staff to help with communication assistance. While it is unrealistic to translate all school materials into Polish, translate the phrase, "This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you." into Polish with help from Polish community leaders.

You can attach this reference sheet to school documents. It will signal non-English speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information.

The district should also identify select publications and correspondence (i.e., ESL materials, FERPA letters, free and reduced meal forms, enrollment information, etc.) that should be translated into the Polish language for these new community members.

■ **Build partnerships with ethnic agencies**

A strong relationship between the school system and community agencies that serve specific ethnic groups will allow District 57 to benefit from their advice and expertise and help provide access to these communities.

■ **Expand opportunities for Polish-speaking parents to get involved.**

Serving as chaperones on field trips is one way that Polish parents can participate in the schools. Parents can help plan cultural celebrations for the schools that would not only be authentic, but would enhance the educational opportunities of the other students as well.

Using Polish parents can bridge the gap between the school and the monolingual parents. Because of a common language and culture, these parents would be in a better position to welcome parents who do not speak English. Polish parents could serve as translators for meetings and other school functions. The monolingual parents would build a rapport with the bilingual parents, which could help them feel less intimidated and more inclined to attend important meetings and school functions.

Action Step

Improve communication with private school leaders and parents.

District 57 has a high percentage of private and parochial school students. Together, the public and private school families have chosen to live and flourish in your award-winning community.

Some school districts recognize that by working together and building positive relationships with the leaders of these private and parochial schools, they build good will that goes a long way in developing a unified sense of community for all parents and their families. One award-winning superintendent was praised by a Catholic school principal in Missouri during an audit because she said, he always referred to her students and his students as *all our children*.

In that community, the private school leaders would meet with the superintendent regularly to talk about community issues, ways of working together, and some joint projects that developed a mutual respect for the school district in that community. As District 57 looks to the future, the support of the private and parochial school community would be a favorable asset in these lean economic times.

Major Goal

Brand communication vehicles.

As you begin deciding on some new approaches to your communication effort, it will be an appropriate time to think about how your materials look and what that look “says” about you. Implementing this recommendation may be a few years away given your current capacity in communication, but it is another item to consider for the future.

Right now, even with the limited vehicles you offer, it would be difficult to know that the web site, the *Prof and School Digest* all come from the same school district. And when you toss in the building newsletters and web sites, few common denominators communicate that they are part of District 57. The impression your vehicles leave is that your school district is not a unified force but rather a system of individual schools or programs. Even your *Parent Handbook and Calendar* does not include your District 57 logo.

Some recommendations to assist with branding follow.

Action Step

Coordinate the graphic design of your publications and web sites.

It would be beneficial for every school and building newsletter to carry the district’s logo and possibly a tag line or theme to go with logo. As examples, NSPRA can provide a list of themes used by school districts. Variations on a theme with something like, *District 57 — Excellent Schools for an Award-Winning Community*, could possibly work for you now. Since your district, enjoys a strong, positive reputation in the community, your communicating vehicles should consistently capture the look and feel of success.

Some school districts develop templates for building newsletters and web sites to solve this problem. Others also publish a style guide to help school district staff consistently present its look to all its target audiences.

Major Goal

Continue improving the web site and parent portals.

You have improved your web site over the past year and many of the recommendations in this report noted new content features that will make it more valuable to all residents of District 57. Our recommendation is to make the web site more interactive and a go-to resource for your community.

Staffing and budget limitations will drive final decisions, but you must remember that your web site should grow into the critical communication vehicle for your system. As it grows, the need for quicker navigation shortcuts will also increase.

Coordination with the building web sites is also needed where the “look” and links make it seem as if we are all a part of District 57.

Parent portals were much appreciated by the parents in our focus groups. Some requested that they eventually be available for elementary students as well. Unlike many other school districts throughout the country, your staff is participating in the portal on a timely basis.

One additional suggestion about the web site and the parent portal is that you must continue to market their availability by driving parents and others to them. Continue mentioning these items in presentations as well as in your print publications and e-newsletters.

