



NSPRA's Communication Audit Report

for

Cape Henlopen School District

February 2018

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

The Cape Henlopen School District (CHSD) Board of Education and Superintendent Robert Fulton are committed to effective communication throughout the school system and with the community. This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by district leaders, demonstrating their willingness to address communication challenges and strengthen the relationship between the district and its internal and external stakeholders.

The goal of this communication audit was two-fold – first, to seek data, opinion and perceptions, and from these to assess the effectiveness and management of communications and public relations throughout the district; and second, to provide recommendations on strategies and best practices designed to build and enhance the overall communication program.

The observations and recommendations included in this *Communication Audit Report* should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Communications office or any department, school or individual, they are intended to help CHSD improve the effectiveness of current communication, engagement and public relations efforts. Information in this report also should be helpful in supporting the district's commitment to continuous improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all of students and stakeholders to the best of its ability.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program, however – including a communication program – is determining whether it is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the auditor reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of CHSD's mission, as well as the goals discussed by the Board of Education, Superintendent and other school district leaders.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of CHSD provides an important foundation for continuing to implement and expand a strategic communication plan for the school district. The audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions and the effectiveness of current public relations, engagement and marketing efforts, and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the overall program. The audit also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of focus groups and interview sessions representing a variety of CHSD internal and external audiences.

Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group sessions were approximately 50 minutes in length and were held at the CHSD central office on Wednesday and Thursday, Dec. 6 and 7, with the following groups:

- Parents
- PTO leaders
- Cape Henlopen Educational Foundation (CHEF) representatives and advisory committee representatives
- Business and community leaders
- Teachers
- Central office and school secretaries
- Support staff
- Principals
- Central office administrators
- Board of Education

Processes and procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communication from an “outside” perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit was Harry Roberts, APR. His vita is included in the Appendix of this report. He was assisted by NSPRA Senior Communications Manager Jennifer Landes, APR.

The first step in the NSPRA communication audit involved the CHSD Communications Coordinator submitting samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., publications, reports, program information, digital communication analytics, etc.) with various audiences. The auditor also reviewed the district and school websites and social media platforms. In addition, supplemental surveys of principals, central office administrators and the Communications Coordinator were conducted.

These materials and websites/social media platforms were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. In addition, the auditor reviewed demographic data, communication policies, communication budget information, news coverage, etc.

The core of the communication audit is the onsite focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district’s internal and external audiences. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and any direct quotes used in the report would not be directly attributed to any individuals. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the Superintendent and the Communications

Coordinator to learn their thoughts about the district's current communications and public relations strategies and activities, as well as their goals for the future regarding communication.

This communication audit was designed to:

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

Following the review of materials and focus group comments, the auditor prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies CHSD can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible, improve and enhance overall communication practices, and engage stakeholders in supporting the schools.

Guiding definition

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

Assumptions

It is assumed that school systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations and communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view

the 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. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist CHSD leaders in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of CHSD and the Communications office and suggest options and considerations for expanding the overall communication program.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this *Communication Audit Report* contains recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with CHSD internal and external stakeholders and becoming more strategic and effective with outreach and messaging efforts. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around North America and are reflected in NSPRA's [*Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*](#). A major undertaking of NSPRA in 2011, the compilation of these benchmarking rubrics represents a framework for school public relations that NSPRA members can use to assess their programs. The final audit report was carefully reviewed and edited by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, and Associate Director Karen Kleinz, APR.

Copies to participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, we recommend that this report be shared with focus group participants.

Key Findings

The auditor identified several common themes that emerged from focus group discussions. In addition, the review of current materials and the assessment of how communications and public relations can be improved in Cape Henlopen School District (CHSD) led to the following key findings and observations.

General Perceptions of External and Internal Focus Groups

District Strengths

- CHSD clearly enjoys an excellent reputation in the communities it serves and in the state of Delaware. Many residents and employees talked about their pride in the district and cited the “Cape Proud” branding initiative. Focus group participants were well aware of the quality academic programs, services for students with special needs and the district’s leadership of a countywide service consortium, and the strong extracurricular activities, including successful high school athletic teams.
- A number of people called the area “a great place to live.” In most focus groups, participants said that families move into the area so their children can attend CHSD schools. It also was noted that the beach resorts have become retirement destinations for many seniors and “empty nesters,” and that job opportunities in agriculture and construction bring people to the region. Consequently, the area served by CHSD has experienced significant growth.
- Diversity was seen as a strength by stakeholders and staff. The area’s growth has brought greater diversity in terms of socio-economics, race, ethnicity and lifestyle. And, this is reflected in the district’s student population and in its families.
- The consensus among focus groups was that CHSD has a quality staff with a “passion” for education, teachers who “care about kids,” and principals who are skilled leaders. Participants cited good salaries and benefits as a factor contributing to the district’s stability. Many people mentioned the high number of highly qualified and experienced applicants for every teaching opening. One Board member noted that, “We’re able to hire the best of the best.”
- Also cited by PTO leaders and staff as contributing to academic success was parent involvement and support. And despite a significant number of residents without children in school, community support has been strong as well. District leaders noted that recent referenda to finance construction and renovation projects have passed at the polls. The most recent, in 2016, had a 74 percent approval rate. Also noted by focus group participants were CHSD’s community partnerships and supportive business community. In addition, there is an active foundation – Cape Henlopen Educational Foundation – with close to 50 business and community sponsors, that has awarded more than 200 grants to teachers since 2011.

- The desire for CHSD to be the best was apparent. Internal focus group participants talked about a sense of community within the district – a Board of Education whose members are “on the same page” with high expectations for the district, a Superintendent and administration that strive for excellence and who are “always trying to improve” the educational program, and staff collegiality at all levels.
- There clearly is a culture of trust and respect among the staff. While the focus groups were generally positive, participants were not hesitant to offer constructive criticism and suggest ways to improve communication.

District Challenges

- The area’s growth has brought challenges to CHSD. Significant enrollment increases have caused the need for new schools and renovations to existing buildings. Also, the increased diversity has created issues in communicating with non-English-speaking families.
- CHSD has not experienced many serious or divisive problems that have caused a great deal of criticism or negative publicity. However, there are several issues that were mentioned in numerous focus groups. While not directly related to communication, these could have implications for CHSD communications and public relations, as well as for the district in general.

Nearly all groups cited the lack of diversity among district staff, for which an advisory group is currently studying hiring practices and recruitment. Also noted were the disparity in socio-economic levels of the community and perceptions about how well all groups are served by the district. A third issue of concern to district leaders is a recent proposal by the Delaware Department of Education regarding gender self-identification by students (Regulation 225) that would create a need for all districts to revise Board policy.

Communication Strengths and Improvements

- The consensus of all focus groups was that CHSD has been successful in publicizing positive news. Items about classroom activities and achievements are regularly posted on the district website and on the district’s social media – Facebook and Twitter. Also, all focus groups mentioned the positive stories that appear regularly in the *Cape Gazette*, a local newspaper serving CHSD communities and an important source of district news. The newspaper does have a reporter who covers the district and most of the stories are supplied via news releases from the Communications Coordinator.
- Many district staff are skilled personal communicators. According to parents, most teachers are conscientious about sharing information and responding to questions. Principals were recognized for practicing effective communication with their staffs and parents. The Superintendent is a visible leader who is active in community service organizations and regularly visits schools. In

addition, the Board of Education, besides stating their desire for better communication and transparency, demonstrated a commitment for improvement by contracting for this audit.

- While formal, planned two-way communication activities are limited, community members and staff noted that CHSD leaders conducted a number of community meetings during recent referenda campaigns. Participants called them valuable sessions for sharing information. Another engagement activity of note is the current advisory committee that is studying hiring practices and recruitment with a goal of identifying strategies and tactics to increase diversity of the staff.
- A challenge cited across all focus groups was improving communication with families who are not proficient in English. Problems include inconsistencies in translation of messages and materials, responding to phone calls when a translator is not available, and conversing effectively during parent conferences and meetings.
- For the most part, staff members believe they receive the information they need. However, staff groups also expressed a desire for more information about goals, changes and the rationale behind decisions at the district level. Also, support staff and secretaries feel they are not “kept in the loop” about district problems and issues.
- Internal and external stakeholders agree that they have opportunities for input to district leadership. However, most groups also were uncertain or doubtful that their input is taken seriously and considered before decisions are made. In addition, staff and parents would like more options to provide input, without having to speak at a Board meeting or call or email the Superintendent, a district administrator or Board member. A number of staff specifically stated their desire to have more input into the planning of professional development sessions.
- As this past year marks the first time CHSD has had a full-time position devoted to communication, the Communications Coordinator and district leaders are still in the program development stage. Thus, they are counting on the communication audit to help them reach their goal of having an effective program that meets district needs and stakeholder expectations.

Currently, the Coordinator devotes most of her time to electronic communication via the website and social media, digital and print publications, and news media relations. She recognizes the need for more strategic, two-way communication activities and her role in building relationships with key stakeholder groups. One of her goals is developing a strategic communication plan, which is our first recommendation.

Electronic and Digital Communication

- As part of its efforts to go paperless, CHSD has placed more emphasis on electronic and digital communication. The AlertNow messaging system and Peachjar electronic forms distribution program were praised by parents and staff. While most comments about these two platforms were positive, several people expressed concerns about overuse of AlertNow for non-emergency

notifications and the number of items on Peachjar. Some staff think the district needs a policy on the use of both AlertNow and Peachjar to ensure effective use and avoid overwhelming parents and staff with non-essential messaging.

