



Communication Audit Report:

Reynolds School District

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

Reynolds School District (RSD) is located in Multnomah County in Oregon, spans over seven miles wide and serves a student population of more than 10,800 in five cities in the Greater Portland area: Fairview, Troutdale, Wood Village, North Gresham and East Portland. Students are served through 15 traditional schools, including 11 elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school. In addition, the district includes Reynolds Learning Academy (an alternative school), Reynolds Community Transition Program (for students with disabilities), and four charter schools.

RSD has a diverse student body: 44 percent Latino, 28 percent white, 10 percent Black, seven percent Asian, seven percent multiracial, three percent Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian students and one percent Native American/Alaska Native. Students and their families represent more than 125 birth countries and 70 spoken languages. The most common languages are English, Spanish, Russian and Vietnamese.

For the 2020-21 school year, 46 percent of students were Ever English Learners, nine percent were considered mobile students and 91 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch. RSD's on-time graduation rate for high school students in the 2020-21 school year was 66 percent.

Similar to [national data](#), students are more ethnically and racially diverse than the RSD teacher demographics, which are 90 percent white, five percent Latino, two percent Black, two percent Asian and two percent multiracial.

In a study performed in 2019, the district's enrollment was forecast to decrease over the next three years. Of course, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could not have been taken into account in this study. A second enrollment forecast was scheduled to begin in June 2022. The district still anticipates that enrollment will decrease going forward due to the extreme mobility of students and families during COVID-19; the higher cost of living,

which is causing lower income families to move into other areas; an increase in the number of students being homeschooled; and the effects of lower birth rates overall.

RSD offers quality educational opportunities such as sheltered instruction, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Career and Technical Education (CTE), Restorative Practices, Project Lead the Way, K-12 vocal and instrumental music instruction, fine and performing arts, physical education and athletics.

Communications Research

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

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

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

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

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the RSD Board of Directors and Superintendent Danna Diaz, Ph.D., to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

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

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

Guiding Definition

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

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

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

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

Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of RSD enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit is Frank Kwan, APR. His vita is included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the communication audit involved the Communications and Community Relations Department submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences. The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

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

SCoPE Survey

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

staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey was conducted for RSD May 2-20, 2022. It included questions regarding:

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

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

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

- Staff Survey:
 - 305 surveys completed
 - $\pm 5\%$ margin of error (5% target met)
- Parent Survey:
 - 421 surveys completed
 - $\pm 4.8\%$ margin of error ($\pm 5\%$ target exceeded)
- Community Survey:
 - 24 surveys completed
 - $\pm 20.4\%$ margin of error ($\pm 10\%$ target not met)

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

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the virtual focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 13 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent on May 11, 2022 and the Communications and Community Relations Department staff on June 1, 2022. For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Each group met for a 30-minute or 45-minute session and was guided through a similar set of discussion questions on a variety of communication issues. Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to individuals if used in the report.

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

- Parents - English-speaking
- Parents - Spanish-speaking
- Community Partners
- Students
- Teacher Leadership
- Teachers
- Support Staff
- Principals and Assistant Principals
- Department Supervisors
- Administrative Assistants
- Cabinet Members
- Board of Directors

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments and interview feedback, the auditor identified key findings and prepared recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district's internal and external stakeholders.

The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected within NSPRA's [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking publication.

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

Assumptions

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

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. It is also a “snapshot” or view of the district at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

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

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

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

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

Transparency with Focus Group Participants and Other Stakeholders

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

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

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, interviews, SCoPE Survey and review of district materials. It should be noted that the number of participants in the community survey was only 24; therefore, those results cannot be considered statistically significant and are not specifically commented upon in this report. However, the possible reasons for the lack of participation are addressed within the [Recommendations](#).

District Image/Strengths

- In almost every focus group, participants noted RSD’s diversity as one of its key strengths. There was a clear understanding of the challenges of meeting the needs of a broad range of students, and appreciation was expressed for the district’s ability to serve RSD’s diverse student population. Focus group participants noted a number of services offered to meet these needs, including interpreters/translators, multilingual communications channels and parent coordinators.
- The focus groups noted that they believed RSD staff to be resilient, caring and proud of the work being done in their schools. There is an understanding that maintaining educational programming has been challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, staff indicated they have “moved on” and are ready to address ongoing issues such as declining enrollment.
- The Communications and Community Relations Department, as well as the superintendent, shared that parent communication has been a particular focus for RSD, and the SCoPE Survey data shows that RSD exceeds the national average when parents are asked how informed they feel about their student’s progress in school and how to support their child’s learning. The following two areas top the list of all

key information areas when parents are asked to rate how informed they feel on a variety of topics from 1-5, where 1 is “not informed” and 5 is “highly informed.”

How Informed Parents Feel in Nationally Benchmarked Key Areas	RSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Student’s progress in school	3.9	3.8	3.1	4.4
How to support their child(ren)’s learning	3.6	3.4	2.4	4.1

- Parents were asked to provide two words that describe RSD and the results can be found in the [word cloud on page 16](#), with the most prominent words being: “excelente,” “caring” and “good.”

District Image/Challenges

- Trustworthiness of communications arose as a concern in the SCoPE Survey for both staff and parents, with scores below the national average across the board. When staff and parents were asked to rate their agreement with the statements below regarding trust on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree,” the results were as follows.

Trustworthiness of Communication from School/Department	RSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	3.5	4.0	3.5	4.5
Parents/Families	3.7	4.1	3.6	4.5

Trustworthiness of Communication from District	RSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	2.9	3.7	2.7	4.3
Parents/Families	3.4	3.9	3.1	4.4

- Lack of trust was also a central concern in staff focus groups. The specific area mentioned most often was a perceived lack of transparency and understanding about how decisions are made, who is involved in the process and what the impact will be. The view of many staff focus group participants is that decisions are made solely by leadership, despite efforts to include stakeholders. Mention was made of committees coming to consensus on an issue and the final decision being different without explanation. One representative comment was, “They don’t explain the why.”
- Staff indicated that leadership is not visible at school sites, and they believe this contributes to district administrators not feeling personal connections to the schools. Staff felt the lack of leadership presence limited their opportunities to interact with them and deprived them of opportunities to share what is happening in their schools.
- Staff focus group comments indicated that there are lingering negative effects from a previous administration and some staff remain cautious about and distrustful of current practices and decision-making processes. One of the residual consequences is the perception that there is much negativity in the district. Demographics among staff who completed the SCoPE Survey found more than 30 percent of those staff have been with the district five to 15 years, and another 30 percent have been with the district for 16 or more years. Therefore, a significant number of employees who provided feedback have a long history with the district and the institutional memory that goes along with it.
- Staff participants in the focus groups indicated that the amount of turnover and departmental changes the district has been experiencing adds to the sense of uncertainty and a degree of confusion. Specifically, they shared that it is difficult

to maintain working relationships with departments because of the many shifts in personnel. A cited source of confusion was instituting the Human Capital Management Department in lieu of a Human Resources Department.

- Some parent comments in the SCoPE Survey indicate an opportunity to improve responsiveness by staff and a desire to have better teacher-to-parent communications. This feeling may be reflected in the parents rating overall satisfaction with communications and overall perception of the district based on communication as “average,” giving an overall score slightly below the national average. Following were the results when participants were asked to rate these areas on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “poor” and 5 is “excellent.”

Overall Parent Ratings	RSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Overall satisfaction with communication	3.6	3.8	3.1	4.2
Overall perception of the district based on communication	3.4	3.8	3.1	4.2

- The parent focus groups commented on the additional needs of non-English-speaking parents, particularly in regard to them not receiving sufficient information about the district.
- It is a common concern among school districts for staff and parents to feel they are not well informed about district finances, district goals and plans, and leader decisions. RSD shares this challenge. When staff and parents were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “not informed” and 5 is “highly informed,” the results were as follows.

How Informed Staff Feel in Key Areas Surveyed	Staff
About how to perform my duties	3.7
About how I can best support student achievement	3.5
So that I can deliver effective customer services	3.1
During a crisis/serious incident	2.9
About events	2.7
That makes me feel valued as an employee	2.6
About district successes and achievements	2.6
So that I can best represent the district as an ambassador	2.5
About district goals and plans	2.5
About leader decisions	2.3
About district finances	2

How Informed Parents Feel in Key Areas Surveyed	Parents
About my student's progress ins school	3.9
About how I can support my student's learning	3.6
During a crisis/serious incident	3.5
About student conduct and discipline	3.4
About homework and projects	3.3
About academic programs and offerings	3.2
About extra-curricular programs and offerings	3.1
About district successes and achievements	3.1
About school and district events	3.1
About district goals and plans	3.0
About leader decisions	2.9
About PTA/PTO activities	2.8
About district finances	2.7

Communication Strengths

- Staff participants in the focus groups consider the executive director of the Communications and Community Relations Department to be proactive and effective in developing a stronger identity for RSD. They commented that the department staff is experienced, accessible and responsive to requests for support. Staff focus group participants specifically noted that the website and the visuals used to represent RSD are much improved since the site was revised in the first quarter of 2021.
- Board of Directors members also noted that improvements in communications have taken place in the four years since Executive Director Stephanie Field joined RSD and that the approach is more proactive than reactive. The content and tone of messaging were specifically noted as strengths, with specific comments about how communications are designed for parent understanding.
- When parents were asked on the SCoPE Survey to rate various aspects of communication on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree,” the highest ratings were given for: “communications are easy for me to understand” (3.6) and “information is accurate” (3.5).
- It is typical for districts to receive lower ratings than schools and teachers regarding specific areas of communications. However, as reflected in the [SCoPE Scorecard](#), ratings for RSD’s district communications did not lag far behind schools and teachers in most areas.
- As noted in the previous section, parents participating in the SCoPE Survey feel “informed” (score of 3) in key areas that contribute to parent engagement in a student’s education, including the following:

- About my student’s progress in school (3.9)
- About how I can support my student’s learning (3.6)
- About crises/serious incidents (3.5)
- About student conduct and discipline (3.4)
- Although parents indicated that there are often instances when multiple notices are sent over different channels, such as text, email and phone calls, the general consensus is that it is better to be “over-notified” than not notified.