Major Goal

Implement the recommendations.

Currently you have your superintendent driving and implementing your communication effort. You also have a technology professional to assist where he can. In addition, you have a contracted employee for approximately 300 hours a budget year.

Previously, you had a full-time and then part-time communication employee. It appears that the need for more communication is being summoned at a time when the capacity to do more in communication has been diminished.

The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive and should be prioritized by need and importance as to how the district’s communication resources are expended. It would be unrealistic to expect that all the communication goals suggested in this report can be accomplished in the short term — even if you had a full-time communication professional. Rather, use the recommendations in this report as a guide for how to get started and to give a vision of what could be as you look farther down the road.

Our recommendation is that your superintendent provide the leadership and direction to the elements that make sense for District 57 now. In addition, she must be the visible leader along with the Board when it comes to engaging and interacting with your community.

To complete the writing assignments and ongoing communication tasks sprinkled throughout these recommendations, you will need a professional writer who understands the nuances of an operating school district. With the right person, you may need a minimum of a 3-day-a-week professional to get the program underway.

You will also need to contract for some web services and e-newsletter database assistance. Our experience is that contracting for these services is much more efficient and productive when you select the right firm or consultant.

Communication must be an integral function as you move forward in this new era of fiscal uncertainty. Commitment and leadership are needed to build a program that will help maintain all the excellence you have accomplished in the past. Starting with a part-time writer and contracted e-services assistance is what is needed to begin building a communication program for your schools.

Perceptions of the Focus Groups

The following is an overview of perceptions identified by the auditor in the focus group sessions held during the onsite visit on October 21 and 22, 2009. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the auditor's questions. Rather, it contains comments that appear to identify significant beliefs, concerns, and suggestions of participants. Many of these comments led to recommendations in this communication audit report. Other comments may be helpful to the Board and administration in addressing staff and community concerns in other areas.

Group: Building Principals

Strengths of the district

- Size of system is a plus as people know one another.
- Motivated and great staff.
- Staff members stay with us.
- Consistency of staffing also a plus.

Areas needing improvement

- Our smallness can get in the way of getting things done.
- We wear too many hats to be great at everything.
- Lack of standard procedures creates inefficiencies.
- Procedures manual is needed.
- Better understanding by staff and community on how our community is becoming more diverse; it seems at times we wear rose-colored glasses and that is how our community sees us.
- Because we are recognized as a good school district, we sometimes see some complacency within our district.

Current communication devices

- Information is readily available for parents.
- The *Handbook and Calendar* gives parents much of the information they need.

- School district and building web sites also give information, but we depend on parents to go to these sites. So often the communication just sits there passively.
- PTA newsletters are also helpful, but finding the time and budget to coordinate and complete all these communication efforts becomes a difficult task to keep up with in light of other duties we need to complete.

Communication with central office

- Weekly meetings are more open than in the past.
- To improve them, more time needed for conversation and thoughtful discussion on decisions before they are made. It will lead to more transparency and better understanding. We often hear that the “administration decided” when we are not involved in that decision and yet we have to explain the decision to our staff and parents.
- Input on meeting agendas would be preferred.
- Many things seem rushed; need for urgent implementation prohibits lack of discussion.
- Calendar issues need to be resolved; right now there is a building internal calendar, the district calendar, and a number of different delivery systems with a Google calendar, and I-calendar competing for staff’s attention.
- The role of the long-term committee structure needs to be reviewed as well as committees can become a very valuable form of internal communication.
- Clarification is needed on what the principal’s role is at the Board meeting. What are the expectations by the superintendent and the Board? Occasionally, the Board seems to fall into a micromanaging “mindset” that upsets the flow of building-level decisionmaking.

Communication challenges for the future

- The overcrowding and facilities issues will need continued communication effort.
- The changing nature of the community and student body and ways to communicate about the diversity of your system.
- Budget communication effort will need to be enhanced to earn needed community support in the years ahead.