- The district’s new website, launched earlier this year, received many positive comments from focus group participants. People find it attractive and easy to use; they cited useful content such as the calendar, staff directory, parent and employee resources, and athletic schedules. However, while many parents said they visit individual school websites often because they contain needed information, few people across all focus groups said they visit the district website on a regular basis.
- CHSD is followed on Facebook by some parents, and occasionally seen by some community members. But in most focus groups, there were few participants who actively follow the district on Facebook or Twitter. While they may not be followers, internal groups agreed that Facebook and Twitter are important communication vehicles, and think the district should do more to “market” them to attract more community members.
- Few people in any focus group said they had seen or read the Superintendent’s blog, which is included in Peachjar and the electronic version of the *Cape Gazette*. In fact, a majority of participants across all groups were unaware that the district produced a blog.

Observations and Comments

The following summarizes our assessment of CHSD’s most pressing communication needs and challenges. All observations are addressed in the Recommendations section of this report.

- **It is time for CHSD to elevate its formal communication initiative to the next level.** As noted in the Key Findings, stakeholders – both internal and external – take great pride in the schools and district. Community leaders, staff, administrators and Board members said CHSD is recognized as a leading district in Delaware, citing exemplary programs, honors and assessment scores. The district should have a communication program befitting of a “flagship” school system. We believe CHSD is positioned to do just that. There is a supportive community, many involved and active parents, an administration and staff whose desire for excellence is obvious, a Superintendent who is a skilled communicator, a Board of Education committed to improvement, and an overall recognition of the importance of effective communication and public relations.
- **CHSD must change the focus of its formal communication initiative from one-way, mass communication activities to strategic, two-way communication.** Generating publicity should not be the major role of a school district communications office. Everyone likes positive publicity; it makes them feel good and feeds the general feeling of pride found in the schools. But research indicates that more strategic activities focused on two-way communications and relationship-building are more effective in building strong support and helping a district reach its communication and public relations goals. No longer can a school communication program be successful by simply “telling” audiences what we think they should know. We must ask both internal and external stakeholders what they want to know and how they want to receive information. We also have to give them opportunities to express their thoughts and concerns. We cite as an example the praise parents gave principals who actively seek input by meeting regularly with parent leaders and attending PTO meetings, and who respond promptly to parent inquiries.
- **A strategic communication approach will help to support CHSD’s education program.** A more strategic approach, beginning with a comprehensive communication plan, is needed to focus the overall program and engage with all stakeholder groups. The goal is improving communication to the point where the staff feels well-informed and engaged, and morale is high; parents are involved and true partners in their children’s education; and community members trust and support school district leadership.
- **Research is the first critical step in developing a communication plan.** While district leaders are aware of the formal activities now being carried out by the Communications office, no one is aware of all the tactics and activities that constitute CHSD’s public relations in its entirety. Through interviews and focus groups, we learned of additional ways staff members are interacting with internal and external stakeholders. Accounting for all of these communication, engagement and marketing activities will provide a complete picture of total efforts to connect with stakeholders and should be done before any additional planning is considered. Also, it will

be helpful to get an idea of the effectiveness of current formal activities being carried out by the Communications Coordinator.

- **An increased focus on internal communication is needed to create staff ambassadors, improve key messaging about district-wide initiatives, and reinforce the CHSD brand.** Most staff members in the focus groups felt they receive the information needed to do their jobs and that they're adequately informed about activities and issues within their own buildings. However, focus groups also noted inconsistencies in the dissemination of information across buildings and in the messages shared. All staff groups expressed a desire for more information about changes, new initiatives and challenges at the district level, as well as activities in other schools. Communication protocols are needed at all levels to ensure key messages and critical information cascade effectively and efficiently throughout the system. CHSD should have employees who are well-informed about district operations and activities so they can communicate in "one clear voice" to family, friends and neighbors.
- **CHSD must be more targeted with communication to engage key stakeholder groups.** Currently, most formal communication is not only one-way, it can be classified as mass communication. When developing a communication plan, CHSD should account for specific audiences, noting those that are key to strategic communication efforts. Some of these are more obvious, such as staff, parent and community leaders; parents who are not involved with the schools; and business and community partners. But, there are others that should be considered as target audiences in strategic planning. For example, more than half of community residents are retirees, and there is a sizeable LGBTQ community. Another group that merits consideration is families for whom English is not their primary language.
- **Additional opportunities are needed for stakeholders to offer input and express concerns.** As noted under the previous "Key Findings" section, internal and external stakeholders were not reluctant to express concerns or constructive criticisms. In fact, many focus group participants seemed eager to help and offered suggestions for enhancing communication in CHSD. However, we also noted the frustrations of those same people who want to ask questions or offer input without having to speak at a Board meeting or contact the Superintendent. Giving people opportunities to interact more easily with district leaders, *and actually soliciting input*, will help to increase their trust and their belief that leadership really does listen to them when decisions are made. It also will provide more feedback on how to improve your communication program.
- **A more defined communication component is needed in the crisis management/response plan.** A crisis is a reputation-defining moment for a school district, whether it is a traumatic event or a problem situation such as an altercation on campus or an allegation of wrong-doing by an employee. Due to the unpredictable nature of crises, it is important to develop clear guidelines to drive the communication effort in the event of a crisis or unexpected event. This should include how specific communications will be managed before, during and after the crisis and outline the communication responsibilities of each crisis team member as well as the Communications Coordinator.

Recommendations

The following recommendations offer strategies, tactics and activities that can help CHSD improve and expand the overall communication effort with internal and external stakeholders. Included are suggestions for building upon the current work of the Communications office and addressing issues identified through the communication audit process.

We have addressed numerous communication needs, and we advise CHSD leaders to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations and action steps can be implemented in the year ahead given the staff and resources available, and which should be included in long-range plans. While the Communications Coordinator has primary responsibility for critical communication tasks, all CHSD departments and administrators must be accountable for improving communication and taking the lead in implementing some of the action steps.

Recommendation – 1

Develop a comprehensive communication plan that supports the district's mission and goals.

Simply generating information does not constitute an effective communication strategy nor does it guarantee that stakeholders receive needed information. A strategic approach will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of the district's communication dollar. It should also focus on engaging people as well as informing them. The plan should include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, responsible staff, desired outcomes, and specific evaluation criteria and measurements for each initiative.

Without a plan, it is difficult to create an open dialogue, deliver messages to stakeholders, and build support for programs and initiatives. The recommendations included in this *Communication Audit Report* offer proven strategies that can be incorporated into a comprehensive, strategic communication plan that addresses the following questions for every initiative or program that CHSD 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 (actionable behavior)?
- How will we evaluate and measure the outcomes?

A communication plan can then be developed that outlines action steps designed to meet the identified goals. First, align the communication plan with the following goals outlined in the CHSD Mission Statement and additional goals identified by the Superintendent (marked with an asterisk):

- Achieve academic and program excellence.
- Promote diversity.
- Improve school climate and safety.
- Employ and retain highly qualified and dedicated staff.
- Close the achievement gap.
- Become the district of choice in southern Delaware.
- Enhance communication and build trust within the Cape Henlopen community.
- Deal successfully with the growth in enrollment.*
- Meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.*
- Retain students who might leave for private schools under the Choice program.*

List the specific goal then define the communication action steps that will be used to implement it. All employees must assume some responsibility for the communication effort. Typically, it would be the function of the Communications Coordinator to ensure that a communication component is embedded into all district goals, initiatives and programs so that employees understand their roles as key communicators.

Action Step

Follow proven public relations principles and practices.

There is not one “correct” way to develop a formal communication plan, but a good plan should follow the public relations RACE (Research, Assessment, Communication/Implementation, Evaluation) formula. The following components constitute a plan based in sound public relations principles:

- **Research.** The first step in creating a plan is research – determining all communication/public relations/marketing/engagement activities currently happening in CHSD. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics – managing website content; *The Viking Review*; *Annual Report*; Superintendent’s blog; building newsletters; Facebook and Twitter postings; AlertNow notifications; Peachjar electronic flyers; news releases; crisis communication; etc. Also included should be the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders – parent conferences; open house programs; advisory councils; business partnerships; news media relations; and participation in community organizations.

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

Another aspect of research is determining stakeholders' opinions and desires regarding communication. The communication audit is a significant beginning, and the results and recommendations in this report will provide valuable information. However, research should be an ongoing tactic in a school district's communication strategies (see Recommendation 3). When changing curriculum and instructional strategies, education leaders in progressive systems such as CHSD typically turn to research in best practices. We recommend that district leaders do the same when developing and updating the communication plan to ensure it remains dynamic and timely.

- **Assessment.** The next step involves assessment of current activities and tactics, along with the recommendations in this report, to develop goals and action steps that address communication needs. Assessment includes identifying target audiences. Similar to the focus groups convened for the communication audit, this could include:

- **Parents** – can be broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and secondary) or by another identifier (e.g., “active/involved,” “non-English-speaking,” etc.);
- **Employees** – teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and para-professionals;
- **Business and community partners** – 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** – local government, county officials, state legislators;
- **Non-parents** – “Empty nesters,” seniors and other community members without children in CHSD schools;
- **Students** – a group such as Student Government leaders might be targeted; and
- **Media representatives** – local newspaper reporters and editors, contacts from newspapers outside of the region (e.g., *Washington Blade*), radio news directors and TV news reporters.

The assessment phase is also the time to determine desired outcomes or changes in behavior that can be measured to evaluate the plan's effectiveness. Examples of measurable objectives could include:

- An increase in positive statements from employees about “being well-informed,” measured via comments in staff meetings, meet-and-discuss sessions, surveys, focus groups and evaluations;

- Recognition by parents, measured via surveys at school events or community forums;
- Number of people who agree to serve on a proposed Key Communicator Network (see Recommendation 6); and
- Recognition of school success stories by non-parents, as measured by a community survey.

A timeline to achieve the desired outcomes should be set to ensure effective and efficient delivery of information. It should include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out.