Communication Challenges

- Some staff, primarily teachers, participating in the focus groups perceive that content in messaging is sometimes limited because of what the Communications and Community Relations Department is “told to say.” They felt that the messaging is sometimes “overly optimistic,” concentrating more on what the district aspires to rather than the real situation. There was an expressed desire for the district to be more realistic in sharing information about difficult situations, including acknowledgements of challenges still being addressed. As an example, one participant noted, “It’s acceptable to say, ‘We’re working on it.’”
- There is a perception among staff that although great things are happening in the schools, the district may be missing opportunities to spread the word. Special events at the schools are not always promoted, and staff want a more streamlined process to share good news in a timely fashion with senior leadership. Currently, the District Leadership Team meeting is the only avenue for sharing positive information with senior leadership and the process for being able to share information via this platform is described as “cumbersome.” There is also a desire to have more places and opportunities to share news beyond the District Leadership Team meetings.

- The timeliness and reach of communications appear to vary. Not all staff receive messages at the same time—particularly if it is a new or rapidly evolving situation. As a result, office personnel report that they sometimes receive calls about situations they know little or nothing about. Student focus group participants also indicated they often hear about situations in the district from other sources more quickly than from their school or the district.
- As noted in the previous section, there are areas where parents give the quality of RSD communications high marks. However, there are areas in which both staff and parent responses indicate opportunities for improvement.

When staff were asked on the SCoPE Survey to rate various aspects of district communication on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree,” staff response averages indicated disagreement in the following areas:

Agreement with Statements About Communications	Staff
Information is accurate.	2.8
Communications are timely.	2.7
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	2.5
I trust the communication I receive.	2.5
Communications are open and transparent.	2.3
My involvement is welcome and valued.	2.3
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	2.1

Parents also rated various aspects of district communication on a scale of 1-5 where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree.” Their response averages were lowest in the following:

Agreement with Statements About Communications	Parents
I trust the communication I receive.	3.4
Communications are open and transparent.	3.3
Communications are timely.	3.3
My involvement is welcome and valued.	3.1
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	3.0

Internal Communications

- RSD staff responses on the SCoPE Survey indicate they feel only “somewhat informed” (rating of 2) in multiple areas of communication..

SCoPE Scorecard Results for Staff	RSD	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Communication to keep me informed so I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador	2.5	3.2	2.5	4.0
Communication during a crisis/serious incident	2.9	3.4	2.8	4.0
Communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	2.6	3.0	2.3	3.6
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	2.9	3.7	2.7	4.3
Overall perception of the district based on communication	2.3	3.6	2.3	4.2

- In focus groups, staff said they want more information about decisions made by district leaders and describe communications regarding decisions as lacking in transparency. This aligns with SCoPE Survey results, shared on page 10,

where the areas with the lowest ratings were “about district finances” (2.0) and about leader decisions (2.3). These are among the lowest scores these areas have received on the nationally conducted SCoPE Survey.

- Many participants in the staff focus groups felt they are not prepared to serve in the role of RSD ambassador. In the SCoPE Survey, staff were asked to rate if they felt appropriately informed to be an ambassador for the district. The chart at left shows that the rating given of 2.5 is tied with the lowest rating this question has received from districts conducting the SCoPE Survey nationwide. In focus groups, staff indicated they are willing to serve in this role, but cited a lack of training.
- Staff expressed a sense of not feeling valued. This was reflected in the SCoPE Survey, where staff indicated they feel only “somewhat informed” about communications that made them feel valued as an employee. This question received a rating of 2.6 out of 5.0, which is below the national average of 3.0. In focus groups, staff reported feeling their supervisors, as well as the staff at the central office, are too distant and disconnected from the classroom.
- On the SCoPE Survey, staff were asked to provide two words that describe RSD. The results can be seen in the resulting [word cloud on page 15](#). The most prominent words are generally negative, further revealing a sense of employee dissatisfaction.
- Staff were asked the extent to which they rely on various sources of information on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is “never” and 5 is “always,” with the following results.

Information Source Relied on for Communications	Staff
Email	4.6
Word of mouth from colleagues	3.5
Faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings	3.2
Individual meetings with supervisor or administrator	3.1
District calendar	3.0
Text messages	3.0
Newsletter/e-newsletter	2.8
Phone calls	2.8
Website	2.7
Staff intranet	2.7
Printed memos, letters and notices	2.6
Automated email	2.6
Automated phone calls	2.2
Automated text messages	2.2
Mobile app	2.0
Local news and media	1.9
Board of Education meetings	1.8
Social media	1.6

Information Source Relied on for Communications	Parents
Report card and/or progress notes	4.1
Email	4.1
School calendar	4.0
Text messages	4.0
Phone calls	3.8
Classroom mobile app	3.7
Meetings with the teacher	3.7
Online parent portal	3.6
Printed memos and letters	3.5
Newsletter/e-newsletter	3.5
Printed backpack flyers and notices	3.4
Digital backpackflyers and notices	3.3
Website	3.2
District/School mobile app	3.2
School meetings	3.1
Board of Directors meetings	2.7
District meetings	2.6
Social media	2.4

External Communications

- According to the superintendent and the Communications and Community Relations Department, parent communication has been a strong focus of RSD in the four years since Dr. Diaz was appointed superintendent.
- Parents were asked the extent to which they rely on various sources of information on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is “never” and 5 is “always,” with the following results.

Website

- General satisfaction with the website was expressed by focus group participants. Specific comments were about the improvement in the site after its redesign and fewer instances of information being difficult to find or outdated.
- The auditor noted the site was easily accessible and logically laid out. It has a vibrant style and uniformity of color and graphics. An [accessibility scan of the website homepage](#) identified very few areas of potential concern.
- While staff occasionally rely on the website for communications, parents regularly rely on the website, according to the SCOPE Survey results (see charts page 13).

Social Media

- RSD utilizes the [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) social media platforms and utilizes Vimeo to share video content. New postings appear about three to four times each week.
- RSD has approximately 5,600 followers on Facebook, 725 on Instagram and 849 on Twitter.
- At present, there is no formal social media plan in place at RSD. The Board of Directors is currently reviewing the RSD policies related to social media, which include the following:
 - Board Member Standards of Conduct - [BBF](#)
 - Personal Electronic Devices and Social Media - Students - [JFCEB](#)
 - Personal Electronic Devices and Social Media - Students Administrative Regulations - [JFCEB-AR](#)
 - Personal Electronic Devices and Social Media - Staff - [GCAB](#)
 - Electronic Communication System (includes provisions of the Children’s Internet Protection Act) - [IIBGA](#)
 - Electronic Communications System (definitions, system access, general use) - [IIBGA-AR](#)
- Facebook postings and Instagram reflect much of the same content.
- There were significant swings in the reach of RSD’s Facebook and Instagram between September 2021 and March 2022. During this time, Facebook experienced a decrease in reach of almost 62%, and Instagram’s reach was down by 91%. These numbers are skewed to a degree by a spike in September 2021, with relatively consistent numbers afterwards to March 2022. In the most recent data supplied to the auditor, the Facebook page reach was down 28%, while Instagram was up by 20%.
 - For Vimeo, the data shows that the most plays and loads have been for Superintendent Diaz’s holiday messages, with about equal numbers for the English and Spanish videos. The superintendent’s 2022 spring break message was also a highlight in terms of plays and loads—<https://vimeo.com/689383293>. There is far lower to almost no activity for other messages such as those for trainings and recognition, welcome back and special events.
 - Twitter appears to be used for urgent messages and news of events such as the Health Fair, Speech Camp, Challenge Day and Spring Break. The highest number of impressions was for school closures in March, with the Spring Break tweet next highest.
 - Message content is the same across all platforms, and while the visuals are appealing, there is little use of video for storytelling.
 - Among the 18 communication sources, staff and parents were asked to rate in terms of how much they are relied upon, both staff and parents rated social media the lowest (see chart p. 13). The average rating indicates staff “never” rely on social media communications, while parents “occasionally” rely on it.
 - Social media was not discussed a great deal in the focus groups, which aligns with survey results suggesting a low level of reliance among staff and parents on social media for district communications.

Two Words That Best Describe the District:
Parents/Family



Two Words That Best Describe the District:
Community



Observations and SWOT Analysis

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

It is clear that the superintendent, Board of Directors and the cabinet are committed to quality communication with stakeholders and, despite lacking an overall communications plan, solid communication strategies are used by the Communications and Community Relations Department. The department leader and staff demonstrate effective communication capabilities.

To leverage these strengths, a comprehensive communications plan is needed to support RSD goals, give structure and accountability to these efforts, and put a process in place to evaluate and modify goals and strategies for maximum effectiveness. There is an existing body of research to begin the process, including RSD's annual Educational Effectiveness Survey (ESS) from the Center for Educational Effectiveness. That research along with this NSPRA Communication Audit Report and the SCoPE Survey results should be used to set baselines against which future progress in communications can be compared.

The remarks from the focus groups show there is great pride in the work of the district. As noted in the [Key Findings](#), there is a desire and willingness to share and promote the achievements in RSD, but training is needed to create a culture where communication is seen as a responsibility of employees at all levels.

Addressing internal staff issues should be a priority. It is evident that trust is a critical concern, particularly in understanding and accepting decisions by district administration. There were repeated concerns about there not being context provided about decisions and the benefits of those decisions. In fact, it was the single most talked about subject in the staff focus groups. The challenges are to rebuild

trust in district leadership and engage staff in working together to create positive perceptions of RSD. The emphasis in the communications planning in this area should be developing strategies to build transparency and increase engagement by the senior leadership.

The auditor has observed the skill levels of the Communications and Community Relations Department staff, and Executive Director Stephanie Field has demonstrated capable and experienced leadership within the department. The most recent focus of the department has been on parent communications, and the SCoPE survey, as well as comments from parents in the focus groups, have shown these efforts to have been generally effective. In addition, the positive attitude of the department's staff and improvements in the website and RSD materials were noted in the focus groups. Given all of this, it is the auditor's belief that the Communications and Community Relations Department is well-positioned to create and implement a comprehensive communications program that addresses the recommendations in this report.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that affect the ability of RSD to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed,

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

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to communications by leadership • Skilled communications staff • Ongoing surveys that assess the district’s communications needs and provide data for planning • Common desire to promote the progress at the schools throughout the district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for a comprehensive communications plan • Low visibility of district leadership • Staff trust issues, particularly about decision-making • Lack of attention to internal communication processes • Inefficient information flow to the Communications and Community Relations Department about positive happenings • Across RSD, staff turnover and department changes that leads to confusion • Perception that problems of previous administrations still linger
	Opportunities	Threats
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador staff training to help improve external perceptions • Growth potential of communications with non-English-speaking communities • Board of Directors strong ties to RSD community and stakeholders • Potential for wider engagement with community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information about district finances, goals, plans and leadership decisions, which could be problematic when the district is in need of financial (or other) support

Recommendations

The RSD Communications and Community Relations staff consists of an executive director of communications and community relations, an assistant director of public relations and partnerships, a communications specialist, an administrative communications analyst and a community engagement and volunteer specialist. The Language Services Department was recently moved under the direction of the executive director of communications and community relations. Family and staff focus group participants generally spoke highly of recent improvements made by the department. A willingness to offer support to individual schools, a proactive attitude, unifying graphics and a redesigned website were all cited.