Group: Central Office Administration

Strengths of the district

- Leadership still defining roles on decisionmaking. Stable community; not transient.
- Long-standing legacy of solid instructional program; I would recommend it as an ideal place to work.
- High-performing system.
- Expectations of kids are at high levels.
- Children come “ready to learn.”
- Support for learning at home.
- Considered one of the premiere districts.
- Parents are very involved (sometimes over-involved).
- High expectations.

Areas needing improvement

- Because of performance, no urgency to change.
- Fear that complacency will work against future performance.
- Public perception of past leadership is that the Board and administration “did not play well together.”
- Board was seen as seven individuals, not one Board of Education.
- Needs to be better definition of roles of Board members, parents, and administrative team. Some involved parents want to know everything. Small administration wears so many hats that some things inevitably fall through the cracks.
- Leads to some micromanaging that creates second-guessing, which does not help trust issues among all groups.

Current communication devices

- Cabinet meeting is major communication device, but we are so small that we just talk and meet with one another as needed.

- Strive for collaboration and using processes but time factor and self-imposed limitations created by everyday responsibilities get in the way of a true collaboration.
- Timing of issues also forces less dialogue as deadlines have to be met.
- History of high-performing, site-based management of schools and new central office leadership created some uncertainty on making decisions. They feel they are usually “the last to know.”
- E-mail and use of Internet are primary way to deliver information.

Communication recommendations

- Development of a better e-system for employees so that they can better access insurance forms, and also improves a delivery system for overall internal communication.
- Stronger customer service commitment by central office to all employees.
- In the past, when it came to facilitates, it appeared that we had a program of “Random Acts of Improvement.” A communication plan to work with a facilities plan is needed.
- Building newsletters are key and the parent portal needs to continue as it leads to efficiency.
- Place *School Digest* on the web site.
- Need to find ways to reach non-parents in our community.

Communication challenges

- We need to be more consistent and efficient.
- Budget communications with more emphasis on letting entire community including empty-nesters know where we are headed.
- Maintaining support in the lean years ahead.

Group: Teachers

Strengths of the district

- Nice group of students to work with.
- Wide variety of services for children.

- High work ethic of staff.
- Supportive parents.
- Nice community feel to schools.

Areas needing improvement

- Space issues in schools.
- Not enough custodial staff.
- Not enough opportunities to go to conferences.
- Not a lot of growth opportunities within system.
- Communication issues regarding Institute Day – no real planning or collaboration. If existed or accomplished, it was not communicated.
- Calendar issues: which one do we use “I Cal” versus Google calendars causing confusion.
- Communication: Not aware of what is going on in other buildings. Other schools seem to have different expectations.

Sources of information

- Grapevine is strong.
- Newspaper.
- Superintendent’s e-mail after the Board meeting.
- Principals’ newsletters.
- No consistent method of communication.
- Some principals share information and others don’t; call colleagues at other school to find out what is happening.
- Web site can help (but many teachers were not aware that superintendent’s messages about facilities and start times were on the web site.)
- An Intranet for employees would be helpful.
- Current web site is better than it was but still difficult to navigate.

Best way to deliver information

- Principals delivering to us. Other districts use signs outside their buildings effectively.
- E-mail communication by Superintendent.
- Visits by Superintendent.

Opportunities for input into decisions

- Listening is better at building level than at district level.
- Feel that their voice is not being heard on such items as master facilities plan and reduction in force issues.
- Inservice day planning is weak.
- Morale is low because voices are not being heard.
- Years ago, the committee structure was working, but now we feel we are just being led to a predetermined decision.

Greatest communication challenge facing the district

- Our smallness makes you think communication is easy; but it is difficult as everyone seems to be involved in just about everything.
- Bad communication and trust issues in past need to be addressed; won't happen overnight.
- Keeping parents involved — more and more are working.

Group: Parents

Strengths of the district

- Principals have best interest of kids in hand.
- Philosophy of a welcoming environment.
- Academically, outstanding in all our schools.
- Teachers are strength of school district.
- Safety of schools is a strength.