- **Communication/implementation.** Current activities to be continued and new activities to be implemented must be determined, and someone must be assigned responsibility for each. The recommendations included in this report provide direction for identifying communication tactics and activities to accomplish the desired outcomes. Other ideas may come from discussions of groups such as the proposed Communication Advisory Council (see following action steps).

A budget that notes the resources required is the final step of plan development. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:

- Equipment/software;
 - Materials and supplies;
 - Printing and duplicating;
 - Advertising;
 - Professional development;
 - Staff travel;
 - Subscriptions; and
 - Professional dues/fees.
- **Evaluation.** All communication activities should be evaluated regularly to determine whether outcomes were achieved and to refine the plan and consider the addition of new tactics and strategies. 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.

Examples of communication/public relations plans are available from NSPRA upon request.

Action Step**Seek Board approval and update the plan annually.**

It should be remembered that a plan is just that – it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in stone. It should be reviewed annually and will need to be revised as objectives are accomplished and as new communication challenges arise.

In addition, we suggest that the plan be presented to the Board of Education 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.

Action Step**Create a Communication Advisory Council.**

We recommend that the Communications Coordinator follow through with her plan to create a Communication Advisory Council. Such a group, comprised of parent, community, Board and staff representatives, could be a valuable asset in helping develop the strategic communication plan and guiding the communication program in the future. Educators often frame issues very differently from the public. To connect with and engage stakeholders, CHSD needs to understand the public's perspective and present messages in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences.

Consider tapping the expertise of business and community leaders as well as retirees living in Rehoboth Beach, who are interested and willing to assist the district with its strategic communication efforts. Seek out people with a background in public relations, communication or marketing who would be willing to share their knowledge and skills. This council could provide ongoing input regarding strategies and tactics for communication efforts, and could also serve as a "sounding board." In addition, members of the council could become strong allies and advocates for CHSD.

Action Step**Include issues management as a component of communication planning.**

There are several ongoing issues CHSD must deal with. Mentioned across focus groups were the challenges brought by growth, lack of diversity among staff, the disparity in socio-economic levels of the community, the state's proposed Regulation 225, and the Board's policy on financial accounts for school-related organizations. CHSD leaders must stay on top of issues such as these, that have the potential to impact the district's public relations.

Quite simply, issues management is the ability to anticipate and prepare for a problem before it happens – effectively anticipating problems and adjusting policy and procedures in response, before a crisis occurs.

Issues management should be an integral part of any well-planned public relations program. It not only helps districts avoid crises, it helps to build trust and goodwill by demonstrating a willingness to listen and respond to stakeholder priorities. Keeping stakeholders well-informed also will enable CHSD to be more proactive rather than reactive in its communication efforts.

Quick reference fact sheets can be created to share with staff, parents and the public to serve as a resource on emerging issues. An example is:

Issue at a Glance	Managing District Growth
Description	Steady growth in the student population means that CHSD will be expanding and revising district and school boundaries to accommodate demand.
Work to Date	Explain studies and planning completed to date.
Barriers to Progress	List of items such as budget, time, approvals, etc.
What's Next	Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. Next meeting/public forum dates listed, if appropriate.
Your Involvement	You can help our schools with this issue by...
Key Messages/Talking Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CHSD is addressing the issue in the following ways... (include specifics) • Priority consideration is to improve educational options and minimize the impact on students.
For More Information	List contacts.

Identifying and framing key issues, developing key messages and talking points, and ensuring that administrators and staff are able to articulate the district’s position will help foster understanding and more transparency around leadership decisions. Preparing leaders at all levels of the school system with background information, rationale, key messages, and strategies for inviting input from staff, parents, and others and engaging them in dialogue about outcomes will help to “close the loop” on critical communications.

Develop specific communication plans for referenda campaigns and individual projects.

The most effective school district communication/public relations programs are guided not only by an overall plan, but also by communication plans for campaigns and individual projects. Think of these as “sub-plans” that, when completed, become a component of the comprehensive strategic plan.

If a referendum to finance the ongoing construction program is approved by the Board of Education in 2018, we recommend that CHSD make development of a finance election campaign a priority. While the last two referenda easily won voter approval, several Board members expressed concerns about another ballot measure, so soon after the last one.

In developing a communication plan for a campaign or individual project, follow the same steps as developing an overall comprehensive communication plan. Use the RACE formula (Research, Assessment, Communication/Execution and Evaluation). For a finance campaign, we suggest that you consider the following key strategies and tactics that have been successful for other school systems.

- **Know your target audience(s)** – determine what groups you need to turn out at the polls.
- **Include staff as a primary audience** in your campaign. Every employee – including clerical and support staff, not just teachers and administrators – should be well-versed on the need for the referendum.
- **Identify opinion leaders** among staff, parents, business partners, community leaders, and civic groups and initiate a dialogue with them. These people could be the same as those invited to join a proposed Key Communicator Network (see Recommendation 6).
- **Learn what facts and key messages will resonate** with stakeholders and move supportive voters to action.
- **Prepare key messages** and arguments in support of the referendum.
- **Incorporate social media** into communication strategies and tactics. The CHSD Facebook page and Twitter feed provide channels for sharing information quickly and easily. Currently, the district uses these primarily to transmit positive news, but don’t hesitate to use them to keep stakeholders informed of facts and key messages during a referendum campaign.
- **Use multiple channels** to deliver key messages. Over the past 10 years, social media has changed the way elections are won or lost, but you can’t overlook more traditional one-way communication tools such as the news media and district and school websites.

- **Incorporate two-way communication.** Personal interaction and engagement with audiences are still some of the most effective tactics.

Before the most recent referendum, Superintendent Fulton and other district leaders conducted meetings with stakeholders to explain the need for the proposed ballot measure. Across most focus groups, participants said those sessions were valuable, and they believed they were important in winning voter approval. We recommend that CHSD consider similar meetings during future finance campaigns.

In addition, focus groups were asked to comment about a direct mail flyer sent to district residents during the 2016 campaign. Focus group comments were inconclusive regarding the value of a direct mail flyer. A few people remembered them and said they were helpful; others did not recognize them. Personal interaction and engagement are always more effective in campaigns, but since CHSD has limited channels to reach community people without children in school, a direct mail piece sent to all households may be useful in a future campaign. A flyer could also double as a handout to be distributed at meetings.

NSPRA has a resource that is helpful in conducting successful referendum campaigns – [Election Success: Proven Strategies for Public Finance Campaigns](#). It is available from NSPRA’s Online Store at www.nspra.org/products.

Recommendation – 2

Develop and adopt a Board policy on communication.

CHSD leaders recognize the value of a strategic communication program. The Board has the opportunity to expand and enhance expectations for communication by creating a vision and establishing a policy that formalizes the district’s commitment to transparency, responsiveness and engagement with stakeholders.

It is no longer enough to say that communication is important. If communication is to be successful, a Board policy should establish guidelines, set expectations for actions of the Board and staff, and outline what information stakeholders can expect from the district. The following action steps can serve as a guide for CHSD to formalize its commitment to communicating with stakeholders.

Action Step

Create a vision statement and Board goals for communication.

A vision statement and Board goals related to communication can help focus district leaders and staff members on the importance of effective, strategic communication. The ultimate goal of any school district communication program is positively influencing student success by engaging parents and staff and ensuring a well-informed and supportive community. CHSD’s vision and goals should affirm:

- Communication as the foundation of a strong relationship between the school district and the community.
- The responsibility of the Board and all employees to build positive, long-term relationships with parents and community members to better position CHSD to achieve its mission.
- The value of public participation at school board meetings.
- Ways in which CHSD will engage staff, parents and other stakeholders in its mission, including specifics such as:
 - Providing accurate, timely information;
 - Requesting feedback on important issues;
 - Involving impacted constituent groups in the problem-solving/decision-making process whenever possible;
 - Listening to the ideas and viewpoints of constituents; and
 - Adhering to a practice of open, honest communication with stakeholders and the news media.

Action Step

Translate the vision into the rationale for communication policy.

Typically, policies include rationales for their need – the qualities that presumably will be identified in the district’s vision. Translating that vision into an introduction and addressing topics that are relevant to communication should constitute a formal policy. Creation and adoption of the policy will help solidify CHSD’s commitment to effective communication.

The following is a sample of the beginning of a policy establishing a communication program:

Cape Henlopen School District and the Board of Education believe that planned, systemic, two-way communication is the foundation of a strong relationship between the school district and the community. It is the responsibility of each board member and each district employee to actively build positive long-term relationships with community members to ensure that our students realize their full potential.

The above purpose statement could be followed by a general statement listing specific expectations:

We will engage the community in the mission of our schools by:

1. *Providing accurate, timely information.*

2. *Requesting feedback on important issues.*
3. *Involving affected stakeholder groups in the problem-solving/decision-making process whenever possible.*
4. *Listening to the ideas and viewpoints of citizens.*
5. *Adhering to a practice of open, honest communication with our citizens and news media.*

Communication-related topics that typically are addressed in school policy include:

- Public participation at Board meetings;
- The public’s “Right to Know” and adherence to “Freedom of Information” requirements;
- Crisis communication;
- Protocol/channels of communication for public concerns;
- Use of social media; and
- Guidelines for communication advisory groups.

NSPRA and the Delaware School Boards Association may be able to provide sample policies on communication.

Recommendation – 3

Introduce processes and protocols to improve communication.

CHSD can build on the personal communication skills of many staff members to improve internal communication. The goal should be to create a culture of communication where all staff recognize and understand their roles as communicators so that sharing important information with colleagues, parents and community members becomes second nature.

Everyone – Board members, Superintendent, central office administrators, principals, faculty, support staff – needs to think about how communication can be improved. CHSD leaders talked about their desire for transparency, and building trust with stakeholders is one of the Superintendent’s goals. Both qualities go hand-in-hand with sharing information among colleagues and co-workers, passing information from the top down to staff at all levels of the organization and to external stakeholders, and conversely, giving all staff and stakeholders a voice by seeking input. A school district where these functions routinely occur is a system that truly embraces and practices a culture of communication.