A very different picture is painted by staff in regard to internal communications, with RSD receiving the lowest scores among districts participating in the SCoPE Survey to date in four categories:

- Communication to keep staff informed so they can best represent the school/district as an ambassador
- Trustworthiness of communication
- Overall satisfaction with communication
- Overall perception of the district based on communication

These results should be the basis for a new focus on internal communications. There were allusions to previous district leadership with a negative culture, and some staff expressed that the results of this still linger. In many ways, the current district leadership has made efforts to turn the corner on that chapter of RSD history, but it is clearly still a work in progress.

The most effective means to deal with such a deep and wide-ranging challenge is to have a comprehensive strategic communications plan that systematically addresses critical internal and external issues. This overarching

structure will allow RSD to continue to build on the progress that has been made in parent communications and other areas, while also developing specific goals, strategies and tactics to address the internal trust and transparency issues.

The Communications and Community Relations Department is well positioned to undertake the development of such a plan and has been awaiting the results of this audit to begin the process. The department has experienced leadership and a belief in basing plans in research, which will include RSD's Educational Effectiveness Surveys, this report and the SCoPE Survey results. These will serve as substantive building blocks to help set goals, long term strategies and accountability. It should also be noted that many elements of the plan are already in place, and the RSD communication team is already engaged in many effective communication practices.

While the SCoPE Survey data reveals there has been progress in parent communications overall, the focus group of parents who do not speak English pointed out a desire to know more about district decisions. In addition, the need for improvements in interpreting and translation services was discussed. With the Language Services Department having been recently transferred under the Communications and Community Relations Department, these improvements may be forthcoming, and there are suggestions in [Recommendation 7](#) to address them as well.

The data set derived from the SCoPE Survey for the RSD community group had a high margin of error due to the relatively low rate of participation and is insufficient for drawing conclusions for the wider population of community members. In addition, the community focus group had a less than ideal level of participation as well. Perhaps this is telling in its own way. When the community partners focus group was asked about the low

level of participation, responses were typically that people may be “surveyed out” or the timing was bad since it was toward the close of the school year. However, building a wider and more responsive community network for RSD is important to the health of the school district and ideas for improvement can be found in [Recommendation 4](#).

There was a very strong desire among focus group participants to tell the RSD story. There is a belief that there are many positive events taking place, but that the information is not reaching the Communications and Community Relations Department. Creating a culture of communications within the district, as well as systems for sharing information, will help to direct the flow of information and make the process of sharing good news more efficient and effective.

The superintendent, Board of Directors and director of communications and community relations were all supportive of the NSPRA Communication Audit process in hopes of strengthening RSD’s efforts to effectively engage with its stakeholders. The recommendations to help meet the goal of creating more effective communications are listed in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to implement different recommendations and action steps at different times. Some can be implemented immediately, and others may take longer. NSPRA has generally found that it is not feasible for a communications department to implement more than two or three major recommendations a year while maintaining its existing services, initiatives and staffing levels.

This is a long-term effort for which the report should serve as a road map.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a strategic communication plan aligned to the district’s strategic plan.
2. Focus on improving internal communication and employee engagement.
3. Implement strategies to strengthen trust in district decision-making.
4. Create a network of key communicators.
5. Empower and inspire staff to engage in effective, timely and targeted communications.
6. Expand strategies to improve district-to-parent communications.
7. Increase methods for effectively reaching non-English speakers.

Recommendation 1:

Develop a strategic communication plan aligned to the district's strategic plan.

Planning strategically for communications is about taking a proactive approach to the exchange of information between a school system and its stakeholders. When done well, it allows a school system to strengthen relationships with stakeholders by building credibility, for the system and its leaders, and by increasing understanding on both sides. Developing a formal, strategic communication plan helps those responsible for implementing a communication program ground their efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, time- and cost-effective, and likely to succeed in their unique, local community.

The resulting plan will serve as a road map that will enable RSD to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication efforts. It will help ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication demands that can overwhelm school districts. With goals tied to the overall strategic plan and measurable objectives in place, the plan will also provide a means for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability. While time-consuming, good communication planning usually takes much less time than dealing with controversies that arise from poor communication.

Along with determining the work and accountability of the Communications and Community Relations Department, RSD should more fully integrate communication in the [RSD Strategic Plan 2021-2026](#). There are currently communications responsibilities outlined in the strategic plan, and having these outlined more comprehensively as a strategy, rather than a tool, can provide immediate and long term benefits when allocating resources and setting priorities.

The following action steps outline current best practices and provide resources for the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan that can evolve over time and guide RSD's communication efforts in both the short and long term.

Action Step 1.1

Utilize the RPIE model for building the comprehensive strategic communication plan.

A strategic communication plan adheres to the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement and evaluate). Begin developing your plan by following these four steps.

Research

Research and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report, and summarize any relevant findings from that research at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit report, the SCoPE Survey data and the annually conducted Educational Effectiveness Survey will be excellent research foundations. Following are some additional data types worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by local news media, specialized websites, etc.
- Local community demographics: National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts>) and your county/city/town websites
- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>)

- Global communication trends:
Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>)

Also as part of the research phase, determine all communication, public relations, marketing and engagement activities currently happening in RSD. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics: managing website content, newsletters, social media postings, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, etc.

Also include the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, open house programs, advisory groups, business partnerships, news media relations, and participation in community organizations.

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

Research should be an ongoing tactic in a school district's communication strategies. When changing curriculum and instructional strategies, education leaders typically turn to research in best practices. It is recommended that district leaders do the same when developing and updating the communication plan to ensure it remains dynamic and timely.

Plan

Planning is at the heart of the process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications road map will begin to come to life. This is the heavy-lifting phase of creating the communication plan, but following through on these plans will pay big dividends for the district.

- **Develop Objectives.** In the planning phase, RSD will begin by articulating clear long-term goals and shorter-term measurable objectives for communication based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences.
- **Determine Strategies.** Strategies are used to achieve objectives. Be careful to delineate strategies from tactics. A strategy states what is going to be done. Tactics describe the tools and timing that will be used to do it. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing

#1

Develop a strategic communication plan aligned to the district's strategic plan.

Measurable objectives build trust by establishing accountability.

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

- By the end of the 2022-23 school year, when staff are asked to rate their level of being informed in order to represent the district as an ambassador on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "not informed" and 5 is "highly informed," results will increase from 2.5 to 3.0.
- By the end of the 2022-23 school year, when parents are asked to rate how informed they feel they are about district finances on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "not informed" and 5 is "highly informed," results will increase from 2.7 to 3.2.
- By the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, a key communicator program will have been developed, strategies and tactics for keeping them informed will have been identified and 30 participants will have been selected and made familiar with the role they will play.

them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For example:

- Strategy: Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications between leadership and building-level staff (see [Recommendation 2](#)).
 - Tactic: Create a schedule for the superintendent and cabinet members to attend staff meetings at every school over the course of the year, and ensure they are given a place on the agenda to provide district updates.
- **Create Key Messages.** Remember that people’s attention span and time is limited. Messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated regularly have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. Determine what the audience should come away knowing as a result of your effort, and use those to build your key messages.
 - **Identify Stakeholder Groups.** Stakeholder groups are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district. They can be subgrouped similarly to the focus groups convened for the communication audit and could include:
 - Parents broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and secondary) or by another identifier (e.g., “active/involved,” “non-English-speaking,” etc.)
 - Employees subgrouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals
 - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents (an important audience who can be invaluable allies or damaging detractors) and others active in the schools and community
 - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislators
 - Non-parents, including empty nesters, seniors and other community members without children in RSD schools
 - Students such as those participating in student government
 - Media representatives from radio and television stations and local newspapers and magazines
- **Establish Tools and Tactics.** For each audience, identify the best resources for deploying communications and how they will be acquired. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:
 - Equipment and software
 - Materials and supplies
 - Printing and duplicating
 - Advertising
 - Professional development
 - Staff travel
 - Subscriptions
 - Professional dues/fees
 - **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of the implementation process, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase, building in checkpoint opportunities to modify the plan if and as needed.
 - **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. It will be vital to ensure each team member understands their roles and responsibilities for meeting the department’s objectives.

As RSD works through the planning process, ensure the following questions are addressed for every action or activity the district undertakes:

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

Implement

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

Evaluate

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

Resources

NSPRA provides extensive resources to members who are working to create or revise comprehensive strategic communication plans

NSPRA's Gold Medallion Award is the organization's highest recognition for superior education public relations programs, projects

and campaigns. Entries must be organized in the four-step strategic communication planning model outlined here. View the plans of past award winners at <https://www.nspr.org/awards/gold-medallion-winners>.

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

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

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

Action Step 1.2

Maximize the utility of the strategic communications plan.

To make the plan as useful and effective as possible, keep the following in mind as it is developed.

- Simply generating information does not constitute an effective communication strategy nor does it guarantee that stakeholders receive needed information. A strategic approach that takes into consideration how stakeholders prefer to receive various types of information will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of the district's communication dollar.

When asked how they prefer to receive various types of information on the SCoPE Survey, staff and parents provided the following information.

How Staff Prefer to Get Information

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

How Parents/Families Prefer to Get Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About my student’s progress and how I can best support his/her learning	Report Cards and/or Progress Notes	Email
About school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises	Phone Calls	Text Messages
About school and district events, programs, calendar updates	Email	Text Messages
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues	Email	Text Messages

- The communication plan should focus on engaging people as well as informing them. Ensure feedback loops are incorporated into initiatives whenever possible.
- The finished plan should demonstrate how communication projects, tasks and responsibilities support overarching RSD goals.
- Include plans for sharing the results of communication initiatives internally on a regular basis. The document should be shared annually with the board and cabinet to highlight its major components. This step in the planning process ensures that all district leaders are informed about communication strategies and activities.
- Identify ways to share progress externally on a regular basis. This sends a clear message to all stakeholders that the district is serious about creating a culture of effective communication.
- Document when and how the plan will be updated. The most effective communication plans are revised annually, not only to assess progress, but also to include goals for any new district initiatives planned for the coming year.
- Extend communication planning into the daily work of the communication staff and the district’s administrative team; more is noted on this in Action Step 1.4. Mini communication plans should be developed whenever key issues or initiatives need

to be addressed or implemented. While these issue- or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, this type of thoughtful planning around key issues is important.