Areas needing improvement

- In literature, at the middle school, everything they read seems to be a “downer.”
- Should consider ramping up requirements as some students may not be ready for a rigorous high school curriculum.
- Better definition of “high honors” and the criteria needed for it.
- Increasing pressure on students for more achievement. When are we going to allow “kids to be kids?”

Sources of information

- Friday packets.
- E-mail from principals.
- Connect Ed messages.
- Appreciated the H1N1 Connect Ed messages.
- Local newspapers.
- Grapevine of other parents.
- Talking with administrators at events — they are always there.
- Should drive more info to web
- Parent Portals are wonderful; need at all levels. Schools are in their own silos; don’t know what goes on in other schools.
- Web site needs refreshing; not easy to navigate.

Information desired

- Board level plans for communication.
- Board seen as reactive; need to demonstrate movement that things are happening.
- Regular communication from Board meetings would be appreciated.
- Need more information about the Foundation and how to support it.
- Information on fiscal planning and the misconceptions about it. Proving the value of education to entire community or we may be headed for a “train wreck.”

- Need fiscal picture painted so we know what support is needed and how the overlapping districts come into play.

Greatest communication challenges facing the district

- Working with the municipal government.
- Fiscal picture and support.

Group: Support Staff

Strengths of the district

- One of the best systems.
- Teachers are best I ever worked with.
- Forward-thinking teachers.
- Number One priority is all things for children.
- Very inclusive in working to solving problem for children.

Areas needing improvement

- Overcrowding.
- Kids in the “middle need attention, too.”
- Lack of support for computer repairs.
- Communication: Do not know what is going on at other schools.
- Late hires receive e-mail and informal mentoring; orientation is needed for new hires throughout the year.

Sources of information

- Grapevine and e-mail.
- Team leader notes.

- I Cal calendar.
- Staff meetings; but some aides cannot attend dealing with “bankable hours.”
- Connect Ed is a winner.
- Handbook and calendar publication is valuable –just wish more parents would read it.
- *Daily Herald*.

Additional communication concerns

- Supervisor communication to me directly.
- An e-mail to all of us who deal with staff an parents possibly called ,”In Case You Hear this ...” so we could all be on the same page.
- Letters going home to parents also need to be given to staff, including aides.
- Orientation sessions for all staff members to set up communication protocols.
- We need to make it easier for families to find the information they need.

Opportunities for input into decisions

- Somewhat at building level; not at district level. Example, we are considering change ... how will this change influence your job? What ideas do you have? This happens in some buildings. Not consistent.
- Tech decisions made without input; but personnel in transition during the period of change.
- Greatest communication challenges facing the district.
- Reaching more families; making it easier for families to find the information they need.
- Making it easier for schools to find the information they need from the central office.
- Dealing with individual students and fear of litigation. What is appropriate process for us in dealing with students and parents?

Group: Central Office & School Administrative Assistants

Strengths of the district

- Parental and family support is great.

- Wonderful opportunities for kids.
- Good experiences for all students.
- Nice school libraries.
- State School Report Card recruits powerful people into our district.
- People want to move here.
- About 75% of parents are supportive and accommodating; 25% fall into a category of being unreasonable and very demanding with “on-demand” requests.
- Special education programs are very good.

Areas needing improvement

- We are not on par with other school districts when it comes to teacher compensation.
- Insurance, especially family coverage is high.
- Overcrowding and space issues need improvement.
- No set district- wide procedures so individual buildings handle things differently. “Procedures should be an easy bow to tie as we only have four schools.”
- Who is in charge of me? “I seem to have two bosses; need clarity on who is my boss?”

Sources of information

- Web site is helpful.
- E-mail blasts.
- Principals, but inconsistent.
- We appreciate the Board meeting summaries.
- Meetings with principals and superintendent, but there is little or no time for questions.

Best way to deliver information

- Prefer meetings with supervisors.
- E-mail on a consistent basis with enough time to assimilate and react.

Information desired

- Appreciate Board Briefs.
- Would like to receive Board Agenda items.
- E-mail on a consistent basis from bosses and central office.

