



Communication Audit Report:

Corvallis School District

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

The Corvallis School District 509J (CSD) serves an area of approximately 190 square miles including the city of Corvallis, Oregon and large portions of unincorporated Benton County. Corvallis is the home to Oregon State University, and a majority of its residents are highly educated.

The district has close to 6,400 students at two high schools, two middle schools, eight elementary schools, a K-8 school of choice (no boundary area), one charter school and one alternative school.

While Corvallis families are predominantly white (66 percent), Hispanic students account for about a fifth of the student population. More than 50 languages are spoken, and nearly 14 percent of students are English language learners.

The district's [Strategic Path](#) is guided by the [2018-2023 School Board Goals](#), which addresses the following five main areas of focus, in addition to a 2021-22 goal in response to COVID-19.

- Student Achievement
- Equitable Systems
- Real-World Learning
- Health and Wellness
- Long Range Facility Planning

The district is widely known for its focus on equity and has strong community support. While the district's commitment to equity is a strength, it is also a source of challenges, as some in the community view the focus on equity as not being equitable for all students and as diminishing the district's focus on academic rigor.

The Communications Department has a basic communication plan in place to guide its efforts for the 2022-23 school year. The first strategy of that plan is, "Conduct a communications

audit to evaluate the effectiveness of the CSD communications program and identify areas for future development." This NSPRA Communication Audit Report is a direct result of that plan and provides extensive information and recommendations that can serve to guide the district's communication efforts going forward.

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

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

In serving CSD, the goals of the NSPRA Communication Audit process were to:

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

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Corvallis School Board and Superintendent Ryan Noss, to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Communications Department or any other department or individual school, they are intended to help CSD improve the effectiveness of current communications, engagement

and marketing efforts and to support its commitment to continuous improvement.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall, but individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met for example. The real measure of success, though, is whether the communication program is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing recommendations, the auditor reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of the district's vision, mission, beliefs and goals.

Guiding Definition

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

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

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

An NSPRA Communication Audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions and the effectiveness of current public relations, engagement and marketing efforts, and offers recommendations to enhance or expand the

overall program. The audit also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication program begins with opinion research.

Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of CSD enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit was Carol Fenstermacher, APR. Her vita is included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the communication audit involved the Communications Department submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., Corvallis School District News, Sup's Chat and CSD's 2022-23 Student Parent Handbook). The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor's review of websites and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content. In addition, the auditor reviewed the district's demographic data, strategic plan, news clips and digital communication analytics.

SCoPE Survey

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted online School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (both instructional staff and support staff) and the community.

The nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey was conducted for CSD on October 10 - 24, 2022. It included questions regarding the following:

- How people are currently getting information and how they prefer to receive it.
- Whether they are getting the information they need.
- Perceptions around their opportunities to seek information, provide input and become involved.
- Whether they perceive the communications to be understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

There was also an opportunity for participants to comment on any aspect of district or school/department communications.

Responses to the SCoPE Survey resulted in attaining the following margins of error for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the district:

- Faculty/Staff Survey:
 - 325 surveys completed
 - ± 4.6 percent margin of error (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Parent Survey:
 - 907 surveys completed
 - ± 3.1 percent margin of error (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Community survey:
 - 102 surveys completed
 - ± 9.9 percent margin of error (± 10 percent target exceeded)

This same survey has been administered to school districts across the United States, and the CSD final survey report compares the local responses to national benchmark averages (see [SCoPE Scorecard](#)). The auditor reviewed the data and open-ended comment results for each survey group in detail.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the on-site focus group component designed

to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent and communications staff on November 1 - 2, 2022. For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Each group met for an hour and was guided through a similar set of [discussion questions](#) on a variety of communication issues. Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to individuals if used in the report.

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

- Elementary Parents
- Secondary Parents
- Spanish-Speaking Parents
- Central Office Staff
- School Office Managers
- Business/Community Leaders
- Teachers
- Principals
- Classified Staff
- School Board Members
- Superintendent
- Communications staff

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments, SCoPE Survey results and interview feedback, the auditor identified [Key Findings](#) and prepared recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected

within NSPRA's *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* benchmarking publication.

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

Assumptions

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

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. It is also a "snapshot" or view of the district at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

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

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication tasks, and others may apply to additional departments or all staff. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake while maintaining existing programs.

This is a long-term effort for which this report should serve as a road map. Some recommendations in this report may take months, if not years, to fully implement. However, there are some action steps that can be taken immediately, with very little effort on behalf of the district or the Communications Department, and can pay quick dividends.



QUICK WIN

In addition to these "quick wins," there also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task that could be eliminated or streamlined. These quick win (above) and rethink (left) opportunities are notated with the symbols shown.



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

Transparency with Focus Group Participants and Other Stakeholders

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

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

Key Findings

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

District Image/Strengths

- Participants in every focus group cited the district's work on equity as a strength.
- The support of the community was mentioned repeatedly throughout the focus groups and is evident with the passage of a \$199,916,925 bond referendum in 2018 and the recent renewal of a local option levy.
- In one-on-one meetings with the Communications Department staff and in several staff focus groups, the district's focus on the physical and mental health of all students was mentioned. Participants noted that CSD has clinical mental health professionals in each school and that the district is good about advocating for students and employees. Support for the LGBTQ+ community was also mentioned numerous times.
- Respondents to the SCoPE Survey were asked to name the two words that best describe the district. In all three groups—staff, parents and community—the words “inclusive” and “caring” were amongst the top words. (Full word cloud results can be found on pages 15-17.) In the staff and parent surveys, a third word was “progressive,” while the community said “transparent.”

District Image/Challenges

- Focus group participants repeatedly mentioned that there is a lack of focus or a clear vision for CSD. Most were not aware that the school board is beginning to work on a new strategic plan.

- There is a strong perception that CSD is not as good as it once was due to what seems to be a greater focus on equity and a lesser focus on attendance and rigor. One participant said that when the governor suspended the core standards, it appeared that CSD dropped the academic rigor and now passes all students. In their focus groups, parents said their students don't seem to ever have homework, and they are unsure if they can trust their child's grades, test scores or the rigor of the curriculum.
- Some participants in the staff, parent and community focus groups felt that the district is concentrating too much on students at the extreme ends of academic abilities and their need for additional support—low and high—at the expense of those in the middle.

Communication Strengths

- A basic communication plan is in place to guide the Communications Department's efforts during the 2022-23 school year
- Focus group participants from the community complimented the district on its handling of flyers for community groups and how helpful the staff is on getting them posted on the websites.
- On the SCoPE Survey, when staff, parents and community members were asked to rate how informed they feel in a variety of areas, they felt informed in most areas. Their ratings in the following three charts on the next page are provided on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “not informed,” 3 is “informed” and 5 is “highly informed.”

Of particular note is that parents gave communication “during a crisis/serious incident” the highest rating in terms of how informed they feel (3.6). This is an area of communications where other school districts often struggle to meet parent expectations.

How Informed Staff Feel in Key Areas

Key Areas	Staff Rating
About how to best perform my duties	3.9
About how I can best support student achievement	3.7
During a crisis/serious incident	3.4
So that I can deliver effective customer service	3.3
So that I feel valued as an employee	3.1
About district successes and achievements	3.1
About events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	3.0
So that I can best represent the district as an ambassador	3.0
About district goals and plans	2.8
About leader decisions	2.7
About district finances	2.2

How Informed Parents/Families Feel in Key Areas

Key Areas	Parent Rating
During a crisis/serious incident	3.6
About my student's progress in school	3.3
About homework and projects	3.0
About how I can support my student's learning	3.0
About PTA/PTO activities	2.9
About extra-curricular programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.)	2.9
About student conduct and discipline	2.9
About academic programs and offerings	2.8
About school and district events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.7
About district successes and achievements	2.4
About leader decisions	2.2
About district goals and plans	2.2
About district finances	1.8

How Informed Community Members Feel in Key Areas

Key Areas	Community Rating
About district successes and achievements	2.8
During a crisis/serious incident	2.7
About events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.6
About leader decisions	2.6
About district facilities	2.5
About district goals and plans	2.4
About district finances	2.2

Communication Challenges

- A prevalent theme throughout all the focus groups was what they felt was the reactive versus proactive nature of communications—especially from the Communications Department. There is also a perceived lack of accountability, with many noting that communications (such as emails and talking points) are sent out with mistakes, inaccurate information or in a less than timely manner.
- Many staff and parents reported widely different systems for how the district and school principals communicate with them. And while ParentSquare is used widely across the district for emails and text messages, many were not aware that this is the system being used.

- It was the perception across all focus groups that stories about the great things happening in the schools and the district are not getting out.
- Parents and staff expressed frustration with not knowing to whom questions should be directed at the district office.

Internal Communications

- Staff are appreciative of the Spanish translation services provided by the Communications Department.
- On the SCoPE Survey, when staff were asked to share how they prefer to receive various types of information, the results were as follows. These results mirror the comments staff provided in focus groups.

How Staff Prefer to Receive Various Types of Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
To help me perform my duties and how I can best support student learning	Email	Individual Meetings with Supervisor
About school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises	Text Messages	Email/ Phone Calls
About school and district events, programs and calendar updates	Email	Email/ District Calendar
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues	Email	Email/ Newsletter/ e-Newsletter

- Internal focus groups vocalized a need for better internal communication in general and noted that messages are often delayed or contain inaccuracies or mistakes. Staff

focus group participants report having to rely heavily on word of mouth to get information, rather than reliable, regular channels pushed out directly to them. As shown, when staff were asked to rate on the SCoPE Survey how often they rely on various sources for information, “word of mouth from colleagues” received the second highest ranking (3.5) below email (4.6).

When reviewing the following, please note that the choices provided to participants were: never (1), occasionally (2), regularly (3), almost always (4) and always (5).

How Much Staff Rely on Various Sources of Information

Information Source	Staff Rating
Email	4.6
Word of mouth from colleagues	3.5
District calendar	3.3
Text messages	3.3
Individual meetings with supervisor or administrator	3.1
Faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings	3.1
Website	2.9
Automated email	2.9
Parent Square/District/School mobile app	2.8
Staff intranet	2.8
Phone calls	2.8
Automated text messages	2.8
Newsletter/e-newsletter	2.7
Printed memos, letters and notices	2.2
Automated phone calls	2.1
Mobile app	2.0
Local news and media	1.9
School Board meetings	1.7
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)	1.7

- On the nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey questions (see [SCoPE Scorecard](#)), staff consistently rated CSD near the average of all districts who have participated in the survey.
- Many staff described significant voids and delays in receiving important information that impacts both their jobs and their roles as ambassadors. This includes talking points about emergencies or information about new initiatives that the district is undertaking.
- Participants in the staff focus groups highlighted the need for more training in a variety of communication processes, including the use of ParentSquare. Staff feel there is no training or onboarding for new staff members, or staff in a new position. Representative comments on this topic include:
 - “There is an assumption of knowledge, and supervisors do not have a good grasp of their employees’ responsibilities or tasks.”
 - “People are not set up to be successful in their jobs.”
- Staff focus group participants consistently cited a communication divide between the staff in the schools and the staff at the district office. Many felt that decisions are made at the district level with little to no input from staff in the schools.
- When staff in the focus groups were asked if they receive the information they need and in a timely manner to be effective in their role as an ambassador for the district, a majority said they do not. One participant expressed this common sentiment by saying, “We are a need-to-know district, and if we don’t think you need to know, you don’t.”
- Staff expressed a desire to know more about the rationale behind leaders’ decisions and described communications regarding decisions as lacking in transparency. This focus group feedback aligns with the SCoPE Survey results,

where staff felt only somewhat informed regarding school/district leader decisions and district finances.