The following action steps are designed to help CHSD leaders initiate communication processes and protocols to enhance internal communication.

Add a “How This (Issue/Decision/Information) Will Be Communicated” section to agendas for meetings.

This suggestion is simple, but it can help to create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. A reminder item on agendas can stimulate discussions about decisions and issues and lead to timelier and more strategic communication with key stakeholder groups. Questions to consider:

- **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem, and how it will be presented to audiences.
- **How does this issue/problem affect staff and stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various groups or impact other concerns facing the district and community.
- **Which staff and stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the groups that are the primary audiences.
- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that staff and stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key statements or “talking points.”
- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with audiences, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each group.
- **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.
- **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson with audiences.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute printed copies for use in the discussion. Over time, these questions will become routine and an integral part of the district’s communication process.

Action Step

Use an action grid to report the outcomes of meetings.

Another tactic to keep staff informed is the use of an action grid. This grid can be shared with meeting participants, placed on a proposed staff intranet on the district website (see Recommendation 7) and used to report actions and outcomes from the meeting.

A grid makes it easier to track the discussion as it takes place and eliminates the need for lengthy minutes. It helps with closing the communication and responsibility loop by managing the ambiguity of “who does what” for each resolved agenda item. Administrators, principals and other leaders should be encouraged to share these with secretaries so they are kept up to date on decisions, changes and activities.

We recommend that CHSD leaders use a responsibility management grid for every meeting where decisions are made or responsibilities set. The grid should include the agenda item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. It can be an electronic template that is sent to all leaders and their secretaries so everyone is on the same page. This grid also can be used with teacher work groups or parent committees that need to disseminate information. Rotate the responsibility for completing the grid when possible to engage more people in the process.

Agenda Item	Action Taken/ Key Discussion Points	Who Is Responsible for the Next Step	Timeline/Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes – “FYI,” “To Be Shared” and “Confidential” – to each agenda item. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If 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. Noting what is to be done with specific agenda items will help ensure that the right people are informed in a timely manner.

Action Step

Communicate the rationale behind decisions, report the outcomes on all issues and provide progress updates on initiatives.

While CHSD leaders strive to make good decisions on behalf of students, there is a risk of being perceived negatively if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with staff, parents, students and community members. Stakeholders realize that the district will encounter challenges and problems, but they want to know what they are and that concerns are being addressed. A critical component of a strategic communication program is ensuring that the rationale for decisions is presented along with the outcomes. Explaining to stakeholders the genesis and rationale for specific actions and then reporting back to them on results will build trust in leadership. Focus groups noted the improved communication about emergencies via the electronic messaging system and about issues such as the recent vandalism of school buses. We urge CHSD to continue efforts to keep stakeholders informed with timely messaging.

Employees, PTO members, proposed key communicators (see Recommendation 6), and advisory councils or committees are key audiences that can directly influence perceptions of the district. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that active members don't think their time has been wasted or their input wasn't valued.

Communication follow-through is critical to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way. CHSD leaders may think they are explaining their decisions, but some staff members and parents in the focus groups did not perceive this to be the case. We recommend that CHSD develop specific strategies and tactics to provide follow-up information about important decisions to address this disconnect with staff and parents. The website, social media, a staff intranet, small group meetings and a Board meeting summary (see Recommendation 5) can be used to convey this information.

Action Step

Increase visible leadership.

Participants in most of the focus groups talked about the visible leadership of Superintendent Fulton, citing his visits to schools, attendance at school and community events and participation in community service organizations. In addition, PTO leaders and other parents also cited principals for their regular attendance at parent meetings and participation in school events.

We commend CHSD administrators for their visible leadership, and we encourage other district leaders to increase their visibility with stakeholder groups. Central office administrators also could visit schools periodically and chat with staff, and even hold short question-and-answer sessions during staff meetings. Administrators and principals also can follow the Superintendent's lead and become active members in community groups. And since the district is a member of two local Chambers of Commerce, we

encourage leaders to become more actively involved with these important community groups. Visible leadership can reap huge rewards for CHSD by increasing opportunities for two-way communication with key stakeholder groups.

Finally, Mr. Fulton also serves on a state advisory council for the Department of Education. We encourage all administrators and principals to seek similar opportunities for advocacy and service. Visibility on state and national advisory groups and in professional associations will support the CHSD goal of becoming recognized as a leading school district in the region and state.

Action Step

Conduct regular research on communication and public relations efforts.

Effective public relations/communication/engagement programs are based on a solid foundation of research. Communication research helps to identify what stakeholders know or don't know, what information they want to receive, key audiences for specific messages and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. Allowing stakeholders to define their information needs is an important step. As educators, we should not assume we know their information preferences unless we ask. This communication audit is a significant start that will guide the district in developing a strategic communication plan, but ongoing research will be needed to ensure that communication remains relevant and effective.

Research does not have to be expensive or require a professional researcher. There are a number of effective strategies that can be implemented with a minimal amount of effort. Some suggestions include:

- **Readership surveys of *The Viking Review*, *Annual Report* and school newsletters.** The primary focus of communication vehicles should be delivery of news and information about the schools and the district based on what stakeholders say they want to know. We suggest surveys be conducted early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes. Surveys can be conducted online, by including an insert or tear-off page in print publications, or, at the school-level, by distributing printed surveys to parents at parent-teacher conferences or open houses.
- **Focus groups.** Focus groups with parents, staff and community members can be used to gauge information needs, explore perceptions, and identify issues and concerns. They can be informal (by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions of a PTO leadership group or advisory group already meeting on another topic) or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative the district is considering.
- **Exit/entrance surveys.** Short surveys given to parents withdrawing or enrolling students can provide valuable information for marketing and communication planning. These surveys should be designed to find out why families are leaving or what brought them to the district, what their

expectations were or are, how best to communicate with them, etc. This information can also identify specific schools or departments where communication efforts need improvement.

- **Satisfaction/climate surveys.** This type of survey is useful in gathering feedback from parents, students and staff. In addition to asking respondents to rate school performance and general satisfaction with the educational program, additional questions can be included that are more specific as to the information parents want and the best format and vehicle to deliver it to them.

Recommendation – 4

Expand the communication components in CHSD’s crisis management/response plan.

In today’s world, school districts must be prepared to deal with the unexpected – from school shootings to weather events to major health epidemics. The speed of today’s communication technology adds another layer of challenge. The ability of students and staff to call or text as an incident is taking place can relegate CHSD to the role of a communication “observer” rather than a valued information provider. A crisis is a reputation-defining moment for a school system, and communication missteps are costly.

Given the heightened awareness about safety following such high-profile events as recent school shootings and natural disasters, we believe it is important for CHSD’s crisis management plan to incorporate the latest and best practices in crisis communication. Communication strategies should reflect openness and accessibility, transparency, truthfulness, engagement and responsiveness. Once in place, these crisis communication components will help build credibility and trust with stakeholders by establishing a process through which the district can provide information in a calm, professional manner.

We offer the following action steps as a guide for developing crisis communication response protocols that will serve CHSD’s needs.

Action Step

Designate an overall team leader for crisis communication oversight.

When a crisis management plan is put into effect, someone must serve as the team leader and manager. In most cases this is the superintendent, who will make decisions and oversee the activities of the crisis response team from a central location, be it a command center or the central office. Typically, an administrator responsible for communication also takes a lead role in assisting the designated leader. It is critical to identify that team leader in advance so he or she is prepared to act when a crisis occurs.

Some districts also designate a crisis communication leadership team. This team could be comprised of the Superintendent, Communications Coordinator and a third administrator, such as the Director of

Facility Operations and Construction. This group would oversee the district's response to the emergency and coordinate with PIOs from local emergency response agencies. The response team is charged with convening during a crisis to oversee the communication function of the crisis management team. Other members of the communication leadership team could include the Assistant Superintendent, the Director of Business Operations, a principal, and other department staff members to provide website, social media, and other messaging support.

Action Step

Assign responsibility for specific communication responsibilities.

A crisis management plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels. With only one communications staff member in CHSD, assistance from other administrators will be needed to help gather and disseminate critical news and updates during a crisis. The organizational structure of an incident response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should be designated to take charge of various communication responsibilities in the event of a major crisis. These should include the following:

- Leadership advisement;
- Internal communication (an important role that is sometimes overlooked);
- External communication;
- News media relations;
- Communication command center operations;
- Electronic communications (website and social media posts and monitoring, etc.);
- AlertNow notifications (voice and text if possible);
- Research and media monitoring;
- Counseling and support;
- Donations and volunteer management; and
- Special events (i.e., memorial services)

Include key communication components in the plan.

As the crisis communication plan is developed, the following components should be addressed:

- **List of key audiences/stakeholders and the best way to communicate with each group.** By having a list of audiences and the most effective channels to reach them, the communications team can move forward without having to brainstorm the list as the crisis response begins.
- **First response checklist.** The first hour of a crisis is sometimes called the “golden hour” because public perception about an institution’s ability to respond effectively in a crisis is determined very early. A first response checklist helps crisis teams manage that first hour. It essentially is a reminder of actions that should be done, such as:
 - Collecting the basic facts of the situation: who-what-when-where-why;
 - Determining communication priorities;
 - Identifying whom to reach first; and
 - Developing a beginning of the response strategy.
- **Template for an initial public statement.** This should include reminders of what will be needed to compose an initial statement. A template can serve as a backup communication starter if the Superintendent or Communications Coordinator is out of the district at the beginning of a crisis event. The template should include the following:
 - What can be confirmed;
 - What the district is doing to respond to the situation;
 - Schedule of when updates are expected to occur; and
 - Messages of concern and sympathy for anyone directly and negatively impacted by the crisis.
- **List of communication responsibilities of the district and local law enforcement or emergency response personnel.** Talk to local officials before a crisis occurs to understand parameters around the appropriate release of information, who will serve as primary contact, and how the district and first response personnel can work together.
- **Statement for receptionists and secretaries.** Parents will be concerned about their own children, even if the crisis occurs in another school. Building staff should be aware of this responsibility and look for a statement from the district office.