Action Step 1.3

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

Once a comprehensive strategic communication plan has been developed, the Communications and Community Relations Department can organize part of its regular staff meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep staff energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with day-to-day tasks.

These discussions can also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind and avoid jumping to preferred strategies and tactics, although those may be most familiar and comfortable for staff. Creativity should be encouraged in exploring new strategies and tactics to keep the communications efforts relevant and highly effective.

Action Step 1.4

Create mini communication plans for key initiatives and programs, and show administrators how their initiatives might benefit from a similar process.

The Communications and Community Relations Department should organize its approach to key initiatives and programs using the same RPIE model as is recommended for developing the comprehensive strategic communication plan. Doing so will ensure that a systematic and thoughtful approach is taken and that there are built-in mechanisms for measuring and reporting the effectiveness of the plans.

When deploying these plans, ensure administrators are familiar with them and can readily access them. This can be a valuable first step in encouraging other departments and principals to develop their own communication plans for special projects using the same model. The Communications and Community Relations Department can support these efforts with training, resources and advice on using the four-step public relations best practice of research, plan, implement and evaluate.

As noted in [Recommendation 5](#), developing the communication skills of the entire administrative team can help lay the groundwork for RSD to become more proactive in telling its story and building strong support both internally and externally. It will also establish the practice of building accountability measures into each initiative, which in turn will begin to address the trust issues identified in the focus groups and SCoPE Survey.

Action Step 1.5

Develop communication goals clearly intended for the Communications and Community Relations staff.

The strategic communication plan must be relatable to the staff tasked with implementing it. They must feel ownership of the goals, understand how their work contributes to achieving those goals and believe that successful completion of the goals is essential to achieving district goals. The Communications and Community Relations staff is fortunate that the district's goals are clearly laid out in the four pillars of the Strategic Plan 2021-2026, as is the work framed around addressing these goals.

Action Step 1.6

Include proactive issues management as a component of communication planning.

The focus group discussions identified several challenges facing RSD. Examples include negative or inaccurate perceptions about the

district's past history, lack of understanding about decisions on finances, and questions of trust and a lack of transparency. If left unaddressed, these perceptions could grow into a distraction at best or, at worst, could significantly hurt the district's efficient and effective operations, while undermining credibility and the ability to educate students.

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

Consider adding a goal and/or objectives related to issues management to your strategic communication plan. Proactively addressing issues on the horizon can equip school leaders with talking points to start the conversation. In that manner, RSD can frame an honest conversation rather than allowing stakeholders to discuss the issue with only rumor and partial information.

Recommendation 2:

Focus on improving internal communication and employee engagement.

A critical issue identified in the SCoPE Survey and mentioned frequently in the focus groups is the need to improve RSD's internal communications. The first step in strengthening the overall communication program and increasing its effectiveness is to promote and continually reinforce a culture of communication so that all staff feel part of a team and recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for RSD schools and its mission. There was also a stated desire to help combat a reputation for negativity in the district. Effectively addressing these internal communication challenges will require the support and collaboration of all departments across RSD.

The opportunities for RSD staff to influence each other and the community in a positive way is significant. The SCoPE Survey data shows the number of typical interactions that staff members have with parents or community members in a week. This sample of 307 staff members estimated an average of 12.3 interactions each week with parents or community members, which totals more than 3,700 interactions per week for this group alone. If this is extrapolated to RSD's entire staff, that would mean more than 15,000 interactions per week and ample opportunities for RSD staff to share the progress that is being made in the district. However, to take full advantage of these interactions, employees must first see themselves as ambassadors of RSD.

Effective internal communication and a commitment to authentic employee engagement need to be integrated as strategic priorities, and expectations should be set for all administrators to view improvement in these areas as critical components of their overall responsibilities. Following are specific strategies for improving overall internal communications

and creating a greater sense of community among staff. Another important component—how staff participate in the decision-making processes of the district—is specifically addressed in [Recommendation 3](#).

Action Step 2.1

Take a “staff first” approach to disseminating information.

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

Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. When employees feel they are “the last to know” or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as social media or parents), they do not feel they are valued members of the team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their roles as ambassadors for the schools. In addition, when employees rely on the “grapevine” or other second-hand sources to get information, it hampers the district's ability to disseminate accurate and credible information. Employees are considered by parents to be trusted sources of information, but they can't serve as ambassadors if they are not aware of the situation and have not been properly prepared to respond to questions. Given the speed of today's information dissemination with mobile technology, ensuring staff are accurately informed in a timely manner and provided updates must be a priority.

By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for RSD and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages and training

when appropriate, RSD can exponentially expand its communication outreach while also building trust and credibility both internally and externally.

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

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Employees are frontline communicators and should receive important information before the media and parents whenever possible. When an issue emerges or when RSD begins to address an initiative or concern, it is essential that senior leaders and school administrators include in their planning how employees will be incorporated into their communication and response efforts.
- **Use multiple vehicles to communicate whenever possible.** Consider the best vehicles for communication based on the urgency of the message and timing considerations. Utilize as many communication platforms as practical to ensure the message is received, absorbed and can be acted upon, if necessary. If the communication is about an upcoming or ongoing issue, information can be shared with staff via meetings, publications, email and video. For more urgent or unexpected announcements, automated voice and text notifications may be more appropriate.
- **When possible, share information in settings that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the topic.** Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address an issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.
- **Evaluate internal newsletters.** RSD has internal publications that are regularly emailed to employees (e.g., Friday Memo, Keeping You Informed). Staff focus group participants were familiar with these for the most part, but that does not mean they are effective in delivering information

#2

Focus on improving internal communication and employee engagement.

that is perceived as important to staff members. The auditor did not receive analytics for these publications, but communications staff are encouraged to review and analyze open and click-through rates on staff e-newsletter articles to determine which headlines, topics and content presentation styles are most engaging. In addition, reader surveys could be conducted to evaluate effectiveness in terms of content and ease of use. (Is information provided that helps employees do their jobs? Are the publications easy to open and scan for relevant information?) In order for employees to view internal publications as must-read news, they must offer content that is valued by staff or risk being overlooked or simply deleted.

- **Create protocols for sharing information.** Lack of clarity and consistency about who is responsible for sharing information with whom can easily impede the flow of staff communications. This can be easily remedied by adding check boxes—FYI, To Be Shared and Confidential—to agenda items. 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 and the following communication responsibility grid could then be employed.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Action Step 2.2

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

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

Staff were asked on the SCoPE Survey to rate on a scale of 1-5 how much they rely on various sources of information, where 1 is “never” and 5 is “always.” Email was the most relied upon source (4.6), but was followed by “word of mouth (from colleagues)” (3.5); “faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings” (3.2); and “individual meetings with supervisor or administrator” (3.2). While clearly there is a logical use for sharing more routine information via email, this data reflects the great extent to which employees turn to face-to-face communications for their information.

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

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

- **Include all employees assigned to a school in faculty meetings.** Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important RSD updates and share key messages at faculty meetings. As reflected in the SCoPE Survey, parents rely on teachers as one of their main information sources. Therefore, it is essential that staff have the information they need to fulfill this communication role. Include support staff whenever possible. Share information relevant to them at the top of the meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related to instruction are discussed.
- **Hold staff breakfast or lunch meetings.** With COVID-19 restrictions easing, this strategy can be applied at the district office and at individual schools. Invite a random group of 10-15 staff members to meet informally with an RSD leader (e.g., superintendent, cabinet member, principals). The goal should be to solicit feedback from staff members on what is going well at the schools or in their departments and what areas need to be improved. Staff members have a chance to provide input, and leaders gain valuable insight into challenges and successes around the system. Keeping the group relatively small ensures that everyone has a chance to comment and no one has to be intimidated by speaking in front of a large group. The meetings should be held to one hour, and someone should be assigned to take notes so the hosting administrator can focus on listening to and interacting with the participants, while ensuring their input is captured for review and consideration.
- **Create opportunities for district office staff to interact with the superintendent, the cabinet and each other.** To better integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a “big picture” view

of employee issues and concerns, consider holding regular meetings of district office staff. This can provide a chance for employees, who may have limited interaction with each other or don't know each other at all, to become better acquainted.

Improving communication and interaction between departments and employees can help head off conflicting communications, overlapping deadlines and other operational disconnects that ultimately create issues. Improved collegiality between departments can also positively impact message consistency and improve customer service.

- **Cultivate internal key communicators across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department has team members that colleagues consider to be “in the know” and who are trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put this system to work by identifying these individuals and engaging them in helping to share key messages. Provide these staff members, along with advisory committees, union/association leaders and other leaders, with regular news updates and key messages and ask for their support in disseminating information. (See [Recommendation 4](#) for more details on developing key communicator systems.)
- **Create a department advisory council.** This group could be composed of an employee representative from each department (not the supervisory administrator). The group would meet regularly with the superintendent and other cabinet members to provide input on topics or new resource tools under consideration in RSD. This would give each department an opportunity to evaluate how decisions being made in other departments will affect them and offer solutions or alternatives “from the trenches.” It would also provide a venue

for promoting understanding of jobs and responsibilities among employee groups and build a stronger team sensibility. This type of advisory council also offers a way to involve employees who are not normally involved in the decision-making process and to give them a sense that their input is valued.

Action Step 2.3

Build up employees' ability to serve as ambassadors for RSD.

All employees must share the role of representing the district to the community and serve as ambassadors for the schools. Communication is not just the responsibility of the superintendent, executive director of communication, district administrators or principals. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with internal colleagues as well as external stakeholders. The staff focus groups did not feel adequately prepared to fulfill this role.

Highly effective organizations are those that empower their employees through effective communications to serve as ambassadors for the organization during work hours and after hours in their real and virtual communities.

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

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

- The information included in RSD's [Fast Facts](#) on the district website.

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

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

While new employees are most in need of ambassador-style information, it is beneficial to redistribute tool kits annually to all employees during the back-to-school season. This serves to remind them of their daily roles as representatives of an educational community. In remarks to employees throughout the school year, leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as ambassadors for RSD schools and public education.