- Staff in some leadership positions feel they are no longer asked for their opinion related to matters that impact their school or department. There is frustration regarding how information is communicated at meetings: “We have the same number of meetings as before COVID, but now they are different. The agenda is full, so there is no time to talk or process.” Many feel they no longer have a say in where the district is going and that all decisions are made by staff at the district office.
- A significant number of staff are unaware of who the communications coordinator is or what her role is.

External Communications

- Community focus group members applauded CSD for opening school buildings after hours to outside groups and for the way the district posts outside organizations’ flyers on the websites’ bulletin boards.
- On the SCoPE Survey, when parents were asked to share how they prefer to receive various types of information, email was their preference except in the case of urgent messages such as school closings.

How Parents/Families Prefer to Receive Various Types of Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About my student’s progress and how I can best support his/her learning	Email	Email/ Report Cards
About school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises	Text	Emails/ Phone Calls

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About school and district events, programs, and calendar updates	Email	Text
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues.	Email	Websites

- On the SCoPE Survey, when parents were asked how often they rely on various types of communication on a scale of 1 to 5, email received the highest rating (4.4), followed by report cards/progress notes and “from my student” (4.1).

When reviewing the following, please note that the choices provided to participants were: never (1), occasionally (2), regularly (3), almost always (4) and always (5).

How Much Parents/Families Rely on Various Sources of Information

Information Source	Parent Rating
Email	4.4
Report cards and/or progress notes	4.1
From my student	4.1
School calendar	4.0
Newsletter/e-newsletter	3.7
Meetings with the teacher	3.5
Parent Square/District/School mobile app	3.4
Text messages	3.4
Classroom mobile app (SeeSaw, Google Classroom, Canvas, Wazzle, Moodle, etc.)	3.1
Online parent portal	3.1
Printed memos and letters	3.0
Phone calls	3.0
Word of mouth	2.8

Information Source	Parent Rating
Website	2.8
School meetings	2.7
Local news and media	2.0
District meetings	1.8
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)	1.7
School Board meetings	1.6

- On the SCoPE Survey, when community members were asked to share how they prefer to receive various types of information, the results were as follows:

How Community Members Prefer to Receive Various Types of Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About success of school programs and student achievement	Newsletter/ e-Newsletter	Website
About district leader goals, decisions and plans	Newsletter/ e-Newsletter	Website
About district finances and facilities	Newsletter/ e-Newsletter	e-Newsletter
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and crises	Text Messages	Email

- On the nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey questions (see [SCoPE Scorecard](#)), parents and community members rated CSD at or below the average of districts who have participated in the survey.
- Participants in the Spanish-speaking focus group would prefer to see information on social media versus in an email. They also desire that more information about the

various programs offered in the district are shared with them on a consistent basis in their native language.

- Parents are confused about the various apps the district and schools are using to communicate. In the focus groups, parents did not understand ParentSquare and how it is being used. Some are frustrated that the same information is sent as a text and an email. Parents also feel they are receiving too many emails that are not applicable to their family. An example given was emails about high school sports sent to parents that do not have a child enrolled at one of the high schools.
- On the SCoPE Survey, when community members were asked how often they rely on various types of communication on a scale from 1 to 5, the results were as follows.

When reviewing the following, please note that the choices provided to participants were: never (1), occasionally (2), regularly (3), almost always (4) and always (5).

How Much Community Members Rely on Various Sources of Information

Information Source	Community Rating
Family member/friend who is currently a student in the district	3.3
Website	3.2
District calendar	3.2
Automated email	3.1
Newsletter/e-newsletter	2.9
Family member/friend who currently works for the district	2.9
Word of mouth	2.8
Automated text messages	2.7
Local news and media	2.6
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)	2.3

Information Source	Community Rating
Printed correspondence	2.1
Automated phone calls	2.1
Board of Education meetings	1.8
Mobile app	1.8
District meetings	1.7

Website

- An evaluation of the district’s homepage (<https://www.csd509j.net/>) was done on WAVE (www.wave.webaim.org), an evaluation tool that helps web authors make their web content more accessible to individuals with disabilities. There were no significant errors or areas of concern indicated by the WAVE tool. However, the auditor noted that the video on the home page does not have closed captioning.
- The auditor also noted the following when reviewing the website:
 - The website is copy heavy and lacks the photos and images needed to engage and maintain reader attention.
 - In several cases, the same topic is linked multiple times on the same page. For example, there are three places on the district home page that link to the [Bond Program](#) page, and two that link to the same information for parents and students.
 - Links to the various schools and outside organizations such as the Oregon Department of Education send visitors to a site within the same web browser tab instead of opening up in a new tab.
 - School websites are impersonal with all but a few having home pages that feature either buildings or a graphic for reporting safety tips.

Social Media

- The Corvallis School District utilizes the following social media platforms:
 - [Facebook](#) (3,700 followers)
 - [Instagram](#) (1,330 followers)
 - [LinkedIn](#) (391 employees)
 - [YouTube](#) (343 subscribers)
 - [Twitter](#) (760 followers)
- Content on the various social media accounts are basically the same across all platforms. Most of the information shared is also available on the district's website.
- Facebook, Instagram and Twitter postings with stories and photos of students and/or staff generate the most interaction and likes. For example, the November 4, 2022, post about Lincoln Elementary School students watching traditional Mexican folk dancing garnered 145 likes on Facebook, 4 likes and 3 retweets on Twitter, and 72 likes on Instagram. In contrast, posts about school board meetings, invitations to join the budget committee and a request to share favorite meals during National School Lunch Week included no photos or videos and received very little attention.
- The district allows comments to be made on the various social media platforms, but does not appear to respond or engage with commenters.

Observations and SWOT Analysis

Following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditor offers the following general observations.

- In every focus group it was apparent that the work the district has done around equity is known and understood throughout the district. What is missing, however, is an understanding of how the work is positively impacting CSD students. Without providing context, the equity work is perceived as taking the place of strong academics and rigor. Increasing and tying equity into the number of good news stories about students and staff success can go a long way in garnering more support for the district.
- The overarching perception among staff is that they either are not being asked for input, or, when asked, their input is ignored by district leadership. Staff have a strong desire to provide input around issues that will directly impact them, and they would feel valued by being included. Including them in the decision-making process whenever possible is likely to have a positive effect on staff morale.
- Another step toward improving morale would be having district leaders spend more time in school buildings. The perception that district leaders have lost touch with what is happening in school buildings is not unique to CSD. However, staff seeing and having the opportunity to interact with district leaders in their schools creates better understanding of how decisions are made and how they impact staff and students.
- Overall, district- and department-level communications and response to requests and inquiries from school building staff need to be more timely. Staff, and school office managers in particular, are

on the front line with parents and the community. They need timely information to answer questions, or at the very least, they need to know whom to ask and when information will be made available.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) affecting the ability of CSD to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

		Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is clear understanding and support for the district’s equity work. • CSD is viewed as being caring and inclusive, and there is appreciation for the services and advocacy the district provides. • The majority of the communication challenges identified in the focus groups and SCoPE Survey can be addressed through the creation and adherence to protocols as well as communications training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a perception that the district lacks clear focus and vision. • There are issues with the timeliness and accuracy of communications from the district. • Communication is viewed as reactive, not proactive. • There is inconsistency in communications from school to school. • There is a lack of communication training for new and existing employees.
		Opportunities	Threats
External		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is strong community support for the district’s financial needs (bonds and levies). • Existing community support can be expanded by explaining the “why” behind decisions. • The community is appreciative of the district’s efforts to support community organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a perception that the district is not as strong as it once was and is focused on equity over academics. • Parents and staff are concerned that the district takes care of students at the low and high end of abilities at the expense of those in the middle. As the majority of students fall in this middle category, this perception can erode trust that CSD supports the success of all students.

Recommendations

In CSD, the communication efforts are guided by the Communication Department’s mission statement: “Providing clear, accurate and timely information to staff, students and families, and the Corvallis community.”

The communications coordinator works with district leadership to support effective internal and external communications about district school programs, events, initiatives and key issues. She maintains positive relations between the public and the district and provides strategic counsel to district leadership. She is assisted by a communications specialist and an administrative assistant, who also serves as a Spanish translator.

The communications staff have accomplished a great deal. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the district’s communication program, but that should not detract from the many positives coming out of that department. In fact, many of the recommendations will require commitment and participation from the entire CSD administrative team if the district is going to realize meaningful improvements in its communication program.

The superintendent, the Corvallis School Board and the communications

coordinator were all supportive of the NSPRA Communication Audit process in hopes of strengthening CSD’s efforts to effectively engage with its stakeholders. The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to implement different recommendations and action steps at different times. Some of the recommendations and action steps here may be feasible to implement right away. In fact, some can be accomplished quickly and with few or no resources. These are noted with this Quick Win symbol. Others give the Communications Department the opportunity to reconsider and possibly streamline current practices, and these are noted with this Rethink symbol. However, many of these recommendations will need to be



addressed over an extended period of time as budget, resources and staff capacity allow. Consider undertaking no more than two or three major recommendations a year while continuing to maintain existing programs, services and responsibilities.

Summary of Recommendations

1. [Enhance the strategic value of the communication plan with measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.](#)
2. [Develop and implement strategies to keep staff members informed and engaged.](#)
3. [Provide support and training to staff at all levels who are responsible for communicating with students, parents and the public.](#)
4. [Standardize parent and family communication processes.](#)
5. [Enhance strategies to strengthen the engagement of parents and community members.](#)
6. [Create a network of key communicators.](#)
7. [Increase the usefulness and value of the district’s website and social media channels.](#)

Recommendation 1:

Enhance the strategic value of the communication plan with measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

The day-to-day demands of any public school system can easily consume a majority of staff members' time, leaving little time or resources for communication planning and evaluation. This can result in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering the district's key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools. It is possible this busyness is contributing to stakeholders' perceptions, whether accurate or not, that district communications is more reactive than proactive, as described in the Key Findings.

Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision and measurable objectives, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. Making time for strategic communication planning will help staff prioritize proactive communication opportunities designed to expand the district's outreach and brand, and that support CSD's overall mission and objectives.

Action Step 1.1

Continue following proven public relations principles and practices.

The Communications Department currently has a communication plan in place to guide its work for the 2022-23 school year. It focuses on addressing communication issues that the Communications Department has already identified, many of which are also addressed in the recommendations of this report. And, in fact, conducting an NSPRA Communication Audit is the first initiative identified in the plan.