- **News media protocols.** With today’s instant communication, the news media may hear of any trouble faster than district staff. If reporters sense at first contact that the district is unprepared to respond, they will report that perception. Establish news media protocols such as the following:
 - When will interviews be available?
 - Where will they be held?
 - Are photographers allowed?
 - Can students be photographed?

- **“Dark” webpage.** These pages remain dormant until the need arises. The webpages should include items such as: contact information; links to the initial public statement; background information and district facts including current enrollment, number and names of schools, etc.; protocols for picking up students; news media guidelines and location of news briefings; and other pertinent information. As a crisis response evolves, all related messages from CHSD should be posted on the website and on social media sites for access by stakeholders.

- **Communication with staff.** Employees need to be updated and, if possible, they should hear what is happening before messages are sent to parents and the community. Employees will be important information ambassadors during a crisis. People will expect that they know what is happening. Talking to uninformed employees will eat away at the community’s confidence and trust in CHSD’s response.

- **Communication with parents and students.** The best time to let students, staff and family know what to do in an emergency is before it happens. Include information in student and staff handbooks and on the website explaining what parents and staff can expect if a crisis situation occurs. Include the most likely communication vehicles the district will use in a crisis – AlertNow notifications, email, website, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Communicate the fact that CHSD has a crisis management and communication plan. Stress that student safety and welfare will always be the primary concern in any crisis.

Action Step

Take advantage of social media capabilities.

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

- **Before the crisis – engage and anticipate.** Social media is a tool to engage parents and stakeholders in conversations. By doing so early (before a crisis), schools establish a community

of participants (for example, friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter, etc.) and a familiarity as the “go to” source for information about an incident and how schools are responding. In an emergency people will seek information wherever they can find it. Huge dividends are afforded school districts that are successful in creating a relationship with a community of participants. These “key communicators” become online influencers who have the ability to get to a wide range of audiences in times of a crisis to manage rumors and correct misinformation.

- **During the crisis – communicate.** Social media provides an opportunity to share information with stakeholders quickly and easily. It also enables two-way communication in today’s world where people crave dialogue. But keep in mind that social media also presents challenges for school leaders by placing the ability for instant communication in the hands of anyone – student, parent, staff member. Thus, the bottom line is still less about saying the right things and more about doing the right things.
- **After the crisis – communicate.** Re-engaging on social media platforms may be the best opportunity to regain the trust of stakeholders and to lead the way in connecting the community after a crisis to help in the recovery effort. The more schools engage in social media from the beginning, the better positioned they will be to anticipate, communicate and regain trust in order to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

Action Step

Involve community agencies and identify available resources.

To be as well-prepared as possible to face a crisis or emergency, school districts must involve representatives from local emergency response agencies (i.e., law enforcement, fire, hospital, behavioral health services, etc.) in crisis communication and management planning. In addition to local resources, many states offer assistance in developing a crisis response and communication plan under the federal Safe Schools program.

NSPRA offers a resource that is helpful in developing a crisis communication manual – [*The Complete Revised Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools*](#). It is available from NSPRA’s Online Store at www.nspra.org/products.

Recommendation – 5

Improve and enhance communication with employees.

The importance of internal audiences cannot be overlooked in building a successful communications and public relations 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. Employees at all levels will not only be aware of district initiatives and issues, but also able to share that information when the need or opportunity arises.

Staff focus groups in general spoke positively about internal communication in the schools and the central office. We commend district administrators and principals for recognizing the importance of interaction with staff and their willingness to respond to questions and concerns from employees and stakeholders. However, participants in the employee focus groups still noted gaps in the communication process and expressed a desire for more information about issues and decision-making processes.

The following action steps can further enhance internal communication and enable CHSD 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

Establish communication guidelines and expectations for district administrators and principals.

Maintaining effective communication requires thoughtful, well-defined guidelines and protocols to deliver clear, targeted messages. While many staff and parent focus group participants considered communication at the school level to be a strength, they pointed to some deficiencies in communication between the district office and the schools.

Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, instead of important information cascading throughout CHSD in a timely manner, bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. To ensure that CHSD leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how the district will communicate with all staff. As frontline communicators and ambassadors for the schools, staff should receive important information before parents and the community. The focus should be on delivering the information employees need to know in a timely and consistent manner. This should include:

- Rationale behind decisions;
- Articulation of the vision and direction of the district;
- Summaries of important meetings; and
- “Nuts and bolts” of district operations and policies that affect staff members’ job duties.

In order to improve the communication infrastructure and ensure timely and consistent information delivery, clearly define guidelines that:

- Identify who is responsible for communicating with different employee groups;

- Outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared;
- Identify specific communication vehicles to maximize effectiveness and efficiency;
- Provide tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department to school communication; and
- Provide forms and templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.

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 as well as 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.

By expanding the communication responsibilities of administrators and principals the district can broaden its reach and create more capacity for the Communications office to focus on overarching strategic communication priorities. To demonstrate the district’s commitment to enhancing communication efforts, we suggest a communication component be included in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria.

Action Step

Gather employee input on decisions that affect their jobs.

When CHSD 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. Participants in several staff focus groups indicated that this process is not employed consistently across the district.

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 a simple emailed survey or in a focus group. By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, CHSD leaders will expand the ownership of change and contribute positively to employees’ feelings of being valued team members.

Action Step

Include all employees in “staff” meetings.

Based on comments in staff focus groups, we recommend that principals include support staff, not just teaching faculty, in “staff meetings” that are not limited to discussion about instruction. Consider placing

information or discussion items relevant to all employees at the start of the agenda so support staff can leave once these are covered and the meeting can continue with items pertinent to teachers. While it is not always possible for support staff to attend meetings due to work hours and responsibilities, making it possible for them to attend some meetings each year will reinforce their sense of being valued as contributing members of the school team.

In addition, this will enable clerical and support staff to become better ambassadors for CHSD. Typically, these employees are often viewed by community members as highly credible sources of news about the schools.

Action Step

Develop a list of staff “resource people” with responsibilities noted.

A number of participants in the employee focus groups, especially secretaries, said that they often don’t know whom to call or email with questions, because they don’t know co-workers’ responsibilities. This is a fairly common concern in school districts with a centralized district office and separate campuses. An easy solution to the problem, suggested by CHSD staff, is the development of a directory listing staff members to call with questions by topic or responsibility. To be sure you cover all topics of interest, you could poll or survey administrators and secretaries, along with other relevant support staff. This can be a simple one-page list that would be duplicated and distributed throughout the district and posted on the proposed staff intranet.

Action Step

Produce and disseminate a summary of Board of Education meetings to staff.

One obvious way to keep staff better informed about issues is increasing their awareness of Board of Education activities. A brief summary (400-500 words) of Board actions and discussion topics could be produced and disseminated to staff the morning after monthly meetings.

Think of this as a bulletin, not a newsletter. It should be a much shorter, user-friendly version of minutes that will immediately inform staff of Board business without having to wait for and read lengthy minutes. Details and background information should be limited – think “talking points.”

In fact, much of this summary could consist of bulleted lists of actions on routine financial and personnel matters. A draft of the bulletin could be prepared before the meeting by listing the topics and actions for consideration on the Board meeting agenda. Then, making any necessary changes or additions to complete the bulletin following the meeting would take a minimal amount of time.

We have found that employees value receiving a summary of Board governance activities and it helps them feel more engaged in school system business. Keeping all staff members in the loop on formal

actions will prepare them for their roles as CHSD ambassadors and build confidence in their ability to respond to questions from parents, students and community members.

Action Step

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

Secretaries and other office personnel are a critical part of the communication loop in any school district. They come in contact with numerous people every day. Each of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between the school and stakeholders. For these employees to function effectively in this key role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them regularly.

Focus group participants said they don't always know basic information such as emergencies in other schools or where to direct callers with questions about a specific issue. This can hamper their ability as frontline contacts to respond to parents or co-workers. The following steps should serve as a reminder to district administrators and principals so that key office personnel have the information they need to do their jobs efficiently and well:

- Review daily and weekly schedules so that staff members are aware of activities going on in their school or department, as well as major events district-wide.
- Review the major issues under discussion so that they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
- Ensure that clerical staff have printed copies of current materials at hand, such as the calendar, organizational chart, school and district data, and agendas for Board of Education 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

Use orientation sessions to remind new employees of their communication role.

Staff orientation programs typically include a review of required forms and employment-related topics such as insurance and benefits. Often overlooked is an overview of the school system's history, culture and key initiatives. In addition, new employees should learn about any major initiatives (e.g., the ongoing building project, AVID college preparatory program, 1:1 iPad initiative), as well as recent honors and recognitions. The focus should be on generating excitement about CHSD and sharing key messages so that new employees are empowered to be ambassadors. They also should learn about sources of information and be reminded that as CHSD employees they have a responsibility to read communications sent out by the central office and their schools.

With an increased emphasis on effective communications, it would be beneficial to distribute “CHSD Education Ambassador” packets to all district employees, not just new hires, at the beginning of the school year. A “tool kit” of district information with basic facts and information, such as district and school enrollments, number of staff employed, revenue sources, district goals, social media guidelines, and reasons to be “Cape Proud” would be a helpful resource and serve to remind employees that they also are “communicators.” Training in customer service and ambassadorship can empower staff to become active advocates for the schools.

Finally, orientation for support staff is many times an afterthought, but these employees communicate with families, friends and neighbors just as teachers and administrators do so it is important to include them in orientation programs.