Once the ambassador program is established, make sure to recognize and reward outstanding employee ambassadors. Keep employees motivated and engaged as goodwill ambassadors for RSD by recognizing outstanding efforts that reflect the district’s mission, vision and customer service standards. Invite employees to anonymously recognize each other for representing and promoting the school system in an exceptional way. Highlight an ambassador of the month (or year) on social media, on the website, in digital or print publications and at school board meetings.

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

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

- [Social media brand ambassador program](#)—The School District of Palm Beach County, Fla.
- [2019-2020 Pocket Guide](#)—Orange County (Fla.) Public Schools

To achieve the greatest level of support in the community, every RSD employee needs to accept their role as an ambassador and see themselves as an active member of the team—not simply a passive “fan.” There was a strong desire in the focus groups to share the good work of the district, and equipping staff with the knowledge and support they need to feel confident in speaking about the district is vital to achieving this goal. It is unlikely that all employees will fully buy into their role as an ambassador for the district, but many will, and this can be an extraordinarily powerful strategy for transforming the culture of the district.

Action Step 2.4

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

While onboarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of the Communications and Community Relations Department, the department does have a

significant impact on internal communication efforts and can play an important role in getting all new hires off to a great start. Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, with the goal of creating a positive on-boarding experience that goes beyond Human Capital Management forms and documents and offers a solid grounding in RSD's history and values.

Following are some suggestions for addressing new employee's communication needs.

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

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

- **Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with RSD operations, culture, history and procedures.** Provide new hires with an orientation package that includes:
 - An employee handbook and a current contact directory for all RSD departments
 - General information about RSD, the schools and unique programs
 - An overview of school district and local community history
 - A copy of the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan and information about key initiatives
 - A list of all communication vehicles (publications, website, intranet, social media, etc.), their purpose and when information or new issues are typically published or posted
 - Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor
 - Tips on being an ambassador for the schools and the importance of good communication to RSD's success
- **Have the superintendent welcome the staff and talk briefly about the strategic priorities and accomplishments to date.** Making an immediate connection with top leadership demonstrates they are valued in their role and helps build trust and confidence.
- **Include a communications component to emphasize the important role of staff as communicators and ambassadors.** New hires should learn their best sources of information and what it means to be an ambassador for RSD. Emphasize their responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their school. Review guidelines and expectations related to news media relations and social media so staff protocols are clearly understood. Encourage staff to keep the Communications and Community

Relations Department informed of newsworthy events happening in their classrooms (see [Recommendation 5](#)).

- **New hires should also be given guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests.**
Consider preparing a summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” to distribute to all employees.

Action Step 2.5

Continue to celebrate employee contributions and successes.

A combination of formal and informal acknowledgments and expressions of appreciation for employee efforts is important to maintaining high morale and employee engagement. These should be integrated into daily operations in a mindful and authentic manner. Personal acknowledgements of successes—large and small—help to build a positive culture by adding a human touch.

A powerful way that RSD can expand employee recognition is to highlight how individual employees are supporting strategic goals and helping prepare students for the future. Acknowledging the daily work contributions of employees is often more meaningful than reporting on awards received. Continue featuring success and recognition stories in short videos, publications, on websites and on social media. Provide commendations at staff meetings, send personal notes and make personal thank you calls. Acknowledging the role employees play in the day-to-day success of students, as well as in raising RSD’s image, is key to building morale and fostering ownership.

Recommendation 3:

Implement strategies to strengthen trust in district decisions.

RSD utilizes staff and parent groups, advisory councils and committees to provide feedback and ideas when decisions are being made. These are audiences who can directly influence perceptions of the district, and participants should always receive feedback on what was done with their recommendations and/or reports. This is true if their recommendations were adopted, but perhaps even more so if they are not.

Many staff members in the focus groups expressed concern regarding the processes used to engage district employees in decision-making. Staff were concerned that the input collected is not considered or incorporated into decisions, and/or they did not understand what occurred to make the final outcome different from what was understood to be the consensus of the committee. Providing a rationale behind decisions is particularly important with staff if they are to represent the district well and accurately.

It is important that RSD leaders become sensitive to the importance of fully disclosing information regarding decisions in a timely manner so that stakeholders become accustomed to this loop being closed for them. It will also assure participants that their time was not wasted and that their input is valued. Over time, this will begin to build trust and a belief that the district is being transparent in its decision-making processes.

Following are suggestions to consider for strengthening decision-making, increasing engagement and building trust. When developing its strategic communication plan, RSD should include specific strategies and tactics for providing follow-up information about important decisions. As noted on [page 26](#), the SCoPE Survey provides data regarding how

staff and parents prefer to receive information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues. Staff indicated that their first preference is email and their secondary preference is newsletters/e-newsletters. Parents indicated that their first preference is email and their secondary preference is text messages.

Action Step 3.1

Decide how to include stakeholders in the decision-making process.

When school system leaders must make decisions that will impact staff, or any other stakeholder group, it is usually impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of everyone. Knowing that universal happiness with a decision is unlikely, administrators are best served by aiming for consent around the decision-making process; in other words, participants are aware of the process and believe it to be fair and reasonable. Once consent for the process is earned, supporters of the decision are more confident in their agreement and detractors are more willing to go along. When deciding how to include stakeholders in the decision-making process, keep these general tips in mind.

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

#3

Implement strategies to strengthen trust in district decisions.

- If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to state mandates or budget constraints for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, the focus should be on building understanding around the situation that led to the particular decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.
- **Give stakeholder input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or direction.** In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, but choose to seek public input before finalizing it. When this is done and stakeholder input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders have an interesting dilemma. They can choose to continue with the original plan or listen to the input and consider alternative options.

As noted in the focus groups, asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause stakeholders to disengage from the district. Requesting input does not mean district leaders must follow the public's suggestions. However, that input must be given due consideration, and if it is not actionable, then the reasons why should be explained along with the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive they are making the decision. To avoid such a situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used and who will make the actual decision. This can be communicated effectively via a purpose statement that incorporates the following:
 - A description of the issue to be addressed

- What specific output is requested of the group (e.g., a recommendation, research results, points of consensus) and what the group does not have authority to do
- When the output of the group is to be completed
- Who will make the final decision
- How/when the group can anticipate learning of the decision and the rationale behind it

As the group deliberates, it is the responsibility of the group leader(s) to continually reinforce the purpose and authority of the group.

Action Step 3.2**Institute communication protocol questions to guide decision-making.**

In order to make sharing information about decisions more systematic, consider incorporating communication protocol questions into discussions of major decisions. The questions can be used as a regular component of the superintendent's District Leadership Team meetings and adapted for department, school-level and advisory council/committee meetings as well.

Communication protocol questions include the following:

- **What is the issue?** 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 stakeholders to heighten awareness and understanding.
- **How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district and community.
- **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that are most impacted by the issue.
- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.
- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the strategies and tactics that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders.
- **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will represent the district in discussions with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.
- **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for implementing the strategies and tactics.

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

Action Step 3.3

Recognize and consistently exhibit characteristics of trustworthiness.

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

- **Sincerity: "I mean what I say, say what I mean and act accordingly."** Sincerity is the distinction that one is being honest and can be believed and taken seriously. It also means that when opinions are expressed, they are valid, useful and backed up by sound thinking and evidence. Finally, it means actions will align with the spoken word.
- **Reliability: "You can count on me to deliver what I promise."** Reliability is the distinction that a leader will fulfill commitments and keep promises.
- **Competence: "I know I can do this. I don't know if I can do that."** Competence is the distinction that one has the ability to do what they are doing or propose to do. In the workplace, this usually means the other person believes the person doing the work has the required capacity, skill, knowledge and resources to do a particular task or job.
- **Care: "We're in this together."** Care is the distinction that leaders have the other person's interests in mind when decisions are made and actions are taken. Of the four assessments of trustworthiness, care is in some ways the most important. When people believe a decision is made out of self-interest, they may trust the sincerity, reliability and competence of the person, but they will tend to limit their trust to specific situations or transactions. On the other hand, when people believe their

interests have been kept in mind, they will extend their trust more broadly.

Action Step 3.4

Gather employee input on decisions that affect their jobs.

When RSD leaders are considering decisions that directly impact staff members and the schools, seeking their input in advance whenever possible should be a goal. This is particularly important as leaders implement changes to established procedures of the organization.

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. As noted in [Recommendation 2](#), this can be done via staff meetings and personal interaction in many cases. When it requires input on a broader scale—for example, from all faculty—opinions and suggestions can be gathered through an emailed survey or in focus groups.

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

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

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

team for consideration in the decision-making process.

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

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

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

Action Step 3.5

Incorporate information-gathering into regular meetings and staff gatherings.

A focus group comment was that meetings are often only focused on problem solving. However, meetings of staff, parents, students and other stakeholder groups can also be used as opportunities to gather ideas and feedback that ultimately lead to more informed decision-making.

This can be done without taking up significant meeting time by asking the group a question and asking them to provide their answers in a brief statement, through conducting a short online survey or participating in a live, interactive, online idea-sharing activity. The power in this recommendation is that it maximizes existing opportunities and uses them to gather ideas and feedback. Once collected, the group's leader should summarize the information, share it with other appropriate members of the school or district's leadership team and report the results back to the staff members at the next meeting.

Again, this is a simple idea, but combined with other engagement strategies, a sense

of openness and willingness to engage stakeholders on an ongoing basis becomes part of the district's overall culture.

Action Step 3.6

Seek input from a variety of voices and perspectives.

One of the challenges of effective engagement is to broaden the voices that are included in the process. It is common for districts to go back to many of the same people to gain their perspective rather than to seek out new and different voices. It is also common for the same people within various stakeholder groups to volunteer to be involved in school and district processes. The result is that decisions can be made based on the input of the same small group of representatives, who may not reflect the views of their broader constituencies. In addition, it can leave an impression on those who are not involved that only the ideas of the “in” group are welcome.

Following are ideas that will allow RSD to intentionally broaden who is involved in the process of gathering feedback.

- There is often a tendency by administrators to go to teachers and other professional staff and overlook input from support staff. Support staff, who are often on the front lines and in direct contact with the public, can provide useful insights.
- When forming a committee to discuss an issue, ask school leaders to recommend parents and community members who may not be the most involved in school activities but may have valuable expertise in the issue at hand. Depending on the topic, it can be useful to seek out those with backgrounds in health-related fields, finance, real estate, human resources, fund raising, etc.
- Ensure that the diversity of RSD's student population is represented on committees and in other decision-making bodies.