Expanding on the strategic nature of this plan should be one of the first priorities of the Communication Department. The current plan is largely a presentation of tactics, or to-do's, broken down into increasing detail. Missing are overarching communication goals that align these tactics with the 2019-2023 School Board Goals. Similarly, the evaluative measures included in the plan mark the completion of tasks (outputs), rather than defining how the department will measure whether, or to what extent, a desired outcome has been achieved by changing the knowledge, opinions and/or behaviors of stakeholders.

Developing a formal, strategic communication plan with clear goals (longer term) and objectives (shorter term, measurable) will help communications staff ground their efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, time- and cost-effective for the district, and most likely to succeed in the local community. In addition to a set of strategies and their related tactics for each objective, the plan should include target audiences, key messages, timelines, staff responsibilities, desired outcomes and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative.

The resulting plan would better serve as a road map that will enable CSD to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication efforts. It will help ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication that can overwhelm school districts. The plan will also provide a means for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability.

There is not one correct way to develop a formal communication plan, but a good plan should follow the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement, evaluate).

Research

Research and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant findings from that research in a few paragraphs

at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit will be an excellent starting point on that research, with its data on the communication preferences of internal and external stakeholders. Following are some additional data types worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by news media and specialized websites, etc.
- Local community demographics: National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045222>) and local county/city/town websites
- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>)
- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>), Gallup Polls (<https://news.gallup.com/>)

Also as part of the research phase, determine all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in CSD. Identify ongoing communication activities and tactics: managing website content, the CSD News newsletter, building newsletters, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube postings, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, posting of community organization flyers on the website, etc.

Also identify the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, open houses, Family Support Programs, business partnerships, news media relations, and participation in community organizations.

#1

Enhance the strategic value of the communication plan with measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

This compilation will provide an accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations. It also will provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communication functions.

Research should be an ongoing tactic in a school district's communication strategies because it informs the creation of measurable objectives. You won't know what needs to be changed to reach your communication goals unless you first research the problems (or opportunities) preventing you now from achieving them.

Plan

In this phase of creating a comprehensive communication plan, CSD will develop objectives, determine strategies, create key messages, identify stakeholder groups, establish tools and tactics, set timelines, and assign responsibilities.

Develop Objectives. In the planning phase, CSD will begin by articulating clear long-term communication goals (desired and broad future states of being) and shorter-term measurable objectives based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Measurable objectives build trust by establishing accountability.

When developing objectives, make sure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). Examples of measurable objectives could include:

- By the end of the 2023-24 school year, a key communicator program will have been established with at least 20 members and a defined process for two-way communication between the group and the district.
 - By the end of the first semester of the 2023-24 school year, family participation in events, meetings, programs and other school activities will have increased by 20 percent over the previous school year.
- **Determine Strategies.** Strategies are the road map to achieving objectives. Be careful to delineate strategies from tactics. A strategy states how an objective will be reached. Tactics describe the specific elements or tools within a strategy that will be used to accomplish it. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For example:
 - Strategy: A method for standardizing staff and parent communication across buildings and departments will be established. (See Recommendations [2](#), [3](#) and [4](#)).
 - Tactic: A committee will be assigned to identify all current tools and types of messages currently being used across the district to communicate with each stakeholder group.
- **Create Key Messages.** Remember that people’s attention span and time is limited. Messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated regularly have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. Determine what your audience should come away knowing or doing as a result of your effort and use those to build your key messages.
- **Identify Stakeholder Groups.** Stakeholder groups are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district. They can be sub-grouped similarly to the focus groups convened for the communication audit and could include:
 - Parents broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and secondary) or by another identifier (e.g., “active/involved,” “non-English-speaking,” etc.)
 - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals
 - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents (an important audience who can be invaluable allies or damaging detractors), and others active in the schools and community
 - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislators
 - Non-parents, including empty nesters, seniors and other community members without children in CSD schools
 - Students such as those participating in student government
 - Media representatives from radio and television stations and local newspapers and magazines
- **Establish Tools and Tactics.** For each audience, identify the best resources for deploying communications and how they will be acquired. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:
 - Equipment/software
 - Materials and supplies
 - Printing and duplicating
 - Advertising
 - Professional development
 - Staff travel

- Subscriptions
- Professional dues/fees
- **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of the implementation process, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase, building in checkpoint opportunities to modify the plan if and as needed.
- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Make sure that each Communications Department staff member understands their roles and responsibilities for meeting the department's objectives.

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

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know?
- When do they need to know?
- How are we going to tell them?
- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
- How will we track and measure what they have learned and done as a result of our communication efforts? How will we measure success?

Implement

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

Evaluate

Evaluate whether measurable objectives were achieved, and the success of the strategies and tactics used. When initially writing the plan, identify evaluative measures to be used later to determine the success in achieving the articulated goals and measurable objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. They may also become the basis of research findings to inform future updates to the communication plan.

The communication plan must be a dynamic document that can be updated as needed given the fast-paced changes in district needs and operations that occur in today's environment.

In NSPRA's online Samples and Resources (Gold Mine), the section on Strategic Communication Plans offers a number of resources, including webinars, plan templates and award-winning campaigns, that will help CSD enhance the strategic elements of its communication plan (<https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans>). Following are two examples of award-winning strategic communication plans on the site. These are larger districts than CSD and have larger communications staffs, but these can be used effectively as guides.

- [Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program](#), Pattonville School District, Saint Ann, Mo.
- [Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan](#), Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools

Visit the site to watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour webinar "Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan" on demand and to find a [blank communication plan template](#) developed by a NSPRA Gold Medallion-winning district.

Action Step 1.2

Seek Board of Education approval and update the strategic communications plan annually.

Once developed, the plan should be presented to the School Board for its approval. The board's input, as well as its review and approval, will validate the plan's importance and create opportunities to report back to the board and stakeholders on implementation progress.

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

Action Step 1.3

Incorporate communications planning into the daily work of staff.

In addition to the overall communication plan for the district, project-specific communication plans should continue to be developed whenever key issues or initiatives (such as the recently announced hiring freeze, the school board's goals for 2023-2028 or potential budget challenges) need to be addressed or implemented. While these issue- or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, the same type of thoughtful planning around key issues affecting the district is important.



Action Step 1.4

Communicate with objectives in mind and avoid jumping to preferred strategies and tactics.

Once a comprehensive, strategic communication plan has been developed, the communications staff should utilize part of its regular staff meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep staff energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with less impactful tasks.

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

Action Step 1.5

Refocus strategies from increasing communication output to increasing stakeholder understanding and engagement.

During focus group discussions, many participants noted feeling overwhelmed by the volume of communications they sift through daily, including the numerous emails coming from the district and its schools. For some, this led to them missing important CSD messages. Both local feedback and national trends suggest stakeholders of educational institutions want school and district information customized to them: when and where they want it on whichever platform(s) they prefer.

As the communications staff plans its work, consideration should be given to focusing strategies and tactics more on achieving desired stakeholder behaviors/outcomes

and less on increasing departmental output. While consumers often need to see a message multiple times before they act on it, a greater volume of communications does not necessarily translate to action when that volume is seen as overwhelming, distracting or unfocused. When key messages need to be delivered, begin with the audience in mind. Begin by asking what the intended audience wants and needs to know, what their current level of understanding is and what they need to do with the information.

With the variety of communication tactics available in CSD, prioritize those platforms that have been shown to secure the greatest level of stakeholder engagement. To guide this effort, use data from the SCoPE Survey, platform analytics and this audit report. This will allow staff to use their time more efficiently and effectively. A tactic should not be used just because it is there and available; it should be used because it is the best tool for the job.

Action Step 1.6

Include proactive issues management as part of communication planning.

The focus group discussions identified several challenges facing CSD. Examples include negative or inaccurate perceptions about the district's focus on equity at the expense of rigor; attendance rates; inconsistent and inaccurate messaging being shared with parents and staff; and growing mistrust between the district and school building staff. If left unaddressed, these perceptions could grow into true crises that could significantly hurt the district's operations while undermining its credibility and ability to educate students.

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

demonstrating awareness of and concern for stakeholders' priorities.

Consider adding a goal and/or objectives related to issues management to the strategic communication plan. Some ways district staff can spot trends include: checking in with their counterparts in other districts to see what issues they are facing; using information gathered by school staff and/or PTA groups about concerns in their specific school; and reviewing issues brought forth by the public to the school board. Once issues are identified, CSD communications staff can equip district leaders with talking points to start conversation about issues on the horizon and how to solicit feedback.

Using tools like this, the district can frame the conversation on its own issues rather than allowing others to do so first.

Recommendation 2:

Develop and implement strategies to keep staff members informed and engaged.

To be effective, a school district needs the support and trust of its employees. Gaining that support and trust is difficult, but keeping staff informed of changes and issues, and encouraging staff engagement in decision-making shows transparency and good faith. Today, internal communications is as much about managing an organization's credibility with its employees as it is about keeping them informed.

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

The importance of internal audiences cannot be overlooked when building a successful communications program. Employees must feel they are part of a bigger organization and understand the school district's mission and vision. A well-informed and supportive staff will have a positive influence on external communication efforts as well as the overall environment of the school district.

Many CSD staff members in the focus groups expressed concern with the quantity and quality of engagement opportunities provided to district employees. While some staff members believe there are not adequate opportunities for them to provide input as

part of the decision-making process, others are concerned that the input collected is not listened to or incorporated into decisions. Staff that work in the school buildings said they don't feel that the district administration trusts them to communicate. Others stated that there is a disconnect between the district's vision and what is happening in the school buildings. Staff repeatedly expressed frustration that parents often know information before staff is informed. This causes staff to feel out of the loop and creates a lack of trust.

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

Action Step 2.1

Take a "staff first" approach to disseminating information.

Internal communication is one of the most critical components of improving communication and image overall. Almost all employees want to feel they are part of something bigger, to have a sense of purpose and to believe they play a valuable and valued role in realizing the district's mission. Believing they are not only part of, but play a key role in, the district's communication efforts will help inspire employees to engage in and take ownership of the initiatives and decisions of the district.



Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. When employees feel they are "the last to know" or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as social media or parents), they do not feel they are valued members of the team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their roles as ambassadors for the schools. In addition, when employees rely on the "grapevine" or other second-hand sources to get information,

it hampers the district's ability to disseminate accurate and credible information. Employees are considered by parents to be trusted sources of information, but they can't serve as ambassadors if they are not aware of the situation and have not been properly prepared to respond to questions. Given the speed of today's information dissemination with mobile technology, ensuring staff are accurately informed in a timely manner and provided updates must be a priority.

By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for CSD and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages and training when appropriate, CSD can exponentially expand its communication outreach while also building trust and credibility both internally and externally.

Following are specific suggestions for developing "staff first" protocols and processes.