Other communication issues:

- Calendar issues: Who is in charge of them? Which calendars do we use?
- Web sites at building level: Who does them? How do we keep them up to date? Is there assistance from central office tech?

Opportunities for input into decisions

- “In the immediate past, listening process was a waste of time.”
- We give input, no feedback received and then decision was made opposite of our input. Why ask? At least tell us why you made decision as there may be factors we were not aware of.

Greatest communication challenge facing the district

- Communication infrastructure to reach all employees.
- Decision on hardware Mac versus PC.
- Communication infrastructure to reach community.
- Training and procedures to work with some parents who seem to have an incredible sense of entitlement.

Group: Community Members

Strengths of the district

- Impeccable academic record .
- Outstanding staff.
- Small and intimate size makes it very good for students.
- Staff makes time for “small talk” with parents.

- Professionalism is very high.

Areas needing improvement

- We need to make sure we can maintain excellence in programs.
- We need to quantify in some way the investment we have made and how to maintain it.
- Facilities need improvement.
- During the HINI scare, we needed to communicate to keep sick children home.
- Find ways to build greater support of non-parents within the district.

Sources of information

- Local paper.
- *School Digest*.
- Web site.
- Parent groups.
- Grapevine.
- Board meetings.
- Automated phone calls (also a parent).
- Backpack info (also a parent).

Best way to deliver information

- Digest reaches non-parents, an important group for the future.
- A newsletter or message with tax bill.
- Short e-mails on key items.
- Personal letter from superintendent as that is why I attended today.
- Televised Board meetings.
- Look into social marketing like Facebook.

Other communication issues

- Does the district have a web site?
- Share celebratory news as not enough people know about the good things happening in the schools.
- Need for short items talking about the value of the budget.
- Involvement is not lacking it is just that people do not come out because everything is okay. People are complacent, not apathetic.

Opportunities for input into decisions

- After facilities study committee dismissed, frustration grew that the Board did not listen.
- Recent involvement attempts reflect back to that time or the complacency issue mentioned above.
- It may help to rotate Board meetings to different schools.

Greatest communication challenges facing the district

- Shaking up the status quo so that more people realize that some changes will need to be made to maintain the greatness of the district.
- Need to portray future changes for the good of the children and not for personal reasons of some groups or powerful figures.
- Need to challenge the entire community to continue its ongoing investment and make them aware that with little commercial tax base, the burden to maintain excellence will fall on homeowners.

Group: Non-Teaching Professional Staff

Strengths of the district

- Great staff who give 100% to help kids.
- Small district where relationships are easily built.
- Parent involvement is great.
- Good follow through with parents.
- Class size.
- Program options for struggling students.

Areas needing improvement

- Wear too many hats and attend too many meetings where things are done differently which leads to inconsistency and confusion as these all feed into a more comprehensive approach later on down the line.
- No time for collaboration.
- Changing timelines for next year needs consideration as staff day are problems may arise.
- Board member and staff communication needs some guidelines; not always sure of protocol when dealing with the Board.
- Overcrowding issues. Superintendent visited but did not have time for questions and gave the impression that it was designed that way so no questions could be asked.

Sources of information

- E-mail and phone messages from bosses and colleagues.
- Principals and the calendars.
- Calendar handbook.
- Web site.
- *School Digest*.

Other communication issues

- Intranet directory with phone numbers needs updating.
- Role of committees not clear.
- Which is the appropriate calendar?
- School web site newsletters and blogging can be positive at building level.

Best way to deliver information

- E-mail and voice mail.
- Meetings with boss.

Opportunities for input into decisions

- New superintendent is more open; a breath of fresh air.
- Transparency seems to be a priority and is positive for school district.
- Previously, people were not one to respond for various reasons; now they will.

Greatest communication challenges facing the district

- Changing first grade will make it better.
- Changing school calendars will call for more communication and collaboration with staff and parents.
- Continued openness from administration is key.
- Giving enough time for collaboration is important; reduces anxiety of parents and staff.
- Teachers are overloaded; not enough time to cover the curriculum and still be creative.
- Some expressed concern that eliminating afternoon recess will escalate behavior problems.