Recommendation – 6

Increase outreach activities and two-way communication with external stakeholders.

CHSD’s formal communication tactics and activities (the work of the Communications Coordinator) are focused on mass communications to external stakeholders. Such a heavy reliance on one-way communication can create a gap between the schools and external audiences. Also, the only effective communication channel reaching community members with no connection to the district is the news media – releases and coverage in the *Cape Gazette*.

We recommend that the Communications Coordinator and district leaders expand upon the meaningful personal interaction already taking place to engage additional parents and residents without children in school. Deliberate public engagement can build trust and create an investment in education by stakeholders. The following action steps offer suggestions for implementing tactics and activities to foster parent and community engagement.

Action Step

Develop a Key Communicator Network that emphasizes relationships.

We recommend that CHSD extend its outreach by developing a Key Communicator Network, which is a formal program designed to expand and build relationships with influential stakeholders. These individuals, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” for the district.

This group can be very effective because members are respected and influential leaders of specific groups of stakeholders. They are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and they are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. You can use this group as a sounding board to test

new ideas, as a conduit to deliver key messages to stakeholders, and as an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns. Following are steps to guide you in developing and maintaining this group.

- **Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.** The individuals invited to participate should be credible members of target audiences identified by the district; people that 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.

Ask each principal, central office administrator and Board member to recommend two or three people who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community, and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, ask those individuals whom they consider to be opinion leaders in the community.

Typically, networks include PTO leaders, local civic and business leaders, pastors and elected officials. CHSD’s network should include representatives from the large group of retirees living in the beach communities, key ethnic minority leaders, the LGBTQ community, and retired teachers and support staff. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

- **Hold an orientation meeting with invited leaders.** During this meeting, the Superintendent should discuss the vision for the district and the participants’ role as important conduits for information. Also, the district’s goals should be stated, as well as any pertinent studies and reports, such as this *Communication Audit Report*. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the Key Communicator Network – 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 these important stakeholders.

At the orientation meeting, encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about the school district or individual schools. A list of links to district publications or printed copies (*The Viking Review* and *Annual Report*, Facebook page, Twitter feed, and the Superintendent’s blog) should be given to everyone. In addition, key communicators should be given a “hot line” number or email (usually the Communications office) to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. 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.

- **Develop a regular electronic update specifically for the Key Communicator Network.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information. In addition to disseminating information, updates can alert the group to breaking news (i.e., emergencies or crisis situations) and dispel rumors, and

provide accurate information and key messages about major school district initiatives. Key communicators should also receive regular publications via email.

- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** It's important to ascertain whether the Key Communicator Network is functioning effectively and meeting the district's needs, as well as those of the participants. Questions that might be asked of participants could include:
 - How satisfied are you with the operation of the Key Communicator Network?
 - Is the information provided to you accurate and timely?
 - How frequently should we meet?
 - Are the e-updates serving your needs?
 - Who else should be invited to join the Key Communicator Network?
 - How can we improve the Key Communicator Network?
- **Hold an appreciation event at the end of each school year.** Invite key communicators to a breakfast or luncheon at the end of the year to thank them for their support and involvement. This event should be hosted by the Superintendent and attended by the Board of Education.

Action Step

Make a special effort to connect with parents who are not actively involved in schools.

Participants in staff and parent focus groups said connecting with parents who are not involved with their children's schools is a communication challenge. There are no magic bullets to ensure all CHSD parents will become more engaged. It takes a determined effort over time, but the payoff is the increased student success that accompanies parent involvement. We encourage the Communications Coordinator to work with principals and consider the following tactics to target these parents.

- Invite small groups of parents to have coffee with the principal for a conversation about the school and how to help their students learn.
- Enlist the help of PTO leaders and other parents who are regularly in the schools by asking them to serve as parent ambassadors. Encourage them to reach out to families and extend special invitations to meetings and other school events.
- Make a special effort to invite and welcome non-English-speaking families into schools. Often parents who aren't fluent in English are hesitant to approach the schools or become involved. Principals and PTO leaders can ease some of this anxiety by providing a personal invitation from someone who speaks their native language and reassuring parents that an interpreter will be available.

- Another option to connect with Hispanic families is via community groups and churches. If Hispanic community leaders are identified for participation in a proposed Key Communicators Network, they could also be consulted to provide advice on where and when to meet with and build better relationships with these parents.

Action Step

Strive to expand translation services for non-English-speaking families.

Focus group participants identified CHSD’s diversity as both a strength and a challenge, primarily because of language issues. Many staff believe there is a need for more translation of messages and forms, and a need for more interpreters in the schools.

We recommend that CHSD review all forms, electronic notification systems, publications and letters to ensure that important information is translated into Spanish. While it is unrealistic to translate all materials into all languages spoken in the district, the phrase, “This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you,” can be attached to school documents to signal non-English-speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information.

Secretaries in the focus groups noted the problem of parents calling or visiting schools when an interpreter is not available. A strategy being used by some school systems is to use cell phones, Skype or Google Hangouts to quickly connect an interpreter with parents needing assistance at any school or office. Training school and central office secretaries on Skype makes every school a welcome center, and starts new families who don’t speak English off on the right foot by connecting them with a friendly staffer who speaks their language. This strategy could be used any time an interpreter is needed, especially in an emergency situation. At a minimum, CHSD should strive to develop a workable protocol for times when a bilingual staff member is not readily available to take phone calls or talk with parents who have come to the school office.

Action Step

Foster opportunities to connect the Board of Education and administrators with stakeholders.

An intentional effort to expand the outreach of district leaders by engaging the public in conversations about the schools can help build a foundation of trust and support and strengthen connections to stakeholders. Participants in several focus groups as well as Board members expressed a desire to find opportunities for informal discussion or interaction in addition to the public comment section of a Board meeting.

A strategy that has worked well in some school systems is to offer a monthly or quarterly “Coffee Chat” – an opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversation with one or two

Board members, the Superintendent or other administrator. These informal meetings should have designated topics, such as planning for growth, or improving outreach to diverse families, and be positioned as opportunities to gather opinion research and information and listen to public input. Open-ended “venting” or unstructured Q & A sessions are not particularly useful, and it also is important to honor the district’s chain-of-command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel. Taking the school district to the public can often be an effective way to encourage engagement as it is less intimidating than asking the public to interact on district “turf.”

Action Step

Create connections and expand communication with retirees and “empty nesters.”

This growing audience can provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors, and mentors. They also can have a great impact on the district as voters. School systems can benefit by finding ways to serve these stakeholders while also providing them with meaningful opportunities to work directly with students. Some ideas to consider include:

- **Open a dialogue with homeowners’ association leaders.** CHSD’s beach communities have attracted many new residents, especially seniors and empty nesters. A sizeable percentage of these people may belong to homeowners’ associations. Conduct research to learn more about these associations and the names of officers. Once you have contact information, ask to visit with association officers in their communities or invite them to a short “get acquainted” meeting at the district office. Share information about volunteer/mentor opportunities and programs open to residents without children in the schools. Offer to give a presentation on the schools to their members or provide them with information brochures to share.
- **Recruit “parent mentors,”** once-active parents whose children are now grown, to assist new parents in navigating the school system and mentor them in how to work effectively as partners with teachers and the schools.
- **Introduce a Gold Card program** that will enable seniors to gain free admittance to CHSD concerts, plays and athletic events.
- **Include “empty nester” representatives** on advisory councils and committees and in the Key Communicator Network.
- **Create a volunteer bank** that connects retirees with student organizations and clubs at the high school.
- **Promote involvement opportunities** in the *Cape Gazette* and other local media outlets, via community partner organizations and businesses, and through homeowners’ associations, churches and senior community centers.

- **Encourage student groups with an interest in technology to help community members** learn new communication skills. With more seniors wanting to connect with family members on digital platforms, there is an excellent opportunity for young “experts” to share their knowledge and skills in areas such as shooting videos on mobile devices and setting up social media accounts.
- **Make annual presentations at senior and community centers** on CHSD’s innovative programs and include students from different grade levels in the presentations.

Action Step

Solicit subscribers to electronic publications.

We recommend that the Communications Coordinator follow through with her idea to solicit subscribers to CHSD electronic publications – *The Viking Review*, *Annual Report* and Superintendent’s blog. Allow readers to opt-in on the website for those they wish to receive. Use any and all marketing opportunities: news releases or ads in the *Cape Gazette*; notices on the district and school websites and social media; notes on the agendas of PTO meetings; email messages to members of advisory groups and business partners; and through any newly established relationships with homeowners’ associations. In addition, members of the proposed Key Communicators Network could be asked to give a card or short flyer soliciting subscribers to their friends, neighbors and associates.

Action Step

Reach out to real estate agents.

Given the community’s growth, CHSD should work with real estate agents to position them as first-line ambassadors with new residents, especially those with no connection to the schools. As the first point of contact with an individual or family, real estate agents should be familiar with the district’s marketing points and successes so they have accurate information to present.

Share information about the district on a regular basis with local agents. Invite them to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year in one of the schools. Provide them with information packets and a checklist of information that is available on the district website. Ask them to share the questions they’re most often asked about the district and schools so information can be tailored to meet their needs. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs.

Action Step

Use the *Cape Gazette* more strategically to reach residents who have no connection to the schools.

The *Cape Gazette* was identified across focus groups as a primary information source for many residents, especially people who have no direct connection to the schools. Having a local newspaper valued as an important information source for school districts is becoming rare, but this is clearly the case for CHSD. Fortunately for the district, most of the news that appears in the paper has been positive and fair. The Communications Coordinator has a good working relationship with the newspaper reporter, and the editor has been willing to run news releases provided by the district.