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Employees are frontline communicators and should receive important information that affects their jobs and workplaces before the media and parents whenever possible. When an issue emerges or when CSD begins to address an initiative or concern, it is essential that district leaders and school administrators include in their planning how employees will be incorporated into their communication and response efforts.
- **Deploy a variety of tools most effective for staff communications.** Consider the best vehicles for communication based on the urgency of the message and timing considerations. Strategically choose and use platforms to ensure the message is received, absorbed and can be acted upon, if necessary. If the communication is about an upcoming or ongoing issue, information can be shared with staff via meetings, publications, email and video. For more urgent or unexpected

#2

Develop and implement strategies to keep staff members informed and engaged.

announcements, automated voice and text notifications may be more appropriate.

- **For more complex or controversial topics, share information in settings that allow staff to ask questions.** Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address an issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.

Action Step 2.2

Create input opportunities and set expectations.

The effective engagement of staff members is an important leverage point for CSD that will ultimately serve to strengthen trust and connections throughout the district. For the engagement of staff, parents and community, there are three key considerations that will help build and expand engagement in the district.

- **If a decision has already been made, do not ask for input from stakeholders.** Stakeholders will likely feel their input does not matter when they perceive that school system leaders have already decided on a direction for a particular issue. Instead of feeling included in the decision-making process, participants typically feel they are being sold an idea or have been asked to provide input only to create the appearance of transparency.
 - Keep in mind that not all decisions require public input; the more controversial a decision is likely to be, the more likely it will be that a school system needs to involve its

stakeholders in the decision-making process.

- If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to state mandates or budget constraints for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, the focus should be on building understanding around the situation that led to the particular decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.
- **Give public input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Asking for input and then appearing to ignore it is one of the quickest ways to cause stakeholders to disengage from a school system. Sometimes school system leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, based on their intimate knowledge of the schools or their professional expertise. But if they choose to seek input from stakeholders before finalizing the decision, and if that input favors a different solution or choice, they must truly listen to the input and consider the alternative options.
 - Respecting stakeholders and giving their input due consideration does not mean their suggestions must be followed. For example, their alternative ideas could be researched, and feedback could be given regarding what those ideas would actually cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.
 - If the stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.
 - When reflecting on public input, always be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a relatively small or large portion of the

community. Do not speak dismissively of input simply because few people agree with it.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. System leaders may be gathering the input to help make a more informed decision and may be considering a much wider scope of input beyond one particular group. To avoid confusion, clearly explain why the group's input is being sought, how it will be used and who ultimately will make the final decision. Defining these positions up front will make it less likely that those providing input misunderstand and become frustrated with their roles.

Trust is also an important component of the engagement process. There is certainly no magic solution for building trust. However, in his book *The Thin Book of Trust*, author Charles Feltman describes four distinctions of trust that should serve as guideposts for both engagement and communication with staff, parents and community members:

- **Sincerity: "I mean what I say, say what I mean and act accordingly."** Sincerity is the distinction that one is being honest and can be believed and taken seriously. It also means that when opinions are expressed, they are valid, useful and backed up by sound thinking and evidence. Finally, it means actions will align with the spoken word.
- **Reliability: "You can count on me to deliver what I promise."** Reliability is the distinction that a leader will fulfill commitments and keep promises.
- **Competence: "I know I can do this. I don't know if I can do that."** Competence is the distinction that one has the ability to do what they are doing or propose to do. In the workplace, this usually means the other person believes

the person doing the work has the required capacity, skill, knowledge and resources to do a particular task or job.

- **Care: “We’re in this together.”** Care is the distinction that leaders have the other person’s interests in mind when decisions are made and actions are taken. Of the four assessments of trustworthiness, care is in some ways the most important. When people believe a decision is made out of self-interest, they may trust the sincerity, reliability and competence of the person, but they will tend to limit their trust to specific situations or transactions. On the other hand, when people believe their interests have been kept in mind, they will extend their trust more broadly.

Action Step 2.3

Gather employee input on decisions that affect their jobs.

When CSD leaders are considering decisions that directly impact staff members and the schools, seeking their input in advance whenever possible should be a goal. This is particularly important as leaders implement changes to established procedures of the organization. Participants in several staff focus groups indicated that this practice is not employed consistently across the district. Several indicated that, since COVID-19, there is no time for group discussions in meetings and leaders no longer ask for input from the people decisions are impacting.

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

Rounding is another method of gathering information in a structured way. In the case of CSD, it might involve administrators approaching employees in their departments or schools to obtain information for the purpose of decision making.

Here’s how rounding conversations might work: The district’s executive team is discussing an idea where staff input is needed to inform the decision.

- The executive team develops two or three questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue.
- The executive team asks principals and department supervisors to each find 10 staff members in their building or department to answer the questions.
- Principals and department supervisors share the responses with the executive team for consideration in the decision-making process.

While being an excellent method for gathering quick input, rounding also demonstrates that administrators care about staff members and the knowledge and perspectives they have that could help the district make more informed decisions.

Again, as stated earlier, it is important that staff members be told how this input impacted the eventual decision, so they are more likely to participate in the future.

By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, CSD leaders will expand the ownership of change and contribute positively to employees’ feelings of being valued team members.

Action Step 2.4

Keep support staff in the communication loop and reinforce their importance as frontline communicators.

Office managers and personnel are a critical part of the communication loop in any school



district. They encounter numerous people every day, and each of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between the school and its stakeholders. For these employees to function effectively in this key role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them regularly.

Support staff participating in the focus groups said they don't always know basic information such as the details behind incidents/emergencies in other schools or where to direct callers with questions about a specific issue. They expressed concern that they often feel handcuffed by the chain of communication when information needs to get out quickly.

Having administrators take the following steps with their key support staff will ensure office personnel have the information they need to do their jobs efficiently and well.

- Review daily and weekly schedules so staff members are aware of activities going on in their school or department as well as major events districtwide.
- Review the major issues under discussion so they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
- Ensure support staff have printed copies of current materials at hand—such as the calendar, organizational chart, school and district data, and agendas for school board meetings—so they can answer questions and share information. (When pressed for time, picking up a hard copy of a document is usually faster than trying to find the information on the website or in emails.)

Action Step 2.5

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

A common theme among the staff focus groups was a desire to see the district leaders and district office staff at their sites. These visits are opportunities for conversation about issues as well as to make human connections. There are many ways to simply deliver information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication.

Administrators and supervisors who plan and run staff meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. This can be especially important when staff changes take place and/or when there are new relationships that need to be established. Whether opportunities are offered on-site or via virtual connections, providing a space for open dialogue and Q&A promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the system and schools.

Following are suggestions for enhancing face-to-face communication.

- **Include all employees assigned to a school in regular building staff meetings.** Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important CSD updates and share key messages at faculty meetings. It is essential that all staff have the information they need to fulfill their communication role. Include support staff with faculty whenever possible. Share information relevant to them at the top of the meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related to instruction are discussed.
- **Hold staff breakfast or lunch meetings.** Invite a random group of 10-15 staff members to meet informally with a CSD leader (e.g., superintendent,

executive team member, department head or principal). The goal should be to solicit feedback from staff members on what is going well at the schools or in their departments and what areas need to be improved. Staff members have a chance to provide input, and leaders gain valuable insight into challenges and successes around the system. Keeping the group relatively small ensures that everyone has a chance to comment, and no one has to be intimidated by speaking in front of a large group. The meetings should be held to one hour, and someone should be assigned to take notes so the hosting administrator can focus on listening to and interacting with the participants, while ensuring their input is captured for review and consideration.

- **Cultivate internal key communicators across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department has team members that colleagues consider to be “in the know” and who are trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put this system to work by identifying these individuals and engaging them in helping to share key messages. Provide these staff members, along with advisory committees, union/association leaders and other leaders, with regular news updates and key messages and ask for their support in disseminating information. (See [Recommendation 6](#) for more details on developing key communicator systems.)

Recommendation 3:

Provide support and training to staff at all levels who are responsible for communicating with students, parents and the public.

Many school districts face challenges in keeping communication simple, timely and accessible to stakeholders. In CSD, the auditor heard from nearly every focus group, internal and external, that information is released inconsistently and, in some cases, inequitably. Parents, staff and community alike complained of getting too many communiques and yet missing important news or not being able to find information they need. School and department staff reported being unsure of what, when and to whom information should be released. Communications were characterized as having gaps in content and delays in transmission.

These stakeholder perceptions are not unique to CSD. As an example, global [research by Poppulo](#) in 2022 found that while 63 percent of internal communications professionals say they communicate about company events frequently with their workforce, less than 28 percent of employees say they receive this communication from their employer frequently. In a similar disconnect, 52 percent of internal communicators say they communicate about company updates frequently, but only 39 percent of employees say they receive this communication frequently.

Solving these communication challenges and eliminating any disconnect between perceptions and reality, across an organization in general and in CSD in particular, should not rest with the Communications Department alone. Empowering staff at all levels, through training and support, to communicate more effectively will strengthen the district's communication program as a whole.

Action Step 3.1

Clearly define the communication role of all CSD departments to ensure a consistent, timely and equitable flow of information at all levels.



The Communications Department has a very specific role to play in planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information and messaging via the district's primary communication channels,

but they alone cannot ensure that all relevant information is disseminated in a timely manner. All CSD district, department and school building leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the communications team.

Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at Executive Team Cabinet meetings and principal meetings so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications. *On the following page is an example of how this might be documented.*

By clarifying communication roles and responsibilities and ensuring messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the district's vision and the school board's goals—and integrated at all levels, CSD can connect more directly with parents and community members and strengthen internal trust and engagement among employees. Clarifying roles and expectations will also provide the communications team with more time and capacity to focus on developing strategic communication initiatives for the district.

To demonstrate the district's commitment to enhancing communication efforts, a communication component should be included in the evaluation of administrators if it is not already.

Example: Communication Roles of Administrative Staff

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
District Communications Team	<p>District-level updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Routine matters that impact more than one school Urgent matters that impact any school Major districtwide initiatives <p>Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals</p>	<p>District-level tools for internal and external audiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emails Automated messages Text messages Website Print/digital newsletters Social media Video channel News releases to media Paid ad placements <p>Annual Report Tool kits for administrators</p>
Superintendent Board President	Board decisions	<p>Board meetings Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Superintendent e-newsletter</p>
Superintendent's Executive Assistant	<p>Board meeting agendas Board policy changes</p>	<p>Board webpage Superintendent e-newsletter</p>
Assistant Superintendent	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	<p>Curriculum webpage Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Community meetings Superintendent e-newsletter</p>
Director of Finance and Operations	Budget and finance updates	<p>Business office/budget webpages Administrative and staff meetings Emails to staff Board meeting presentations Annual Report</p>
Director of Facilities and Transportation	Bond/capital project updates	<p>Facilities project webpage Facilities project e-newsletter Administrative and staff meetings Emails to staff Board meeting presentations Annual Report</p>
Director of Human Resources	<p>Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items</p>	<p>HR webpages Administrative and staff meetings Emails to staff Board meeting presentation</p>
Principals	<p>School-level updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School-specific routine matters School-specific urgent matters Major districtwide initiatives (using tool kit provided) 	<p>School-level tools for internal and external audiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emails Automated messages Text messages Website Print/digital newsletters Social media

#3

Provide support and training to staff at all levels who are responsible for communicating with students, parents and the public.