The development of a key communicator network (see [Recommendation 4](#) and [Action Step 7.1](#)) will be helpful in reaching audiences who may not generally feel as welcome or inclined to participate.

- Engage community members who are partners in the success of the overall community such as elected officials, religious leaders and members of civic organizations.

Recommendation 4:

Create a network of key communicators.

As mentioned previously, community participation in the SCoPE Survey was very low, and the focus group of community partners was not as well-attended or diverse as desired. The difficulty in getting community members to participate in these processes could be due to the survey and focus groups being conducted so close to the end of the school year and on the heels of RSD’s annual Educational Effectiveness Survey. Therefore, the lack of participation may not necessarily reflect an overall lack of community engagement. There is clear evidence of community partners who support the district as well as commitment by the board for developing strong relationships within the RSD community.

However, all school systems can benefit from expanding their reach into the community, and particularly with the possibility of a bond request in the near future, it is recommended that RSD take a structured approach to expanding district relationships through the development of a key communicator network.

A key communicator network is a formalized group created to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community, and it can be a useful communication tool. Although current social media platforms and communications technology have made it convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of RSD patrons and staff, it does not replace the value of personal communication with a small group of influential opinion leaders in the community. (A subset of the key communicator network for non-English speakers is also noted among the action steps in [Recommendation 7.](#))

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

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

A key communicator network could be managed by the Communications and Community Relations department, or in conjunction with the superintendent’s office.

Following are the primary steps for developing and maximizing the benefits of a key communicator network.

Action Step 4.1

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

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

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

New key communicators can be added as identified.

Action Step 4.2

Hold an orientation meeting for key communicators.

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

At the orientation meeting:

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

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Create a network of key communicators.

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

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

Action Step 4.3

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

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

Recommendation 5:

Empower and inspire staff to engage in effective, timely and targeted communications.

A recurring theme with staff focus groups was the desire to share the achievements and accomplishments of RSD's schools, staff and students. In addition, RSD administrators who participated in the focus groups generally acknowledged that there is an expectation that they regularly, proactively communicate what is going on in their department or school with the broader community. However, the perception is that the current system is too complicated and time-consuming.

The auditor recommends a structured approach to support staff in their efforts to fulfill their communications responsibilities. The following action steps outline strategies and tactics intended to empower and inspire RSD administrators to engage in more effective, timely and targeted communications.

In addition, consider viewing one of the most highly rated sessions from the NSPRA 2022 National Seminar: [Communications Consultations: Training Effective Communication Strategies to School Leaders](#) by Chesapeake Public Schools.

Action Step 5.1

Create a school news liaison system.

It is a goal of the Communications and Community Relations Department to share good news stories coming from RSD schools throughout the school year and beyond. Department staff actively seek out story ideas, but with 16 district-operated schools, they are not able to discover all that is happening daily in RSD schools. School principals and district administrators share responsibilities for communication, but they also face increasing demands on their time.

A news liaison system designed to funnel good news in a timely manner from a school building (or department) to its designated point of contact among the Communications and Community Relations staff could help tackle these challenges. Creating such a system will allow administrators to get more coverage for their local good news and communications staff to reduce the amount of time they spend searching for stories.

When setting up this system, consider the following:

- Determine the best format for sharing information.** For example, school news liaisons might be asked to complete an e-form or to email good news details in a prescribed format (e.g., who, what, when, where, why and how) on the same day each week or on the first day of each month. Liaisons should be encouraged to categorize their good news (e.g., special event, student award, staff accomplishment, community service) to assist communications staff in determining how to make the best use of it.
- Work with administrators to identify the best news liaisons.** For a school, the best news liaison is someone who knows what is going on, who has a passion for the school and who wants to maintain and strengthen its reputation in the community. This might describe an administrative assistant, a counselor, an enthusiastic teacher or another school staff member.
- Explain how the news liaison system will help schools (or departments).** Share the benefit of using this system with all staff so that they can be supportive of their news liaison's efforts. For example, coverage of local good news will increase and result in greater community support for local school and districtwide initiatives.
- Provide training for news liaisons.** At the beginning of each school year, invite

all news liaisons to participate in an in-person or virtual training that covers the basics: what makes for a viable news story, the importance of tying school news into school and/or district goals, how and when to submit information and what student and staff information cannot legally be shared. Consider providing a one- or half-page tip sheet they can use as a handy reference when putting their information together. Basic steps in creating videos on personal cell phone should be included as well.

- **Recognize your news liaisons.** Celebrate those school staff who help tell the stories of their schools at the end of each school year. This might be as simple as a note of thanks in an e-newsletter and on social media, or it might entail a token of appreciation such as a gift or breakfast reception.

Here is an example of how one district went about recruiting building-level news liaisons: <https://twitter.com/KleinISDChelsea/status/1560006980730863616>

Action Step 5.2

Offer communication boot camps for administrators each school year.

The superintendent and the Communications and Community Relations Department are clearly committed to effectively communicating with staff, families and the wider community. This is demonstrated through materials for district initiatives such as budget planning and the various communication supports and guidance offered to individual schools. It was also evident during focus groups, with administrators acknowledging that they “want to help dispel the negativity” sometimes associated with RSD.

In focus groups, as well as in the SCoPE Survey, parents and staff remarked on breakdowns in communications, including time delays between an incident happening in the school/district and information being

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Empower and inspire staff to engage in effective, timely and targeted communications.

provided, unreturned emails/phone calls and bottlenecks that prevented the distribution of important news.

An annual communication boot camp for administrators would:

- Provide training, tips and practical learning experiences to help them better communicate with stakeholders;
- Support greater consistency in communication practices among administrators;
- Strengthen partnerships with the Communications and Community Relations staff;
- And reinforce messages shared in past one-off, topical presentations related to communications.

Communication topics for an administrator bootcamp could include the following:

- Communicating to Build Trust Among Staff
- Crisis Communications
- Media Training
- Effective Business Writing
- Public Speaking
- Email Best Practices
- Automated Messaging System Training
- Emotionally Intelligent Communication

- Internal Customer Service

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

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review what local and national research has shown about what families and community members want to know from their schools and school district as well as how they want to receive the information. Provide insights from the district Educational Effectiveness Survey, the SCoPE Survey findings and this report. Discuss best practices for communications on social media and school websites. Consider holding a live Twitter chat using a district hashtag, on-camera mock media interviews and/or a self-reflection exercise on where they are as the chief communicator for their school or department.
- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication in RSD schools or departments led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices in their schools or departments, challenges they have encountered and ways they might overcome them.
- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review how the goals and objectives of the communication program support the district's mission and strategic plan. Lead administrators in a conversation on how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their local school or department goals.

- **Schedule it for the greatest level of participation.** Offer communications boot camp during a less busy time of year such as summer vacation and in a convenient location. Keep it to a half-day program to start, and provide refreshments or other incentives such as RSD-branded door prizes.

Action Step 5.3

Ensure timeliness of information shared at the school level.

Support staff who participated in the focus groups noted that they sometimes weren't aware of or able to access important information, particularly about a recent event or incident. Secretaries and receptionists are typically the first or primary point of contact for many parents and teachers, and as such, it can be frustrating for all involved when they are unable to answer questions because they were not provided with information in a timely manner. It also does not reflect well on the district when parents and community members ask for information on a topic that school staff are not yet aware of.

Secretaries, receptionists and other frontline staff should be made aware of information about major events and incidents at the same time as administrators or as quickly thereafter as possible. It should also be a priority to provide them with talking points and a place to direct parents and staff for more information as it becomes available.

Recommendation 6:

Expand strategies for district-to-parent communications.

As expressed by focus group participants, RSD parents are extremely interested in what is happening in the district and the schools and have an expectation that information will be shared on a timely basis in a variety of ways.

In the SCoPE Survey, parent responses indicated they feel relatively well-informed about most topics, particularly those related to their child's progress and school. However, there is a need for more information about the district itself, specifically regarding decisions and finances. RSD should strengthen and increase the information shared with parents on these topics and consider additional formats.

Suggestions for expanding communication to parents are outlined in the following action steps.

Action Step 6.1

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

When parents were asked on the SCoPE Survey to rate how much they rely on various sources of information from 1-5, newsletters and e-newsletters were given a fairly high rating of 3.5. The survey does not discern between district- and school-level communications, but both should be used as vehicles for sharing information about the district at large.

Understandably, parents are most focused on learning what they need to know to help their child and support the schools they attend. For some, the only news they have the time to read comes from the individual schools. Therefore, the opportunity shouldn't be missed to include district-level news in these communications.

Adding a short RSD news section in school publications and on school websites is an

effective way of getting important district-level information in front of parents. The Communications and Community Relations Department can prepare regular news items for principals to drop into their school newsletters or add to the website. To attract parents' attention, information should be framed in the context of how a program, initiative or change impacts children. These items could appear under the heading: RSD News for Parents.

Many ideas for improving the look and contents of newsletters and e-newsletters can be found by reviewing the print and e-newsletter winners of NSPRA's 2022 Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards.

- [E-Newsletter \(External Audience\)](#)
- [Print Newsletter \(External Audience\)](#)

Action Step 6.2

Increase the use of video as a communication vehicle.

RSD already uses colorful and creative graphics effectively in printed materials and online. It is recommended that RSD expand this vibrant presence by increasing the use of video to connect with parents and to share information in a fun and interesting way.

The [videos](#) created in both English and Spanish for Dr. Diaz's superintendent messages are effective in personalizing the content. Additional videos can be used to feature students and teachers, highlighting classroom activities and lessons in action. There are engaging stories throughout RSD, and more profiles of dedicated teachers and support staff would help to create a human connection with the RSD family of employees.

Principals should also be encouraged to share short video messages each week to connect with and inform their families. Short, simple videos can be recorded on a smartphone, shared on websites and YouTube channels, and posted to social media. As smartphone videos have

become more mainstream, they are often seen as more authentic than professionally produced pieces.

Using video is a powerful and inexpensive way to grab the attention of parents and to visually showcase what is happening in the schools. Whether the expertise to create these videos is internal or an outside contractor is used, RSD is encouraged to expand the use of video on all of its online platforms as staff capacity and resources allow.

Get examples of creative and effective use of video by reviewing the winning submissions of NSPRA's 2022 Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards.

- [Video \(produced in-house\)](#)
- [Video \(produced with outside contract\)](#)

Action Step 6.3

Consider non-technology-based methods for communicating with families.