An additional strategy to consider for maximizing the *Cape Gazette* as a communication vehicle is to purchase a full or half-page ad space on a quarterly or twice a year basis. As residents without children are already looking to the newspaper for their information, capitalize on their readership to provide the district's perspective. Compared to traditional advertising, this format offers an opportunity for the district to communicate its key messages, reach residents who are already reading the newspaper, and usually do so at a lower cost than a print newsletter.

The most successful uses of this strategy typically include photographs and short summaries of multiple stories on key district accomplishments and issues. Readers can then be directed to the district website for additional information. There is certainly a cost for such a strategy, but it may be significantly less than the printing and postage required for a print newsletter. Sponsorship may be available to offset some of these costs. This also would present an opportunity to recruit volunteers for advisory committees and school mentor programs, as well as subscribers to publications and social media (see previous action steps).

Action Step

Continue and expand the “Cape Proud” branding campaign.

We commend CHSD for its “Cape Proud” branding campaign. More than a name, logo or tagline, strong brands are known for something unique – a promise of value that no other product or organization can claim in quite the same way with as much credibility. The goal of branding is development of customer loyalty. In carrying out its campaign, CHSD is focusing on its recognized strengths such as dedicated, caring teachers and staff; emphasis on academic achievement; and opportunities for students. We encourage CHSD to look for additional ways to incorporate branding into its communication and public relations strategies and tactics – e.g., in social media postings, publications, websites, and in outreach and engagement activities.

Continue efforts to make the CHSD website the “go-to” source of information.

Typically, the website is one of a school district’s most important communication tools. The site serves as the first point of contact for prospective students and families as well as community members. It also is a primary information source for outside organizations such as the news media, agencies, associations and business groups seeking facts and information about the district and schools.

CHSD unveiled a new mobile-friendly district site using the Blackboard platform before the start of the current school year that received high praise in the focus groups. There were numerous comments from participants about it being a significant improvement over the former site. Among the well-liked features are the calendar, staff resources and directory, parent forms, pop-up alerts, district data, job postings, and links to state information and resources. In addition, most people consider the site to be attractive and easy to navigate. The few negative comments centered on the accessibility of information such as schedules for athletics and high school events, inconsistencies among individual school websites, and the layout, which has key links below the “centerfold” when the page opens.

The website is attractive and contains a great deal of useful information. We encourage CHSD to keep the site fresh and dynamic and continue seeking ways to improve this important communication channel. The following action steps can help to make the district website the “go to” resource for information and news about CHSD.

Action Step

Conduct focus group research and user-testing to evaluate the new website.

Design by committee is never an effective way to create or critique a website, but gathering input from users will be helpful in assessing the usefulness and effectiveness of the new site. We recommend that after one year the Communications Coordinator conduct two or more small focus groups with parents and staff. Ask specific questions about:

- What information they access online;
- Why, when and how often they visit the district and school sites and portals;
- How content might be better organized; and
- What additional information or features would be helpful.

This type of research should enable CHSD to make enhancements to the site, learn how the site can be better marketed to attract more users, and further the goal of improving two-way communication with key stakeholders.

We urge you to pay specific attention to two concerns noted in the focus groups and consider addressing them – the icon bar is “below the centerfold” and does not appear when the front page opens, and more photos of students engaged in academic activities at the top of the front page would better reflect the district’s mission and reinforce the CHSD brand.

Action Step

Expand the Staff Resources section of the website into a staff intranet.

Staff members in the focus group said they appreciate the information, forms and links to other relevant sites available on the district website via the “Staff Resources” and “Job Postings” links. However, a number of them also said they would like more information about district initiatives and issues. When funding allows, we recommend that CHSD consider expanding the current resources into a true staff intranet, as was proposed by several administrators in focus groups.

An intranet can be the employee hub for news, updates from the central office, changes that impact employees, benefits information, key messages and fact sheets on important issues, summaries of meetings, forms, documents and much more. Consider conducting focus group research with different staff groups to identify priorities and unique content areas.

Strive to create an intuitive, customized design for employees to access information critical to their jobs, as well as applications for which they have authorization. The Communications Coordinator should oversee the front-page content for quality control and branding purposes. Web pages can be maintained in a decentralized manner by the individual departments that will be responsible for providing content. Consider training a staff member in each department to serve as a web curator so updates can be easily made without reliance on the Communications Coordinator.

Investigate the possibility of providing a single log-in with options in the portal that employees can tailor to their needs. As the site is improved over time, consider adding interactive components that will allow staff to submit ideas or comments, ask questions, share documents and communicate with each other.

Action Step

Make all “Department” pages consistent in content and layout.

A positive feature of the CHSD website is the inclusion of individual department pages for curriculum, finance, human resources, facilities, communications, technology, transportation and child nutrition. However, each page has a different format, and varying degrees of information. We recommend taking the best features from each current page to create a standard format for all pages so that these links are consistent in look and content.

Action Step**Consider adding features to increase social media use and interaction with website visitors.**

Currently, the CHSD Twitter feed can be accessed directly from the front page of the district website. We suggest making links to the district Facebook page and Superintendent’s blog more prominent to promote greater use of these communication channels. Both Twitter and Facebook can become more powerful vehicles to increase two-way communication between the district and stakeholders.

In addition, we recommend adding a link that would enable website visitors to ask a question or express a concern. Of course, if this is done, CHSD must be conscientious about replying and answer the question, provide a link to get requested information, or explain why a definitive answer is not possible.

Action Step**Provide easier access to schedules and information about school events to increase stakeholder engagement.**

Community members in focus groups stated concerns about the accessibility of information that would help CHSD build relationships with people who have no connection to the schools. We suggest that you consider adding a link on the front page that would give immediate access to schedules of high school and middle school athletic teams and information about events such as concerts and plays that would attract community members. Getting people who are not connected with CHSD into schools is a first step in increasing engagement.

Action Step**Incorporate marketing components into the website to reinforce the CHSD brand.**

The CHSD website can be used more strategically to attract families and recruit staff. We suggest creating a “Welcome” page targeted to new and potential families and employees. Highlight why people should choose CHSD as a place to live or work. Include information about exemplary programs, information about the area, links to community sites, video testimonials, a welcome message from the Superintendent and Board of Education President. An example is the Minnetonka (Minn.) Public Schools [About Minnetonka Schools](http://www.minnetonkaschools.org/district/about) webpage (www.minnetonkaschools.org/district/about) and [New Family Checklist](http://www.minnetonkaschools.org/district/departments/enrollment/new-family-checklist) (www.minnetonkaschools.org/district/departments/enrollment/new-family-checklist). This type of web content also can serve as a helpful resource that real estate agents can point their clients to for information about CHSD.

In addition, the *Annual Report* contains significant facts and news about CHSD – information that will reinforce the CHSD brand. However, the report is not easily found. Many website visitors look for basic

information such as enrollment, demographics and assessment score highlights. We recommend adding a link to the front page that will enable people to access a page containing this data, along with information to market the district – e.g., 1:13 student-to-teacher ratio, 85 percent of graduates enrolling in higher education, 1:1 iPad program, AVID college readiness project, CAP accelerated elementary program and CHHS dual enrollment.

Even though the CHSD website was just redesigned, the Communications Coordinator and Technology Department staff should stay up to date on what other districts are doing with their websites to stay competitive. Scan district websites that use the Blackboard templates and review recent winners on NSPRA’s website in the NSPRA Publication and Digital Media Awards for [Internet/Intranet](#) sites for features that CHSD may be able to incorporate.

Recommendation – 8

Strive to connect with more stakeholders via social media and digital communication.

Communicating and connecting with stakeholders through social media is, and will continue to be, a key way for school districts to connect with parents and staff members, especially Millennials. More and more families are using social media platforms as regular forms of communication.

Currently, CHSD has a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. While most focus group participants did not cite either of these as an important source of district news at present, their use has been growing. Analytics show that the Facebook page has a respectable following of nearly 3,000 people, while the Twitter feed has about 450 followers. Unfortunately, few people in all of the focus groups were aware of the district blog, and no one cited it as a source of news or information.

Some helpful resources on social media include NSPRA’s [Social Media E-Kit](#) offered as a free download to NSPRA members and the book, [Embracing Social Media: A Practical Guide to Manage Risk and Leverage Opportunity](#). Both are available from NSPRA’s Online Store at www.nspra.org/products.

We encourage CHSD to consider the following tactics and activities to solicit more followers and make these popular communication channels more appealing to stakeholders.

Action Step

Follow through with plans for a new school district app.

We urge CHSD to follow through with plans to introduce a new app for mobile devices. Principals and parents in focus groups were very vocal in noting their desire for a new app. The two principals who formerly had individual school apps, as well as a few parents who were familiar with those,

talked about their value in not only providing information but also in engaging parents. They especially cited the importance of an app during an emergency or other situation requiring urgent communication.

However, the same participants were also vocal about their frustrations with the previous, short-lived district app affiliated with the old website provider. Before investing in a new app, we urge the Communications Coordinator to work with the Technology Department to identify the best platform that will allow CHSD to offer the kinds of services that stakeholders desire. Consider interviewing the principals who formerly had school apps, along with a group of parents and high school students, to determine features they would find useful.

The mobile app can serve as a quick reference for parents and employees. Some common components of a school district mobile app include:

- School directory with contacts, address, phone number and map link;
- Board of Education meeting and contact information;
- District academic and activity calendar;
- School lunch menus;
- School online payment options (if available);
- Bus schedules;
- Information about athletic contests, concerts, plays and other events;
- Department information; and
- Social media links.

Some helpful resources for developing a mobile app include:

- Considering a Mobile App for Your District?
www.nspra.org/e_network/2014-08_trend_tracker
- Tips for Creating Awesome Mobile App Designs
<http://thenextweb.com/dd/2015/07/01/7-tips-to-create-awesome-mobile-app-designs/>

Action Step

Ensure that adequate Board policies are in place related to the use of social media by the district, schools, staff and students.