Action Step 3.2

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

Throughout the focus groups, staff reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and their supervisor, and this in turn affects the flow of information to parents and the community. The Communications Department should work closely with the Executive Team Cabinet to clarify the preferred standard processes for both internal and external communications.

- **Establish guidelines and expectations for internal communications by administrators.** While many staff focus group participants considered communication at the school level to be positive overall, they pointed to some deficiencies in communication between district-level administrators and the schools. This was also reflected in the SCoPE Survey where staff rated the trustworthiness of communication from their school/department at 4.1 out of 5, but trustworthiness of communication from the district at 3.4—which is below the national average of 3.7. (For this question, survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the

statement, “I trust the communication I receive from...”, where 3 is “neutral” and 4 is “agree.”)

Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, administrators don’t know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. To ensure that CSD school leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how they should communicate with internal stakeholders.

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

- Who is responsible for communicating with different employee groups.
- Procedures for how and when important information should be shared.
- The specific communication vehicles to be used to maximize effectiveness and efficiency.
- Tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department-to-school communication.
- Forms and templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.
- Instructions for what information goes into a staff newsletter and what gets pushed out individually by departments or administrators. Ideally, routine and non-emergency notices that are relevant for most/all staff belong in a staff newsletter. Legitimately urgent information pertaining to subgroups can be sent outside of the e-newsletter via email.
- Reminders that communications should include the following whenever appropriate:
 - The rationale behind a decision
 - How a decision or initiative reflects the vision and direction of the district

- Summaries of important meetings that impacted decisions or changes
- How a change in district operations or policy will affect staff members' job duties

• **Institute processes that immediately address the communication component when decisions are made or information needs to be shared.**

Lack of clarity and consistency about who is responsible for sharing information with whom can easily impede the flow of communications.

This can be easily remedied by adding check boxes—FYI, To Be Shared and Confidential—to meeting agenda items.



Communication Planning Check Boxes

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

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

Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

• **Create structures for who is responsible for communicating in various circumstances and how those communications should flow.**

Preparation is key to ensuring information is shared quickly and equitably.

- Information that needs to go to all stakeholders should come from the district, not individual school sites. Many parents reported that some schools send out an announcement sooner than others, leading to parents learning information from other parents or on social media rather than from the school their child attends. The best remedy for this is for information that affects all students and families to come directly from the district whenever possible.
- For news that needs to be shared quickly, determine in advance how those types of communications will flow and who is responsible. Following is an example based on a school closing. Customize this to your protocols. The most important point is that each notification/announcement should have a clearly designed release sequence that designates who is

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid for School Closing

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

responsible for pushing information out and when.

Available in NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section for members on training (<https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff>), following are two examples of guides for district and school administrators that set clear communication expectations:

- Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School District
- Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools

Action Step 3.3

Provide district and school building administrators with tools for sharing information.

Principals and office managers who participated in the focus groups felt unprepared to answer questions from parents and the community about major district initiatives. Parents also shared that the sheer amount of information coming their way was overwhelming. The Communications Department needs to empower administrators, as well as their front-line staff, to communicate consistently, proactively, effectively and independently.

- **Provide assistance for developing messaging.** One tip to share with those responsible for communicating is to encourage them to use the BLUF—bottom line up front—method of communicating. BLUF is a standard in U.S. military communications practice and similar to journalism's inverted pyramid approach. It puts the emphasis on beginning with the conclusion



and following that information with supporting details and facts. By using this method, CSD's communicators can catch reader attention up front and then provide (or provide links to) additional information for those who want more background.

- **Provide talking points for major or controversial changes and decisions.** When a topic is of broad concern or interest, consistency of content and tone becomes even more important. Talking points for district and building leaders should be developed by the appropriate administrator with the help of the Communications Department and should answer the following questions:
 - When was the decision made?
 - Who (or what process) was involved in making it?
 - Why was it necessary?
 - How will it impact staff, families and/or the community?
 - What changes will result and when will they take place?
 - How does this decision align with the district's vision and goals?
 - Where do stakeholders turn for more information?
- **Consider creating communication toolkits for specific purposes.** For some major and/or ongoing initiatives, a more extensive toolkit might be appropriate. For instance, an employee ambassador toolkit is suggested in the next action step.

Depending on the topic, the toolkit might include the following:

- Talking points
- FAQs
- Flyers and posters
- Phone message scripts
- Videos, graphics and suggested text for social media
- Timelines for sharing information

Toolkits can also be used to help administrators with their general communication needs and might include:

- Talking points and key messages about the district's goals and major initiatives.
- Letter templates for situations common in every school district (e.g., a teacher put on administrative leave, a safety issue).
- Template presentation slides for use during staff meetings, parent-teacher group meetings, committee meetings, etc.
- Graphics sized appropriately for use on common social media channels and on school webpages.
- Social media content ideas for posts, including any relevant hashtags.
- Flyers for distribution to students and staff.
 - Keep in mind that some schools and departments may have limited printing capabilities, so provide options that can print equally well in color or black and white.
 - For schools that serve non-native English speakers, provide both an English version and a translated version that can be copied back-to-back to help with English-language acquisition. As is already a CSD practice, have a staff member who speaks the language assist with the translation, but consider doing so in additional languages. Using live translators avoids the too literal or too loose word-for-word translations that cause confusion for non-native English speakers.
- Video files, links and embed codes. This will allow for their use during presentations, on social media and on presentations, on social media and on websites where appropriate.
- Posters for display in main offices,

hallways, staff lounges, public gathering spaces, etc. Keep in mind: If the posters are beyond what can be printed in-house by schools or departments, they may need to be printed by an outside company first and then distributed.

As an example, explore the principal toolkit developed by Wichita (Kan.) Public Schools to ensure consistent messaging around the launch of its strategic plan. View the campaign at <https://bit.ly/3XvtbMF> and turn to page 22 for the toolkit.

Digital platforms such as Google Drive allow for inexpensive sharing of resources. Reminders about the toolkits and how to use them also should be shared during leadership planning meetings and communication trainings as appropriate.

Action Step 3.4

Build up employees' ability to serve as ambassadors.

All employees must share the role of representing the district to the community and serve as ambassadors for the schools. Communication should not be just the responsibility of the superintendent, communication coordinator, district administrators or principals. Every employee can help improve communication with internal colleagues as well as external stakeholders, but staff members in the focus groups said they do not feel adequately prepared to fulfill this role.

Highly effective organizations are those that empower their employees through effective communications to serve as ambassadors for the organization during work hours and after hours in their real and virtual communities. Developing employees as ambassadors is a newer strategy for schools, but it has long shown its value for companies. One notable [case study](#) is that of GE, which saw an 800 percent increase in applicants following the launch of an employee ambassador program.

To begin, develop an ambassador tool kit for school system employees. An ambassador tool kit is designed to help employees see themselves as representatives for their school system when out in the community. It does so by providing them with the information they need to understand how the school system operates and how their work supports the organizational mission. The tool kit should be part of the orientation process for new employees and revisited on an ongoing basis with existing employees. It can be delivered in a print, virtual or video format.

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

- The information included in CSD's Fast Facts on the district website.
- Strategic goals and highlights on the district's progress in achieving them
- Student enrollment and demographics
- Number of staff employed
- Revenue sources
- Brief summaries of special initiatives and programs
- Branding elements for employee use (e.g., logos, taglines)
- Ways to engage with the school system online
- Any other noteworthy background and information

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

While new employees are most in need of ambassador-style information, it is beneficial to redistribute tool kits annually to all employees during the back-to-school season. This serves to remind them of their daily roles as representatives of an educational community.

In remarks to employees throughout the school year, leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as ambassadors for CSD schools and public education.

Make sure to recognize and reward outstanding employee ambassadors to keep employees motivated and engaged. Invite employees to anonymously recognize each other for representing and promoting the school system in an exceptional way. Provide simple rewards such as district-branded swag or donated gift cards from local businesses. Highlight an ambassador of the month (or year) on social media, on the website, in publications and at school board meetings.

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

Following are some examples of school systems empowering their employees to serve as ambassadors:

- Social media brand ambassador program, The School District of Palm Beach County, Fla.—<https://twitter.com/pbcasd/status/1214569109947592705>
- 2022-23 OCPA Pocket Guide, Orange County (Fla.) Public Schools—https://issuu.com/orangecountypublicschools/docs/2022-23_pocket_guide_-_web

To achieve the greatest level of support in the community, every CSD employee needs to accept their role as an ambassador and see themselves as an active member of the team—not simply a passive "fan." There was a strong desire to share the good work of the district, and equipping staff with the knowledge and support they need to feel confident in speaking about

the district is vital to achieving this goal. It is unlikely that all employees will fully buy into their role as an ambassador for the district, but many will, and this can be an extraordinarily powerful strategy for transforming the culture of the district.

Action Step 3.5

Develop a formal “on-boarding” orientation program for new employees that includes a communication/ambassadorship component.

While onboarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of the Communications Department, the department does have a significant impact on internal communication efforts and can play an important role in getting all new hires off to a great start. Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, with the goal of creating a positive on-boarding experience that goes beyond HR forms and documents and offers a solid grounding in CSD’s history and values.

Following are some suggestions for addressing new employee’s communication needs:

- **Seek out veteran staff in key positions to assist in developing the district’s training syllabus.** Those who hold the institutional knowledge of the district and are respected among their peers can be invaluable resources for knowing what information should be shared with new hires as well as how and when to share it.
- **Ensure consistency in training for new employees.** Deliver content that is standard across every department and school.
- **Consider combining in-person and online training.** While many school systems are now using webinars for new staff orientation, online orientation training alone is not sufficient to address the needs of new hires and make them

feel welcomed as members of a team. Face-to-face meetings promote connections and relationships that create comfort zones for new employees. They also allow them to meet others going through the same experience and start establishing a support system. Hold initial orientation meetings in person, and then supplement with webinars (either live or on demand) for training in special topic areas. The key is ensuring all training opportunities allow employees to ask questions and get answers that will help them do their jobs well.

- **Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with CSD operations, culture, history and procedures.** Provide new hires with an orientation package that includes:
 - An employee handbook and a current contact directory for all CSD departments
 - General information about CSD, the schools and unique programs
 - An overview of school district and local community history
 - A copy of the Student Parent Handbook and calendar
 - The district’s long-term strategic plan (2018-2023 Board Goals)
 - A list of all communication vehicles (publications, website, social media, etc.), their purpose and when information or new issues are typically published or posted
 - Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor
 - Tips on being an ambassador for the schools and the importance of good communication to CSD’s success
- **Have the superintendent welcome the staff and talk briefly about the strategic priorities and accomplishments to date.** Making an immediate connection with top leadership

demonstrates they are valued in their role and helps build trust and confidence.

- **Include a communications component to emphasize the important role of staff as communicators and ambassadors.** New hires should learn their best sources of information and what it means to be an ambassador for CSD. Emphasize their responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their school. Review guidelines and expectations related to news media relations and social media so staff protocols are clearly understood. Encourage staff to keep the Communications Department informed of newsworthy events happening in their classrooms.
- **Consider preparing a summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” to distribute to all employees** so new hires know how to be appropriately responsive to parent and staff requests.