While many families have one or more digital devices they use on a regular basis, this is not true for every family in the district. RSD—like most districts throughout the country—currently relies heavily on electronic and digital communication to connect with families. This is working well for many families, but not all. For instance, non-English-speaking focus group members said there was a need for a printed version of the parent handbook. There are also technology access challenges besides language, including cost.

This dictates a need for printed communications or other options that allow families to access information from the district and schools without the use of technology. When developing important communications and information sources, always consider whether the information should be available in printed form and possibly in multiple languages. Also consider how to make this information available to parents. Clearly, they cannot request it if they do not know it

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Expand strategies for district-to-parent communications.

exists, so mechanisms must be developed for determining who may have the need for printed information—and in what language—and providing it.

Action Step 6.4

Expand on organizing information in formats that are easy to consume.

The days of long stories and reports are likely gone. With the constant barrage of information coming at people from a myriad of sources, time and attention are short. This is particularly true for busy parents. In the many focus groups NSPRA conducts for districts nationwide, a common theme is that parents are looking for short, easy-to-read and easy-to-access information from their districts and schools. The 3-30-3 “rule” should always be kept in mind. You have three seconds to grab a reader’s attention, 30 seconds to engage them and roughly three minutes for them to read the content.

Almost any story can be turned into an infographic, and the Communications and Community Relations Department has produced some outstanding graphics. The auditor has noted the strong and upbeat colors and the use of simple and strong imagery to quickly get messages across. Often, the images are used on the website and repurposed on social media. RSD is to be commended for consistently using visuals to deliver key information.

When communicating complex information, it can be challenging to inform fully, while also being concise. Consider creating layers of information so that the reader can determine how deep into the subject they want to go. Use

compelling headlines, bullets and summary statements, then link to more detailed information and resources.

The superintendent newsletters should be reviewed for readability and formatting. The auditor noted that the layout is almost all text, and it is difficult to determine which articles are deemed most important. Consider adding more pictures and callout boxes for quotes to draw in interest. Use more paragraph breaks and more concise copy to make the document easier to read. Also keep in mind that parents are often more willing to watch a well-crafted one-minute video than take two or three minutes to read a few paragraphs.

RSD could benefit from more consistently defining its identity and inclusiveness through its existing “We are Reynolds” tagline. These three words build a sense of community and togetherness. It is currently used on some, but not all, publications, and no pattern of use is immediately evident. It should be used consistently to serve as an ongoing unifying theme that helps to build pride in the district for parents, staff and community.

Finally, it is important to repeat key messages on a regular basis. With more and more people reading and viewing information in short snippets, it is critical to continue to share information on a regular basis and in a variety of formats.

Recommendation 7:

Increase methods for effectively reaching non-English speakers.

RSD is fully committed to equity and to improving communications with all its communities. This commitment was a common theme in all focus groups, and the Board of Directors is living proof of the district's dedication to diversity and inclusiveness. While there were positive comments on the quality of communications to non-English-speaking parents, there were also stated concerns about needing increased access to services and information. Specific areas mentioned were the need for more interpreters/translators, access to technology and Spanish-speaking secretaries or staff. The procedures for staff requesting translators was also discussed because sometimes the need is immediate, and the process is seen as too cumbersome to get assistance quickly.

A challenge noted in several groups of non-English-speaking parents and community members was access to technology. RSD has many platforms for delivering information, but most are accessed online. Although Spanish-speaking parents felt phone calls met most of their primary needs and are more personal, they said that finding information beyond this basic level can be difficult, and they often do not feel comfortable asking administrators such as their child's principal. An example given was finding information about district decisions.

The staff focus groups also reflected concern that parents do not have equitable access to RSD resources and information. As with parents in general, non-English-speaking parents want to receive safety information faster and more consistently, even about activities considered mundane or routine such as fire drills. In short, they want to be kept up to date about all aspects of the school and district that directly affect their children.

The language liaisons in the Language Services Department, which is now managed by

the Communications and Community Relations Department, have a wide area of responsibility, including providing direct support to families and students and providing parent meetings, classes and events. As this department transitions, the action steps outlined below should be considered for enhancing the already extensive work of this group.

Action Step 7.1

Develop a key communicators network among non-English speakers at the school level.

One-on-one and face-to-face communications are highly valued within all parent populations, but these can be particularly important when there are language barriers and/or cultural differences that make building relationships more difficult. For that reason, it is suggested that RSD create a key communicators network at the individual school level specifically for families of non-English-speaking parents.

As noted in [Recommendation 4](#), a key communicator network can provide a conduit for two-way information to flow between parents and community members and the school. The key communicators can be equipped with timely and accurate information about the school to share with their circles in the community. Similarly, they can gain feedback from the broader community to bring back to the schools and district to inform future decisions and processes. A key communicator network also can serve as an early warning system the school can use to identify emerging issues and concerns in the community. As ambassadors for the school, key communicators can help to counter negative or inaccurate information shared by the media or word of mouth.

This is especially important in non- or limited-English-speaking communities. When there is a vacuum of information from reliable sources, rumors and misinformation flourish. Alternatively, key communicators can share information using the terms and colloquialisms of their non-English-speaking community.

This builds goodwill and trust between parents and the schools because the information feels authentic and as if nothing is being hidden.

Following are suggested methods for establishing a key communicators network.

- Work with the language liaisons and school principals to identify potential key communicators for English Language Learner (ELL) families. These should be individuals who have demonstrated support and interest in the school and have connections within their non-English-speaking communities.
- Host exclusive events for potential key communicators and introduce them to the methods that the district uses to disseminate information in multiple languages.
- Provide dual-language materials and messaging to the key communicators and encourage them to share that information with families they know at religious gatherings, during club meetings and in local gathering spots. Hearing the same information from multiple sources and within a similar time frame helps parents feel confident and more willing to trust the accuracy of the message.

Action Step 7.2

Consider reviewing the role of the RSD language liaisons.

Given RSD's demographics, it is recommended that consideration be given to increasing the availability of interpreter/translator staff. Ideally, they should be readily available to help when non-English-speaking parents have questions and/or need to better understand what is happening in their children's schools on a daily basis. If the information they seek is fundamental to their child's success, they deserve to have answers and the information they need in a timely manner. Conversely, if their question or concern is not key to their child's experience, parents will likely not be

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Increase methods for effectively reaching non-English speakers.

inclined to go through a lengthy process to get the information they seek and will simply end up not being as informed as English-speaking parents on broader matters.

Strengthening parent and community support for a school or school district begins with understanding the “why” behind an action or decision. Functioning like key communicators, interpreter/translation staff can become trusted sources of information about the district. By expanding their roles, they can provide an additional level of customer service and guide district leaders on what information needs to be shared with the community-based key communicators.

Like key communicators, the language liaison staff have constant interactions with non-English speakers—official and unofficial—and can help the district identify potential problems and head off misunderstandings before they fester and become bigger problems. They can also reinforce the culture of communication by helping parents feel more comfortable engaging with their children's schools.

The auditor recognizes that implementing this action step may come with significant budget implications, and therefore, it is likely something to be planned for in future budget cycles.

Action Step 7.3

Disseminate written materials for non-English speakers in their native language and in English.

RSD has translated versions of newsletters, flyers and superintendent videos in English, Spanish and other select languages as reviewed

by the auditor. Consideration should be given to translating additional materials, perhaps in more languages than are now commonly translated. The Language Services Department could be tasked with evaluating which materials and which languages would give RSD the greatest practical reach. There may be fiscal impacts to increasing the number of translated materials, and this should be analyzed as part of the evaluation process.

Action Step 7.4

Develop website landing pages customized for non-English speakers.

The district website contains a trove of valuable data, but among non-English-speaking parents there was little indication that they knew about or used the district website despite its translation features.

In contrast to these local findings, a 2016 Pew Research Center report found that internet use among Hispanics in the United States, particularly those who are foreign-born, grew at a faster rate than it did among other major racial groups. Nationally, more than 90 percent of Hispanics younger than 50, and at least 67 percent of those ages 50-64, use the internet. RSD could better tap into the appeal of the internet among its Spanish-speaking stakeholders by developing content for customized, not just translated, landing pages.

The content for these pages should be developed in collaboration with the Spanish-speaking community and should contain information that addresses the issues of most concern to them. These targeted web pages would serve as a valuable and welcoming point of contact for current and prospective students and families whose native language is Spanish.

As examples, the landing pages can be used to inform parents about school-based and districtwide services provided, what to expect when a child moves up a grade level and/or to a new school building, how parents can get involved in their child's school, school safety

guidelines, information about activities, rules and guidelines, etc.

Following are examples of customized, Spanish-language landing pages.

- A¡Usted forma parte del Distrito 196!, District 196, Rosemount, Minn.—<https://www.district196.org/espanol>
- En Espanol, School District of Palm Beach County, Fla.—<https://www.palmbeachschools.org/spanish>
- Hola: Recursos para padres en español, Tuscaloosa (Al.) City Schools—<https://www.tuscaloosacityschools.com/Page/2509>

Action Step 7.5

Develop partnerships with Spanish-speaking media outlets.

Consider the development of partnerships with Spanish language media, which often take on supportive roles in addition to reporting news. There are a number of print and radio outlets in the Portland area that could be potential collaborators.

Education is a community priority, and materials for families such as back-to-school handbooks or health guidance for students could be proposed as a joint project. An education column in one of the print publications could be authored by Dr. Diaz and featured quarterly or on special occasions such as the start or end of school or when there is a special RSD initiative in progress. A column can also feature success stories of the district, background on a new decision and be an adjunct to the key communicator network.

The district should consider convening a partnership-building luncheon for local Spanish language media outlets to focus on promoting efforts that benefit the Spanish-speaking community. It is an opportunity for the media to meet Dr. Diaz, members of the Board of Directors and district leadership, and to discuss various ways of working together for the common goal of educational success. Collaborative efforts in

other districts have created special campaigns focused on literacy, math, back-to-school kits and other opportunities.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures

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

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

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

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

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

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

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging/Established

RSD's overall communication effort falls between the emerging and established categories. For a district this size, the district is presented professionally. The writing and visuals for print pieces, the website and social media are high quality, upbeat and have a consistent style. Much has been accomplished by the Communications and Community Relations Department. The primary reasons the program is noted as being between emerging and established is because of the need for a comprehensive communications plan and a stronger focus on internal communications.