Group: Parent Leaders

Strengths of the district

- Excellent schools.
- History of extraordinary parent involvement.
- Safety of students is a priority.
- Good communication when there is an incident at a school .
- School newsletters are positive.
- Schools do a great job of stretching their dollars.
- Extra activities at school are a plus.

Areas needing improvement

- Wish our total community was more supportive.
- More support needed from business community.

- Not every school is equal when it comes to communication; some inconsistency among schools as I have had children in different school at the same time.
- Team concept not working as our students experienced four tests and projects due on same day—not working together.
- All administrators are not equal; some much better at communication than others.
- Math instruction is a strong point in middle schools while language arts and Spanish II need work.

Communication Issues

- Robo calls are working.
- *School Digest* is fluffy; need more info (news to use) for senior population and empty nesters.
- Receive District news at building level because we are so involved in our parent groups. But again, some buildings are better than others.
- More conferences are needed at the middle school; conferences on-demand when students are struggling; often find out when it is too late; prefer set times throughout the year.
- Transparency is better than in past; Dr. Aumiller listens; but have to wait to see if follow-through will happen.
- The Presidents' Council is a good forum for communication. Members did not think that it was beneficial to have principals in the discussion as it inhibited some parent leaders to speak their mind.
- More information on the relationship of the PTA leaders and how they should be working with the Education Foundation.
- Now feel that there is more of team approach in facilities planning.
- Group says it is often networks with one another through e-mail.
- Group was also aware of one board member sending out info reports by e-mail to selected members in community.
- Better communication is needed with the child care forum registration; some changes implemented that this group said were not working.

Greatest communication challenges

- Communication surrounding the budget and facilities planning.
- Possible need for financial referendum in the future.

- Ways to deal with rumors as the letter sent home today about a student discipline created more rumors because it was too vague.
- Changing nature of our community will also create communication challenges.

Group: Board Members

Strengths of the district

- Parents have a good relationship with teachers.
- Teachers are a plus.
- Engaged families.
- Involved parents; they ask questions.
- Very homogeneous.
- High level of commitment.

Areas needing improvement

- Lack of trust from past Board does not go away.
- Lack of trust of administration which is a layover from some things in the past.
- Our community does not have as many advanced degrees as some of our neighbors so we sometimes have lower expectations.
- We are below are numbers in funding valuations and this will be catching up with us in the near future.

Communication Issues

- We need to look at our audiences and answer the question as to why do they care about our schools. Why do seniors care? Why do private school parents care? We need to demonstrate what we are doing for them regularly.
- One board member was blogging to the community about school district information.
- We need to guard against complacency; we need to tell our story on a consistent and ongoing basis.

- Not sure we can communicate effectively for a crisis as we are lacking procedures.
- More technology is needed in our communication effort.
- We need to build more a partnership with our non-parent community.
- We are making head-way with our parent community.
- Our web site is “as 1994 as they come.” It also contains “deadly boring” information.
- Surveys are not trusted; people are not comfortable in being authentic in the surveys.
- Parent portals need to be moved to elementary schools.
- Stronger relationships need to be nurtured with elected officials, the trustees, and Mayor.

Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions
- What Is NSPRA?
- Auditor's Vita

Focus Group Audiences

- Central Office administrators (C.O. team & coordinators)
- Principals
- Teachers
- Administrative assistants/office personnel (school and central office)
- Support staff
- Business/Civic group/Dist. 57 Education Foundation leaders/Seniors etc.
- Parent leaders (PTA and active others)
- Parents
- Non-teaching professional staff
- Board

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you consider to be the overall strengths of the Mount Prospect School District?
 - Are there areas needing improvement?
2. Is information about the schools and district easy to find and access?
 - What is your best source of news and information about the district/schools?
 - How would you prefer to get your information?
3. What information would you like to receive from the district that you don't get at this time?
4. Are [specific publications] helpful and informative?
 - How can they be improved?
5. Do the district/school web sites provide the information you need?
 - Are they easy to navigate?
 - What would make the district web site more useful to you as a primary source of information?
 - How can they be improved?
6. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does Mount Prospect School District 57 do well?
 - How can it be more proactive in communicating with you?