Action Step 3.6

Establish an annual “boot camp” training program for school and department staff and evaluate their communication efforts.

School and department staff at all levels spoke positively about the support provided by the communications staff, but none mentioned a formal, regular training program to build their skills as communicators and ambassadors for the district and its schools. Given the evolving nature of communication technology, community demographics and staffing, the department should consider providing regular communication skills training to all staff responsible for conveying information—both veterans and new hires.

An annual communication boot camp for cabinet members, department managers, school administrators (and possibly a version for other front-line staff as well) would provide training, tips and practical learning

experiences to help them, in their leadership roles, better communicate with stakeholders. It would strengthen their partnerships with communications staff, who can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments. It would also support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators. Similar training for school board members also should be considered and is often offered by state school boards associations.

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

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build your agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review what local and national research shows about what families and community members want to know from their schools and school districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as holding a live Twitter chat using a district hashtag, on-camera mock-ambush media interviews and/or a self-reflection exercise based on where they are as the chief communicator for their school or department.
- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from a CSD school or department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices in their schools or departments, challenges they have encountered and ways they might not overcome them.

- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review how the goals and objectives of the new strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)) support the district's vision and School Board Goals 2018-2023. Lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.
- **Schedule it for the greatest level of participation.** Offer communication boot camp during a less busy time of year such as summer vacation. Keep it to a half-day program to start and provide refreshments or other incentives such as district-branded door prizes.

To demonstrate the commitment to enhancing communication efforts and underscore its importance, again it is suggested that a communication component be included in the evaluation of cabinet members, department managers, school administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria. Making a commitment to measure something helps ensure it gets done.

It also is incumbent upon the district to provide the support administrators need to improve their communication skills. Providing regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans and new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, cultural competency and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their important communication role.

Recommendation 4:

Standardize parent and family communication processes.

Participants in the parent focus groups, along with staff members who are also district parents, acknowledged the amount of communication received from CSD, but are confused about the various tools used to deliver the messages. Many noted a lack of consistency in how communications are shared across the district. A major issue is the lack of understanding or familiarity with the district's use of ParentSquare. *(Note: The auditor acknowledges that the district made the switch to ParentSquare right before schools closed due to the pandemic. The district has not yet trained parents and staff on the various components of the platform, but plans to provide that training in the near future.)*

While communication practices may vary from school to school with some differences and customization, parents expect some consistency in how schools communicate with them, particularly if they have several children in different schools.

For parents, one of the most frustrating aspects of communications is the inconsistency in the types of communication methods used by their children's schools and teachers. In the focus groups, parents talked about the various apps and notification systems used (ParentSquare, Classlink, Canvas, robocalls, text, emails, etc.) and explained how unwieldy it becomes when a family has more than one child enrolled.

There is a lot of competition for parents' time and attention: children, work, household chores, after-school activities, family recreation, social media and so much more. NSPRA has found that among parent focus groups today, one consistent theme is their sense of being overwhelmed by trying to keep up with school news along with everything else on their to-do list. They want to know about and support their children's education, but they also want school

communications to be brief, tailored to their unique needs and interests and easy to access and digest. Parents in the focus groups were also frustrated that they receive text and emails that have no relevance to their students—texts about sports practice when their student does not play a sport or emails from the high school about upcoming activities when they do not have a student attending the high school.

Addressing these issues often starts with standardizing parent communication processes throughout a school system by:

- Establishing a framework for school communications based on best practices.
- Implementing the framework through guidance, templates and regular training.
- Ensuring consistent application of the framework as families move through the K-12 experience.

If parents know what communications to expect and when, and if they feel confident the communications will apply to them personally, they will be much more likely to consume the communications they receive. For a school district, that translates to more well-informed and engaged families.

Action Step 4.1

Evaluate the tools currently used to communicate with parents and determine which tools to use in various circumstances.

Organize a small group of teachers, parents, school-level administrators, technology staff and communications staff to review the communication tools currently in use across the district: websites, apps, text messaging systems, e-newsletters, print newsletters, paper flyers, virtual backpacks, parent portals, social media, etc. For each tool, consider what it is, what it is used for, who uses it, who receives it, how often it is used, how easy it is to



use, whether training is provided on its use and any available data on readership, open rates, distribution schedules, etc.

From this analysis, develop and share guidelines to be used throughout the district for determining what communication tools are to be used for various types of communications.

Action Step 4.2

Establish a common framework for parent communications.

After the review of parent communication tools, develop a guidance document that details which tools are preferred for which buildings/grade levels, how frequently (or infrequently) they should be used, which general situations are appropriate for their use, and where to turn for assistance and/or training.

When creating these recommendations, keep in mind that while different parents prefer to access information differently, no parent wants to receive the same message seven ways in the same day. Thoughtful, consistent use of a select set of tools will go further to ensure messages are received.

It's also a good idea to include recommended release and response times. The most frequent complaints NSPRA auditors hear from parents are about the timeliness of the release of information and staff responses to inquiries.

Following is additional content to consider incorporating into the guidance document.

- Offer general formatting tips to maintain good readability.
- Share approved sources of royalty-free visual content that won't violate copyright.
- Provide templates or examples for the most commonly occurring school-to-parent or teacher-to-parent messages.
- Summarize any relevant school board policies, state regulations or federal laws that govern the use of such tools.

#4

Standardize parent and family communication processes.

- Provide links to additional communication guidance documents, such as the district's style/brand guide and crisis communications plan.
- Include data on communication preference, as captured by the SCoPE Survey.

Discuss this guidance with school principals and department chairs and ask them to review it annually during back-to-school staff/department meetings. Find an example of this type of guide in Osceola (Fl.) School District's guide on "When to Use What Communications Platform," available in NSPRA's online Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on training (<https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff>).

Action Step 4.3

Establish teacher expectations for CSD Parent Portal updates and other communications.

Parent portals, like Classlink and Canvas, are popular and valuable communication tools if used properly. Nationwide, and also at CSD, a common parent complaint is teachers not keeping student information current on these systems. Parent focus groups specifically noted significant inconsistencies between teachers, grade levels and schools which adds to their confusion and frustration.

If expectations and guidelines already exist for how often teachers should communicate with parents and/or post information on the portal, these protocols should be reviewed

and reinforced to remind teachers of their obligations. If guidelines do not currently exist, convene a team of teachers, parents and administrators to develop expectations for communication that meet the needs of most parents and are reasonable for teachers. Establishing clear expectations will not completely eliminate inconsistencies, but it will go a long way toward reducing parent frustration.

In addition, establish guidelines and expectations for other types of communications. Some teachers send a daily message to parents—even if it is brief—while others might communicate weekly or even less frequently.

Action Step 4.4

Include district news and key messages in school newsletters and websites.

Parents place a high value on communications that come from their child's school and view them as a primary source of information. Adding a short "Corvallis School District News for Parents" section in the school newsletters and on school websites is an effective way of getting important details in front of parents, particularly when the information is applicable to all students. The Communication Department can prepare regular news items for principals to drop into their school newsletters or to add to their school websites. To attract parents' attention, information should be framed in the context of how a program, initiative or change impacts their children.

Action Step 4.5

Send text messages to alert parents to important emails.

Parents on the SCoPE survey indicate they prefer text messages over email when it comes to school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises. CSD needs to keep this in mind when a message

is time sensitive. Parents understand that email is often the most efficient way to share information, but for some, it might take days for them to check their inbox, whereas a text message is more likely to be seen within a few minutes of delivery.

To ensure parents receive important news on a timely basis, focus group participants suggested the district and/or schools send a text message to parents directing them to their email for time sensitive or detailed information. Rather than being a duplication of effort, it will keep parents up to date on important situations.



While parents acknowledge these preferences in focus groups, there is one challenge that needs to be addressed. Parents are required to opt in to receive text messages through ParentSquare and may not be aware that they have not indicated their willingness to receive them. CSD should look for appropriate opportunities to let parents know the type of information that is (and is not) provided via text so they know that these messages are timely and important. This also gives the district an opportunity to remind parents of their need to opt in and instructions regarding how to do so.

Recommendation 5:

Enhance strategies to strengthen the engagement of parents and community members.

The effective engagement of parents and those not directly involved in CSD but who still have a stake in it—also known as taxpayers—can be a leverage point for the district to improve relationships and strengthen its image in the community. Increased engagement can address negative perceptions about local schools as parents and community members become more knowledgeable about issues affecting the district. In turn, this knowledge will allow them to serve as effective third-party representatives when sharing accurate and positive information with other members of the community. They can also help to counter negative and inaccurate information shared by the media, social media and other sources.

The key in a world where the public is saturated with messages coming at them is bringing them together for meaningful conversations about their children and their schools. Look for ways to engage the public in conversation through planned events or informal means. Print, digital and social media communications should continue and in some cases be expanded, but more planning and emphasis should be directed towards face-to-face interaction with the public.

The following strategies are aimed at strengthening CSD's engagement with parents and community members.

Action Step 5.1

Develop a districtwide visibility plan and schedule.

Engagement and connection with the community will not occur if key district leaders are not visible in the community. Along with the activities already taking place, CSD should develop an annual visibility plan and schedule,

clearly charting when administrative staff and other district leaders will attend community events, meetings and activities in an official capacity.

The plan and schedule should include dates for presentations to community groups such as the Rotary Club, chambers of commerce, community and civic organizations, and religious organizations. This will strengthen relationships between CSD and constituents and create opportunities for further dialogue. Even if CSD already has a wide presence in the community, there may be a need to add groups or increase the frequency of attendance at some meetings. While the superintendent is often the lead person in a visibility effort, district administrators and principals can also participate.

Be sure to add planned appearances at community events and meetings to the online district calendar, so stakeholders know where they can engage with leaders.

Action Step 5.2

Hold listening lunches or coffees.

Since most opportunities for the public to interact with the school district involve citizens visiting school campuses, taking the district to the public can often encourage and increase engagement. When district representatives go to where community members gather, there is a greater chance to interact with people who may not otherwise be engaged with the schools.

School board members, the superintendent and/or other district administrators can establish a monthly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversations about the district and the schools. Local shops and businesses often provide a perfect setting. Consider partnering with area coffee shops, restaurants, neighborhood associations or religious organizations to host these events. Set a regular time and day—for example, every second Tuesday from 7-9 a.m. Administrators and school board members could team up and rotate attendance. Vary

the location of these sessions to ensure all segments of the district have access and an opportunity to participate.

To be most effective, provide a structure for the conversations by designating topics. For example, one session might focus on proposed curricular changes, another on the budget or state legislative issues. Remind participants that open-ended “venting” sessions are not useful, and facilitators should also remember the importance of honoring the school district’s chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

The key is to meet with community residents in neutral sites and to listen to concerns they may have about issues impacting the district. They should be positioned as opportunities for the board and administration to gather first-hand information and hear opinions. It should be clearly stated that listening events are just that, and no immediate decisions will be made based on these conversations.