CHSD should have policies and guidelines in place that address the proper use of social media and the protection of students and staff. Some examples and resources that may be helpful in developing social media policies and guidelines include:

- IBM’s Social Computing Guidelines at www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html.
- Papillion-La Vista School District (Neb.): https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/papillion-lavista_social_media_guidelines.pdf.
- NSPRA Social School Public Relations blog: <http://socialschoolpr.wordpress.com> .
- www.edsocialmedia.com.
- www.socialmediatoday.com.

Action Step

Inform parents about how social media is being used by CHSD.

We suggest that you build parents’ understanding and use of social media for school and district communication by explaining how Facebook and Twitter are being employed across the district and for what specific purposes

Hold brief information sessions at parent meetings or schedule presentations at PTO meetings. Include information in regular communication to parents such as newsletters. Consider adding a page to the website outlining social media use and policy. Topics to cover could include:

- How CHSD is using these tools;
- Benefits of using social media;
- How to follow CHSD on social media;
- Protocols and safeguards in place to protect students and staff;
- Site rules and rules of engagement, guidelines and policies; and
- Who can post and how offenders will be handled.

Action Step

Look for creative ways to present the district and schools online.

Facebook and Twitter followers usually enjoy a surprise and a challenge. They like responding to questions and reacting to memories. So here are some content challenge ideas provided by the online newsletter *Constant Contact* and NSPRA that may push your online postings into a more creative direction.

- Post a fill-in-the-blank.
- Run a regular TBT (Throwback Thursday) item with old school photos – ask for submissions.
- Highlight a parent or community volunteer of the month.

- Highlight a “Big Wheel” bus driver each month.
- Collect and post quirky statistics such as pounds of French fries served or bus miles driven.
- Post infographics: Venngage (<https://venngage.com>) and Canva (canva.com) are good and free infographic tools.
- Post old photos and ask people to tag the individuals.
- Cross-promote CHSD social media channels.
- Post a weekly “Did You Know” feature with a little-known fact about classroom activities.

Action Step

Monitor the use of AlertNow and Peachjar.

The AlertNow notification system and Peachjar electronic flyers were widely praised in focus groups. However, a number of participants also expressed concerns about these electronic programs.

A number of principals, secretaries and parents in the focus groups felt that important information can become “lost” amidst the number of flyers and attachments on Peachjar and as a result go unnoticed by too many parents. Also, some participants in staff and parent groups fear that the AlertNow system’s effectiveness may be compromised by schools using the system for too many non-emergency notifications.

The comments in the focus groups were not conclusive enough to warrant changes or a policy restricting the use of these systems at the present time. However, we suggest that CHSD continue to monitor how the schools are using AlertNow and Peachjar and consider further research, such as parent surveys, to determine if tighter parameters regarding their use are needed.

Recommendation – 9

Consider staffing implications.

As CHSD’s communication program evolves to address the needs identified by this audit, the Communications Coordinator will be challenged to maintain current responsibilities and begin strategic communication initiatives that involve more two-way communication and relationship-building. The additional responsibility of serving as the district’s webmaster greatly increases that challenge.

Currently, the Coordinator can call on the Secretary for the Office of the Superintendent for some proofreading assistance, but there is no other clerical assistance or support. It is our assessment that consideration must be given at some point to building capacity in the Communications office in order to implement recommendations in this report in addition to maintaining current responsibilities. At a

minimum, part-time clerical assistance for the Communications office probably will be needed and at some point in the future consideration for additional website support.

In lieu of creating a position, another option is to consider adding a budget line for contract services to support specific projects and initiatives. However it is accomplished, we believe an additional investment will be necessary to expand CHSD's communication program and to begin to address the issues identified in this communication audit report. Providing additional staff support, be it a new position or contract services, or even through internship opportunities, would allow the Communications Coordinator to focus more time on strategic communication needs and high profile issues and initiatives, as well as community engagement efforts.

We recommend that CHSD leaders and the Communications Coordinator thoroughly review this *Communication Audit Report* and give careful consideration to determining what recommendations and action steps should be addressed within the next year. Once priorities are identified, determine which should be assigned to the Communications office and which can be carried out by others on the administrative team. We also recommend reviewing the current responsibilities assigned to the Communications Coordinator to identify tasks that are not directly related to strategic communications and public relations (i.e., those that are more technical or clerical) to determine if they can be reassigned or reduced.

Once this analysis has been completed, a new job description should be created for the Communications Coordinator, one that reflects this assessment and the position's new role of enabling CHSD to meet its strategic communication needs. Then current staffing needs can be better understood and considered.

We also urge the Communications Coordinator to become a more active member of NSPRA and participate in professional development programs whenever possible, such as attending the [NSPRA National Seminar](#). More information can be found on the NSPRA website, www.nspra.org. While Delaware does not have an NSPRA state chapter offering workshops and networking opportunities locally, NSPRA's Chesapeake Chapter does hold conferences in Maryland and Virginia during the year and welcomes participation from anyone in the region. For more information, visit the chapter website at <https://www.chespra.org/>.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report*. They offer strategies and tactics to address immediate communication needs, as well as those that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning.

There are a number of recommendations that CHSD can begin implementing right away. However, it would be unreasonable to expect the district to undertake more than two or three of the major communication recommendations in a year giving current staffing and resources. It is important to keep this in perspective, so that the work outlined does not seem unmanageable or overwhelming.

As we have noted throughout this report, the recommendations presented are not intended only for the Communications Coordinator or the Superintendent. Other administrators must be accountable for improving communication and taking the lead in some tactics and activities. We encourage district leaders to review the recommendations in this light and with an eye to how specific communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among administrative teams.

CHSD is fortunate to have a Board of Education that values transparency, desires meaningful interaction with stakeholders, and supports the investment needed to conduct an effective communication program. In order to support the implementation of a strategic communication plan, budgetary and personnel resources should be considered annually. This is important to build the program and identify how it must evolve as communication needs grow and change. Strategic communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated.

As the district moves forward, we recommend that NSPRA's [*Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*](#) (available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website, at www.nspra.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking) be used to benchmark current work and track growth. These rubrics offer a framework to assess how the CHSD communication program compares to recognized standards for school public relations. We believe CHSD is positioned to begin moving its young program from the “emerging” category to “established.” Besides a supportive Board, the Superintendent understands the importance of communication and leads by example; the Communications Coordinator, though new to the position, demonstrates skills and knowledge of best practices in public relations; and administrators and staff recognize the need to build relationships with stakeholders.

CHSD has the necessary foundation to build a communication program for which everyone associated with the school system can be “Cape Proud.”

Appendix

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

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What are the overall strengths of the Cape Henlopen School District? If you were to pick one thing that could be improved, what would that be?
2. What is the current image of Cape Henlopen School District in the community?
3. What is your best source of news and information about the district and the schools?
 - Do you visit the district/school websites frequently? Do the websites provide the information you need? Are they easy to navigate? How can they be improved?
 - Do you follow the district's Facebook or Twitter postings? Are they helpful and informative?
 - Do you read the district blog in the electronic version of the *Cape Gazette*? Does it provide useful information about the schools?
 - Printed flyers/brochures were used for the last bond election in 2016. Did you see these, and if you so, did they help you understand why the district was asking for approval of the bond issue, and what the implications would be for taxpayers?

(Additional questions for parents and staff)

- Is the AlertNow messaging system effective? Could the use of AlertNow notifications be improved or be more effective?
 - Do the electronic flyers sent to parents through Peachjar provide useful information? Could the system be improved or be more effective?
4. Do you receive the information you need and want from district leaders and school leaders?
 - Is information delivered in a timely manner?
 - How often should the district send information to you?
 - What additional information would you like to receive?

(Alternate question for Board members)

- Is the administration meeting your expectations for communication with you?
5. What is the best way for the district to communicate with you? What communication vehicles are most accessible/effective for you?
 6. In the area of communication, what does the district do well? How can communication be improved?
 7. Do you feel you have opportunities to provide input and express your views to district and school leaders? How can the district and schools best provide those opportunities?

(Alternate question for Board members)

- Do parents, staff and community members have opportunities to provide input and express their views to district and school leaders? How can the district and schools best provide those opportunities?
8. Do you feel district leaders listen to input from parents, community members and staff when appropriate, and consider it before decisions are made?

(Alternate question for Board members)

- Is input from staff, parents and community members considered before decisions are made?
9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing CHSD?

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

With over 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files, and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

NSPRA has 33 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations, along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

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

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

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

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

The NSPRA website at www.nspira.org offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public site and more comprehensive, in-depth information in our *Members Only* section, including resources and article archives.

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

NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people.

Auditor's Vita

Harry Roberts, APR

Harry Roberts, APR, is retired from the position of public relations manager for the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU), a regional education service agency based in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. He now serves as an NSPRA consultant. In 2005, he received NSPRA's Lifetime Professional Achievement Award.

During his career, Harry directed a comprehensive public relations and marketing program for the intermediate unit, including contracted services for local school districts. Through statewide initiatives coordinated by the CSIU, he had the opportunity to work with staff of rural, urban and suburban schools, as well as state agencies. Since his retirement, he also has done consulting work with the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, Montgomery County Intermediate Unit and the Association of Education Service Agencies.

Harry earned accreditation in the practice of public relations from NSPRA and the Public Relations Society of America; he holds a Bachelor's degree in secondary education from Bloomsburg University (Pa.); and he has done graduate work in communication at Pennsylvania State University. He began his career as a middle school teacher.

Active in the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association (PenSPRA) since 1979, he was the group's president from 1987 to 1989. Harry's affiliation with NSPRA began in 1980, and he served the association as Northeast Vice President from 1992 to 1995 and as NSPRA's representative to the Universal Accreditation Board from 1999 to 2002.

Harry has made presentations at meetings of NSPRA, PenSPRA and other professional education associations and has served on public relations advisory committees for several Pennsylvania agencies.