- How might the district more effectively gather input and feedback from you about your satisfaction with the schools and programs?
 - What one thing could the district to improve communication immediately?
7. (*For staff*) As an employee, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
- What additional information would you like to receive?
 - Are current communication vehicles such as (examples) effective in delivering information?
 - What's the best way to communicate with you?
 - How might the district best gather staff input and feedback on important issues?
8. As you are probably aware, the Board is in the process of developing and implementing a Master Facilities Plan as well as a plan to address overcrowding at the elementary schools. What information will it be important for the district to communicate as it proceeds with this plan?
- What communication tools or vehicles should the district use to ensure that the community receives this information as work moves forward?
9. Do you feel that district leaders provide opportunities for you to express your views and have input into important decisions?
- Do you feel district leaders listen to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
10. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district in the future?

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 Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

With 75 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files, and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

NSPRA has 32 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations, along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides school public relations/communication counsel and assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations. For many of these organizations, we have completed comprehensive communication audits to analyze the effectiveness of their overall communication programs and recommend strategies for improving and enhancing their efforts.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each July. This 4-day conference offers more than 70 topics and expert speakers on a wide array of school communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement topics.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter, *Network*, is a communication resource for all school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major communication issue and offers proven strategies educators can use to address it and other concerns. *PRincipal Communicator* is our monthly building-level newsletter for school principals that provides practical communication tips to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.

Our four e-updates, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor*, *NSPRA Alert*, and *Opportunities* offer summaries of breaking national education news, indepth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products, and services available to educators. *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

The NSPRA web site at www.nspira.org offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public site and more comprehensive, indepth information in our *Members Only* section, including discussion forums, article archives and access to the e-Knowledge Portal of the Educational Research Service (ERS).

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

NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people. In addition, NSPRA is a sponsoring agency of the Educational Research Service (ERS).



National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road
Rockville, MD 20855

(301) 519-0496

www.nspra.org

Auditor's Vita

Richard D. Bagin, APR

Rich Bagin, APR, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) since April 1992, has more than 30 years of experience in school and corporate public relations and communication.

In school public relations, Bagin served for 8 years as the communications director and assistant superintendent for a suburban Philadelphia school system. In that capacity, he was responsible for internal and external public relations programs and dealt with crisis situations ranging from employee strikes to federal indictments of school district architects and legal counsel. Before that, Bagin was a secondary school English teacher, coach, and yearbook advisor in Pennsylvania. He has also served as Director of Communications and Development for the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Bagin has conducted numerous communication audits for school districts and corporate clients. He was instrumental in initiating the NSPRA communication audit process in the mid-1980s and has written articles on the auditing process that have appeared in various educational and communication periodicals. Bagin is the author of NSPRA's *Communication Guidebook for Teachers; Evaluating Your School Public Relations Investment, Planning Your School Public Relations Investment; and Making Parent Communication Effective and Easy*. He also authored *Principals in the Public... Engaging Community Support*, jointly published by MetLife, the National Elementary School Principals Association (NAESP) and NSPRA. In addition, Bagin serves as a workshop leader for major education associations and school districts throughout the United States and Canada.

In the corporate sector, Bagin was senior vice president/general manager for two national and international public relations firms. He has counseled corporate Fortune 500 firms on strategy and implemented bottom-line oriented public relations and marketing communication programs in the private sector.

Bagin is accredited by the Universal Accreditation Board of the North American Public Relations Council. He is a member of PRSA's counselor's academy and also holds a master's degree in educational public relations. He serves as a board member and officer for the Educational Research Service (ERS) and the Learning First Alliance. In 2002, Bagin received NSPRA's prestigious Presidents Award, the highest award given to a professional in school public relations, for a lifetime of achievement in school public relations.