Action Step 5.3

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

Many people are interested in sharing their ideas but are unable to attend a meeting or focus group session. The use of supplemental tools for gathering information will draw more parent and community voices into the engagement process. While the CSD website has a [designated webpage for submitting complaints](#), the webpage for [providing input](#) focuses on emails, letters and comments specifically for the school board. It is worth considering other tools for online input gathering.

Today, many software tools and online programs make it easy to create interactive comment pages and short electronic surveys. Tools such as K12 Insight’s Let’s Talk customer service app, ThoughtExchange’s community rating model of surveys and AlwaysOn’s chat bots offer new ways to invite input and funnel it to the appropriate staff for responses.

#5

Enhance strategies to strengthen the engagement of parents and community members.

In addition, the district could consider holding “virtual listening sessions” via Zoom, Facebook Live or a YouTube live stream with comments interaction. These types of sessions, especially when held over the lunch hour, allow parents to participate during the workday and can effectively engage parents and community members in real time at a location that is convenient for them.

Action Step 5.4

Create opportunities for participation in decision-making.

Public forums or other types of community conversations are great ways to engage parents and community members in the decision-making process. Forums are usually organized around a specific topic. This encourages attendance by those with a particular interest in that topic and typically results in better, more useful feedback.

Tips for making these engagement opportunities successful include the following:

- **Work to seek input from a variety of parent and community voices and perspectives.** In particular, it is essential that non-English-speaking parents and residents have an opportunity to participate. Getting a variety of voices and perspectives involved in the engagement process may require the district to hold the engagement sessions at a variety of locations and times.

- **Share with attendees how information gathered will be used in the decision-making process.** Let them know what other research is being done, who will ultimately make the decision and when, and how the decision will be communicated to stakeholders.
- **Be clear about the format of the discussion.** It is important for participants to understand this is not an opportunity to offer complaints and negative comments in an “open mic” setting. In fact, it is often more helpful to present information on the topic to the entire group and then break into smaller groups for discussion led by trained facilitators. In this way, more people will feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their thoughts, and the most aggressive voices in the room do not have an opportunity to dominate the discussion.
- **Provide feedback on these discussions to all district stakeholders.** This shows transparency and also the importance the district places on input from their community.

The Community Engagement section of NSPRA’s members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) offers tip sheets, webinars, award-winning campaigns and more. Find examples of effective public meeting practices on the site at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Community-Engagement>.

Recommendation 6:

Create a network of key communicators.

As mentioned previously, with the district's strong focus on equity there were many in the focus groups that feel the district no longer cares about rigor or the core curriculum.

Another issue that some did not understand was the renaming of some schools. To help combat misunderstandings and misinformation, CSD can benefit from expanding their reach into the community. It is recommended that CSD take a structured approach to expanding district relationships through the development of a key communicator network.

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

Key communicator networks are effective when they are composed of respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents, who are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. This group serves as a sounding board to test new ideas, a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

A key communicator network could be managed by the Communications Department, or in conjunction with the superintendent's office. Following are links to example districts of various sizes that have implemented a key communicators program:

- Spring Branch Independent School District, Houston, Texas (33,600 students)—<https://online.springbranchisd.com/ePubs/KeyComms.html>

- Murrieta (Calif.) Valley Unified School District (22,700 students)—<https://www.murrieta.k12.ca.us/Page/28>
- Stevens Point (Wis.) Area Public School District (7,000 students)—<https://www.pointschools.net/Page/6924>
- Berea (Ohio) City School District (5,700 students)—<https://www.berea.k12.oh.us/Page/4219>

These action steps offer ideas for developing and maximizing the benefits of a key communicator network.

Action Step 6.1

Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.

The individuals invited to participate in a key communicators network should be credible members of target audiences identified by the district; these are people to whom others go to for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building and should represent as many segments of the community as possible.

Begin by asking each principal, central office administrator and school board member to recommend two or three people—parents or community members—who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, also ask those named individuals whom they consider to be opinion leaders in the community. Current community partners, former board members, parent-teacher group leaders, small business owners, Oregon State University department heads and influential corporate partners can all contribute and should be included for consideration. CSD's list could also include leaders of local religious and civic organizations as well as elected officials.

New key communicators can be added as identified.

Action Step 6.2

Hold an orientation meeting for key communicators.

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

At the orientation meeting:

- **Share a planned schedule for email updates to key communicators.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated consistently with current information. Updates can alert the group to breaking news, help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about major school district initiatives. Keep messages effective but brief. Key communicators should also receive any regular district publications. Minimize the time commitment of participants and create a sense that they are getting firsthand or inside information (within legal limits, of course).
- **Encourage key communicators to report concerns.** Designate a particular person (e.g., a communications staff member) as the person to whom key communicators should report any concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about

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Create a network of key communicators.

the school district or individual schools. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate and inform the key communicator network of the district's response.

- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** Survey participants at least annually to determine their satisfaction with the program, and through an internal evaluation process, ascertain whether the key communicator network is functioning effectively and meeting the district's needs.

Action Step 6.3

Hold an appreciation event at the end of each school year.

At the end of the school year, invite key communicators to a breakfast or luncheon, possibly at a location where a particular school or program can be showcased, to thank them for their support and involvement. Regardless of who coordinates the program, this event should be hosted by the superintendent and attended by the Corvallis School Board to show support by top leaders.

Recommendation 7:

Increase the usefulness and value of the district's website and social media channels.

District stakeholders strongly prefer emails and text messages to alert them to important district and school information, news, events and activities, rather than having to seek this information out on their own. While CSD does have effective mechanisms in place to push out this kind of information, stakeholders also say that too many emails and texts can be overwhelming or repetitive, or they arrive at inconvenient times.

That's why it is essential for the district's web and social media pages to be easy to navigate, accurate, engaging and continually kept up to date. This will make it easier for stakeholders to do business with the district on their own time when it's convenient for them.

The following action steps will strengthen the district's website and social media channels, making it more likely stakeholders will turn to them as first and best sources of district information.

Action Step 7.1

Improve the structure, organization, content and search features of the district website.

Overall the district's website desktop and mobile platforms are attractive, well branded and easy to navigate. However some key content is hard to find, as detailed in the Key Findings. In addition, links to external websites do not open in a new window, which carries visitors away and discourages them from continuing their stay on the district's website.

The district needs to re-evaluate what is on the website and where it is located by asking these questions:

- Who are the primary audiences for the district and school web pages?

- What are the objectives for each audience? What should they be able to do, know or believe by visiting the site?
- What current website functionality and features are working well? Which are being under-used or are outdated?
- Are there integrations with other apps/ programs that customers have requested, or they might consider valuable if they were available?
- What works and what doesn't in the partnership between the district and its current website vendor?

In addition, as mentioned previously, items are on the same page multiple times and take up valuable real estate. The district would be better served by eliminating the duplications and using more photos and positive stories about what is happening in the schools.

Action Step 7.2

Improve the welcoming aspect of the district and school websites.

Parents and the community want to feel a personal connection with CSD and its schools. As one of the first places people go to get information about a district or school, the homepage should provide that first warm welcome and immediately market the value offered to current and prospective families and staff. These aspects could be improved at both the school and district levels.

The district homepage currently features several welcoming aspects such as a Spanish-language banner ad linked to a dedicated webpage in the main carousel and friendly photos in graphics designating different sections of the website. But at the individual school level, even those welcoming features are missing.

Each school site should feature a welcome message that highlights one or two unique things about their school. The message can be written or a video and ideally would feature sentiments shared by teachers and students

as well as building leaders, particularly if done as a video. For the district website, consider taking a similar approach with a video message from Superintendent Noss on the front page of the site, similar to the section spotlighting the CPS Foundation, or on the Superintendent and Department Leaders page.

For inspiration, watch these video examples that set a welcoming tone for a school district's website:

- Rooted in the Community, Rockland BOCES, West Nyack, N.Y.—https://youtu.be/rmlR_p6bpZ8
- I Heart CISD, Coppell (Texas) Independent School District—https://youtu.be/dM_avWVcjJE

Action Step 7.3

Strategically plan which content goes where on social media and tailor the content for the typical users of each platform.

Social media is the place for more time-sensitive information, whereas the website is a better location for static information. Social media can also be an effective tool in a crisis to let the community know when and where the district will be providing updates and information.

Communications staff routinely post virtually identical content in a wide range of digital places. However, decisions about which content goes where should be informed by national usage trends and district-specific visitor data for each platform as well as by drilling more deeply into where local stakeholders want to look for the kinds of information the district wants to share, as detailed in the SCoPE Survey report.

One helpful source of national usage trends is the Pew Research Center. For example, its report on [Social Media Use in 2021](#) shows that among U.S. adults:

- 81 percent use YouTube;
- 69 percent use Facebook;

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Increase the usefulness and value of the district's website and social media channels.

- 40 percent use Instagram;
- 31 percent use Pinterest; and
- 23 percent use Twitter.

Further analysis of the data found that those aged 18-64 are largely on YouTube (83 – 95 percent) and Facebook (70 – 73 percent), but nearly half of Hispanic (52 percent) and Black Americans (49 percent) use Instagram compared to just a third of white Americans (35 percent). Twitter use is highest among adults aged 18-29 (42 percent), those who are college educated (33 percent) and those making \$75,000 or more a year (34 percent). Tailoring communications to the typical users of each platform—by adjusting content and graphics—can increase audience engagement with district messages while also reducing stakeholders' sensation of being overloaded by seeing the same message everywhere.

A couple things to keep in mind:

- Social is just that, social, so prioritize putting content on social media platforms that people will want to talk about, share and like.
 - Instagram is highly visual, so showcase your best photos and videos there, especially when you don't need a longer-form written piece to help tell the story. This is a great platform to explore opportunities for showcasing student voice such as through temporary student takeovers, made easier through management tools such as Sprout Social and ClassIntercom.

- Twitter is great for breaking or timely news, so consider linking harder news stories there. This is a popular platform among journalists for finding story ideas, too.
 - Facebook is a good place to post the feel-good stories about students and staff. This is still a popular platform for sharing and conversations among many of today’s parents.
- If the district wants its constituents to be engaged, the district must also be engaged, and that means responding to comments posted on social media. If someone asks a question, either answer it for all to see or let them know they will hear from someone by phone, email or direct message. When the district doesn’t respond, the door is left open for someone else to tell the district’s story.

For controversial issues that the district is unable (or unwilling) to discuss, consider posting that content on the district website or in printed letters, fact sheets or brochures and providing links to those pages/materials in social media posts.

Once the district has developed guidelines for what kinds of content will be shared where, staff should consistently follow those guidelines and make sure stakeholders know where to look for the content they want. Consider an annual, fall reminder for staff and families on “where to turn when you want to know...” Also, no matter the platform, consider linking each social media post back to related, evergreen content on the district’s website to train stakeholders to look there for district information as well.

Action Step 7.4

Use social media to focus on storytelling.

The auditor found that stories and photos of students and or/staff garnered the most interest and stakeholder engagement with CSD’s social media posts. The district needs more posts with

words, images and videos that focus on telling stories about students and the success they are having in CSD compared to the number of posts about school board and budget meetings.

Action Step 7.5

Use standardized email signatures to promote the district’s website and social media channels.

CSD should consider standardizing the signature information included at the bottom of all emails sent from district accounts as a way to ensure consistent branding and messaging. Official email signatures often provide information such as the sender’s telephone number and typical work schedule, notice of confidentiality, the district’s mission statement or taglines, etc., but these standardized signatures can include other features as well.



For example, every email sent can be an opportunity to remind stakeholders about the district’s website and social media channels by including social media icons that link to the district’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. A call to action, such as “Show you know CSD: Follow us on social media,” could also be considered.

Action Step 7.6

Put social media safeguards in place.

The auditor could not find any social media guidelines or rules of engagement posted on the district’s social platforms. The district should adopt and post such guidelines so visitors know what is acceptable and what is not. These guidelines will also help social media managers determine which comments or posts are acceptable and which are not, and they will make it easier to consistently enforce the district’s standards and explain to visitors why some comments were removed.

Following are some example social media guidelines from other school systems:

- Facebook commenting guidelines, Grand Forks Public Schools, Grand Forks, N.D.—https://www.facebook.com/GrandForksPublicSchools/about_details
- Facebook commenting guidelines, Alexandria City Public Schools, Alexandria, Va.—<https://www.facebook.com/acpsk12/about/>
- On Twitter, some school districts place a link in their Twitter profiles to a webpage of social media guidelines. Visit <https://twitter.com/vbschools> to view such a profile, which links to the social media guidelines at <https://www.vbschools.com/socialmedia> for Virginia Beach City Public Schools in Virginia.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that members can use to assess their programs. The work was organized into critical function areas, and to date, rubrics have been completed for the following:

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

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

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

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

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the complete *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website (<https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/222-10102>).

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging

At this point in time, CSD's overall communication effort falls in the emerging category of the rubric. As this audit report identifies, CSD needs a strategic communication plan (see [Recommendation 1](#)) that aligns with the district's strategic goals and objectives. Effective school communication programs are rooted in research and developed to achieve specific goals and measurable objectives. Strategies and tactics are implemented for specific audiences to achieve specific outcomes. This is a critical priority for CSD to undertake in the next 12 months because this plan will drive most of the communications activities. The development of this plan should be a priority for the communications coordinator.

In addition to the recommendations presented in this communications audit report, efforts that could move CSD's communication program from the emerging to the established category of the rubric include:

- Incorporating a series of approaches to embed communications across district and building operations, for example using prepared talking points for department heads and principals to use in sharing information on important issues.

- Embedding effective communication practices across district and building operations. Ensuring district level leaders, faculty and staff are effective communicators maximizes service to students and stakeholders.
- Using a series of approaches to regularly evaluate communication program effectiveness such as attendance and participation rates at programs and events, surveys and other polls to determine satisfaction and effectiveness of district communication efforts.
- Ensuring communication effectiveness through adherence to the [NSPRA Code of Ethics](#). The practice of school communications can present unique and challenging ethical issues. Protecting integrity and public trust are fundamental to the communication profession's role and reputation.

Internal Communications – Emerging

CSD's internal communication program falls in the emerging category of the rubric. There are many opportunities for improvement as noted in this audit report. In addition to [Recommendation 2](#) and its action steps, CSD could consider:

- Ensuring responsive customer service by outlining customer service expectations during new employee orientations, training of frontline school and central office staff on delivering excellent customer service, cultural competency training of staff to serve specific segments of families, and unannounced visits where evaluators audit the school's friendliness and welcoming environment.
- Identifying additional opportunities to engage employees. Organizations with engaged employees show a 44 percent higher employee retention rate

and are 50 percent more productive than organizations that do not engage employees, according to research by Izzo and Withers (2000).

- Perform ongoing research to understand employee's needs, expectations, opinions, attitudes and knowledge levels. Without research, school systems are left to guess at what their employees are thinking and feeling.

Parent/Family Communications – Established

At this time, CSD's parent and family communications program falls in the established rubric. CSD has a variety of ways to reach its parents and families, including email, robo calls, the district and school websites, the *CSD News* newsletter and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. This audit report contains a recommendation and action steps for improving parent and family communications (see [Recommendation 4](#)).

In addition to the auditors' recommendations contained within this report, CSD might also consider the following to move it squarely into the exemplary category:

- Hosting professional development opportunities for principals and teachers on effective parent/family communication strategies.
- Communicating student conduct expectations and discipline policies with parents/families. Strong communications are essential in helping parents/families clearly understand the school's expectations regarding student conduct and consequences for discipline violations, so student learning is maximized in the classroom.
- Monitoring and tracking of parent/family complaints and concerns about communication effectiveness, then

offering solutions to address those complaints and concerns.

- Involving parents/families in decision making to promote a process of partnership with shared views and actions toward shared goals.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging/Established

CSD’s marketing/branding program is in the emerging portion of the rubric, with multiple opportunities to move it into the established rubric, including:

- Defining the brand experience for target audiences.
- Incorporating significant engagement opportunities for each target audience to achieve specific and measurable goals with each group.
- Providing training for key school and central office personnel, especially administrative assistants, to ensure consistency of applying brand guidelines.
- Developing a comprehensive and effective marketing plan in support of the district’s brand and goals.
- Using storytelling (via video, social media, print and interpersonal) to help target audiences emotionally connect with CSD’s brand.

Crisis Communications – Established

CSD’s crisis communications program falls in the established category of the rubric. The district has a crisis communications plan in place with a list of staff and their responsibilities, but it does not take into account who will step in if a key staff person is

absent during a crisis. To move the district to the exemplary category, consider the following:

- Engaging the community on safety and crisis communications. Positive two-way engagement helps families and the community understand school leaders’ efforts to ensure schools are safe learning environments as well as the protocols for communicating during a crisis.
- Maximizing communication effectiveness with trained staff and leadership. Training of district staff and leaders is essential to understand the implementation of the crisis communication plan components. No plan can cover every crisis scenario, but an understanding of the plan components is the foundation to delivering high-quality communications during a crisis.
- Seeking input from local law enforcement and municipal officials for joint review and further development of the plan.
- Including back-up systems in the crisis communication plan.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Established/Exemplary

Over the years, CSD has been successful in passing school construction bonds requests and local option levies. But, even with the immense support from voters, CSD can do a better job of keeping voters and the overall community informed about the use of their tax dollars. The SCoPE Survey found that parents feel “not informed” about district finances while staff and the community feel only “somewhat informed.”

Following are two suggestions to develop more informed stakeholders:

- The communications department needs to develop a strategic communications plan (based on the RPIE model) for every finance measure to be placed before

voters. Plans should be research-based, include key messages, tools, tactics, timelines and who is responsible for each communication. All communication efforts should be designed to educate and inform stakeholders on the issues, so they understand the result of successful and unsuccessful outcomes.

- Establish year-round communication plans, providing clear concise messages about the district's budgets and finances to inform target audiences about how different funding sources and specific funds (transportation, bond or other restricted funds) can and cannot be used.

Appendix

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you perceive as Corvallis School District's strengths?
2. What are the areas needing improvement?
3. What is the current image of the Corvallis School District in the community?
4. When district leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
 - 4a. What makes you feel that way?
 - 4b. If not, how would you like to provide your input?
5. When you receive communications from the district, do you tend to read the entire message or skim it for information that applies to you?
 - 5a. What would make you more likely to read the entire message?
6. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the Corvallis School District?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. As an employee, do you receive the information you need and in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job as an ambassador for the schools/district?
2. How can the Corvallis School District's communications staff best support you in your role?
 - 2a. How can they better support you?

SCoPE Scorecard

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted online School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: employees (both instructional and support staff) parents and families, and community members.

The following scorecard provides a summary of scores for the school district on measures

that matter most in school communications, in comparison to the scores for all school districts that have participated in the SCoPE Survey.

For details on methodology, participation rates and complete SCoPE results, refer to the district’s summary reports and detailed data reports.

		CSD	National		
			Avg.	Low	High
Staff	Communication regarding how I can support student achievement	3.7	3.6	3.0	4.2
	Communication to keep me informed so I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador	3.0	3.2	2.5	4.0
	Communication during a crisis/serious incident	3.4	3.4	2.8	4.0
	Communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	3.1	3.0	2.3	3.6
	Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department	4.1	4.0	3.5	4.5
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.4	3.7	2.7	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.7	3.6	3.0	4.2
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	3.7	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	Communication about my child’s progress in school	3.3	3.8	3.1	4.4
	Communication about how I can support my child’s learning	3.0	3.4	2.4	4.1
	Communication about school and district events and programs	2.7	3.4	2.5	4.1
	Communication during a crisis/serious incident	3.6	3.6	3.0	4.1
	Trustworthiness of communication from my child’s school	4.0	4.1	3.6	4.5
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.4	3.9	3.1	4.4
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.5	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	3.5	3.8	3.1	4.2
Community	Communication about academic programs and district performance	2.8	3.0	2.0	4.2
	Communication about district finances and related issues	2.2	2.5	1.7	3.6
	Communication about school safety	2.7	2.9	1.7	4.0
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.3	3.4	2.2	4.2
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.0	3.2	2.0	4.0
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	3.2	3.3	2.2	4.2

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to develop professionals to communicate strategically, build trust and foster positive relationships in support of their school communities. That mission is accomplished by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to association members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

NSPRA members:

- **Connect and Grow:** This unique professional community includes the NSPRA Connect online forum, Mentor Match, APR Learning Cohort, and national leadership and service opportunities.
- **Expand and Elevate:** Through digital e-newsletters and alerts, free PR Power Hour webinars on tactics, free Leaders Learn webinars on strategies, on-demand learning and National Seminar scholarships, members expand their knowledge and elevate their work.
- **Share and Learn:** Members have access to best practices at www.nspira.org, which offers the online NSPRA Gold Mine; resources on topics such as crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.; salary and career surveys; and more.

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

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Auditor's Vita

Carol Fenstermacher, APR **Consultant auditor**

Carol Fenstermacher, APR, retired in 2021, after serving eight years as the chief communications officer for the Centennial School District in Portland, Oregon.

Prior to Centennial, she worked in the Evergreen School District in Vancouver, Washington, for 14 years as the director of community relations. Carol also worked for the City of Portland as a communications specialist, the Portland Rose Festival Association as the community relations director and United Way of Columbia-Willamette as the assistant vice president of communication and marketing.

A member of NSPRA since 1999, Carol has served on the Executive Board Search Committee, School Communication Benchmarking Project Team and the Communication Equity and Diversity Task Force. She was the Northwest Regional vice president from 2012-2015 and NSPRA president in 2018-19. She served on the board of the Washington School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) and is currently a member and on the board of the Oregon School Public Relations Association (OSPRA).

Carol received her accreditation in public relations (APR) in 2004. She has served on a wide variety of boards, including the local Habitat for Humanity, DePaul Treatment Centers, Oregon Repertory Singers, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), KBPS Public Radio, the Oregon Chapter of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Women in Communications, Inc., where she was president of the Portland Chapter and the international president in 1994-95.



Communication Audit Report

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