There are critical issues that need to be addressed, and a strategic communication plan that aligns with the district's strategic goals and objectives is a priority. The plan will drive the majority of the Communications and Community Relations Department activities going forward, and the district is fortunate to have a skilled and experienced leader in its executive director, who provides counsel, insight and expertise to RSD. It is commendable that the department's leader is a respected member of the executive team, who reports directly to the superintendent and provides advice and insight on major issues.

Once a strategic communication plan with a focus on improving internal communications is in place, RSD could move to the established

category in this critical function area with these additional steps:

- Manage all significant communication efforts through the RPIE model (research, planning, implementation and evaluation) and ensure measurable objectives are included for all significant initiatives.
- Use research results to evaluate current communication efforts and reprioritize staff time and resources as necessary.

Internal Communications – Emerging

The Internal Communications benchmark recognizes the invaluable role of all employees as representatives of their district. Research indicates effective internal communication helps increase job satisfaction, morale, productivity, commitment and learning. It also improves climate and enhances the organization's relationship with its stakeholders.

Internal communications is an urgent priority for RSD as clearly reflected in both the SCoPE Survey and focus group findings. Issues of trust and concerns about a lack of transparency show the need for a different and focused approach to staff communications. Doing what has been done before is not likely to build the trust and cooperation needed to improve the way RSD employees feel about internal communications and district leadership, and this is why RSD falls into the emerging category. As detailed in this report, there are many opportunities for improvement that can move RSD into the established category of the rubric.

In addition to the recommendations and action steps included in this report, RSD could consider these practices:

- Create new ways of gathering input from staff members through periodic focus groups or advisory committees. Any strategies employed in this area should include the ways the information gathered

will be shared with participants and staff as well as how it will be used to make decisions and guide the district.

- Conduct periodic staff surveys that assess employee needs, opinions and knowledge levels. The survey should include components for measuring the effectiveness of employee communication, including readership surveys of all digital and print publications. This survey would be in addition to the annual Educational Effectiveness Survey and would allow for ongoing communication strategy adjustments.

Parent/Family Communications – Emerging / Established

Per the SCoPE Survey results and focus group comments, the auditor would place RSD's parent and family communications program between the emerging and established categories, but closer to the established category. While there are opportunities for improvement, the school district has a good system for communicating with parents that was acknowledged by focus groups. The areas that could be improved were providing more resources for non-English-speaking parents, and, similarly to what was found with employees, increasing understanding of district decision-making and finances.

Suggestions for moving solidly into the established category would be:

- Developing methods for monitoring and tracking parent/family complaints and concerns about communication effectiveness, then implementing solutions to address those complaints and concerns. A suggestion would be the creation of an online system for parents and other community members to ask questions or express concerns/suggestions in a format that will lead to prompt responses from staff.

- Continue to research and understand parent/family communication needs, opinions and communication preferences.
- Host professional development opportunities for principals and teachers on effective parent/family communication strategies.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging

The auditor did not receive data regarding its marketing or branding efforts, but the SCoPE Survey provided insight on how stakeholders viewed the district. In the focus groups, there were a variety of responses to identifying RSD’s strengths, reflecting the sense that there could be a stronger emphasis on the district’s current theme of “We are Reynolds.” This would be constructive in helping to unify the district and could provide opportunities to branch other efforts and initiatives from the “We are Reynolds” platform. Additional suggestions include:

- As a visual brand, the images, graphics and colors in RSD materials and online are vibrant and applied universally across platforms. This upbeat style should be closely linked to “We are Reynolds” when moving to a more focused effort to support external communications and collaborations as well as future bond requests.
- Ensuring that the brand identity (logo and tagline) is reflected in interior and exterior signage, on letterhead and business cards (both print and electronic) and as part of employee email signatures.
- Conduct periodic reviews of district and school communications (print, electronic and social media) for brand consistency.

Crisis Communications – Emerging

RSD’s Emergency Communication Protocol is currently undergoing revision, and therefore, RSD falls into the emerging category in the area of crisis communications. The document was being updated at the time focus groups were being conducted in early June, with the intent to further expand it. The draft reviewed by the auditor is a robust set of guidelines, and includes a contact list, how contact should be made to key administrators and resources with phone numbers and extensions. It also defines what constitutes an incident, who should originate messages and how to handle the media.

When fully completed, the protocols should include plans for providing online access to information during an emergency such as a dedicated web page, where employees can find accurate and timely updates. It should also document how crisis communication effectiveness will be measured once a crisis is resolved. Appendices to the plan should include tools that would be used during a crisis, including standardized letters, notices and other communications so they can be readily adapted to facilitate timely notification.

When the revision to the plan is complete, it should be rehearsed quarterly and reviewed annually, particularly if there are changes in staff roles and/or the organization of departments.

Beyond the status of the protocol document, another major factor in placing RSD in the emerging category of the rubric is the difference between staff and parents in ratings for crisis communication in the SCoPE Survey. For staff, the rating was 2.9 on a scale of 1-5—close to the lowest national score. For families, the rank was 3.5—close to the national average of 3.6. The gap in scores reflects a need for more consistency and taking into consideration the types of information staff and parents need in order to feel informed in this area, as they may very well be different.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Emerging

The auditor did not receive specific data regarding the district’s bond or operating tax increase campaigns, and the topic was not mentioned in focus groups. However, in interviews with district leadership, the possibility of future bond proposals did come up.

The SCoPE Survey provided insight into stakeholders’ knowledge level regarding school finances. When staff and parents were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale of 1-5, “about district finances” received the lowest rating, with staff and parent/family ratings of 2.0 and 2.7, respectively. These perceptions are of concern, particularly given the district’s past efforts to actively recruit participation in the budget process and making fiscal information available on the website. Given this situation, the auditor places RSD in the emerging category of this rubric.

[Recommendation 3](#), which includes action steps for strengthening trust in district decisions, and [Recommendation 5](#), which includes action steps for improving district-to-parent communications, should be of assistance in improving RSD’s performance in this category.

Effectively communicating complex financial information is an ongoing challenge for most school districts. However, confidence in RSD’s fiscal status and decision-making is vital to the trust-building process. This area should receive attention to help lay the groundwork for any future bond campaign. The Communications and Community Relations Department’s demonstrated skills in creating infographics should be applied when reporting on financial matters.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the district's strengths, particularly in communications?
2. How could district success be communicated better?
3. What do you see as the biggest communications challenge for Reynolds?
4. Do you feel there are opportunities for families to connect and have input on important decisions? (parents only)
5. Please share your thoughts about teacher-to-parent communications. (parents only)
6. In terms of crisis communications, what is and is not working? (parents only)
7. What is the best way to communicate school and district information to you? (students only)
8. In the SCoPE Survey, Reynolds staff noted there are serious concerns about understanding leader decisions, goals and plans. How could that information be better communicated? (staff only)
9. The SCoPE Survey reflects that employees do not feel they are valued. Why do you think they feel this way? (staff only)
10. We know that the strongest form of communication is word of mouth—yet employees' perception of the district is very low. How could the district better prepare employees to serve as good-will ambassadors for Reynolds? (staff only)
11. In the SCoPE Survey, staff see crisis communications more negatively than families. What is, and is not, working? (staff only)
12. How can the board best support the communication efforts of RSD? (Board of Directors only)

SCoPE Scorecard

How Your District Scored on Measures that Matter Most in School Communications
 Compared to All Districts Participating in the SCoPE School Survey Program
REYNOLDS SCHOOL DISTRICT MAY 2022

STAFF

	District	Avg	Low	High
Communication regarding how I can support student achievement	3.5	3.6	3	4.2
Communication to keep me informed so I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador	2.5	3.2	2.5	4
Communication during a crisis/serious incidents	2.9	3.4	2.8	4
Communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	2.6	3	2.3	3.6
Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department	3.5	4	3.5	4.5
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	2.9	3.7	2.7	4.3
Overall satisfaction with communication	3	3.6	3	4.2
Overall perception of district based on communication	2.3	3.6	2.3	4.2

FAMILY

Communication about my child’s progress in school	3.9	3.8	3.1	4.4
Communication about how I can support my child’s learning	3.6	3.4	2.4	4.1
Communication about school and district events and programs	3.1	3.4	2.5	4.1
Communication during a crisis/serious incidents	3.5	3.6	3	4.1
Trustworthiness of communication from my child’s school	3.7	4.1	3.6	4.5
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.4	3.9	3.1	4.4
Overall satisfaction with communication	3.6	3.8	3.1	4.2
Overall perception of district based on communication	3.4	3.8	3.1	4.2

COMMUNITY

Communication about academic programs and district performance	2.6	3	2	4.2
Communication about district finances and related issues	2.1	2.6	1.7	3.6
Communication about school safety	2.4	2.9	1.7	4
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3	3.3	2.2	4.2
Overall satisfaction with communication	2.5	3.2	2	4
Overall perception of district based on communication	2.5	3.3	2.2	4.2

For details on methodology, participation rates, and your district’s complete SCoPE results, please refer to the SCoPE User Guide and your SCoPE Reports.

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Auditor's Vita

Frank Kwan, APR Consultant auditor

Frank Kwan, APR, has held leadership roles in media and education and has an extensive background in marketing, public affairs, digital media, video, community relations, crisis communications and special event management. He recently retired from the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) after overseeing communications for the nation's largest regional educational agency, which serves 80 K-12 school districts. While at LACOE, he led communications services and was the primary K-12 education liaison to the Los Angeles County Office of Emergency Management.

In addition, Frank served as the executive director of the Los Angeles County School Trustees Association, with a membership of more than 500 K-12 school board members and community college trustees.

Frank came to LACOE from NBC 4 Television in Los Angeles, with assignments as an executive producer and host for news, public affairs, documentaries, and special event / political programming.

Frank's experience includes communications consulting for national organizations, and he currently advises Expatiate Communications, a management consulting group for special education services as its director of strategic communications. He is also a consultant with the Pasadena Unified School District and a senior advisor with the consulting firm The Education Experts.

Frank has been a communications auditor for NSPRA and worked with districts in Canada, Alaska, California, Idaho, Georgia, Oregon, Texas and Washington. He served as NSPRA president in 2011-12, and has his Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) from the Universal Accreditation Board.

Frank has held leadership roles in National PTA, including two terms on the board of directors and chair of the Diversity, Inclusion and Outreach Committee. Frank was a founder of the Asian American Journalists Association and the USC Asian Pacific American Alumni Association, and was a senior lecturer in Asian American Studies at the University of Southern California.

Frank is the recipient of major awards from NSPRA, the California School Public Relations Association (CalSPRA) and the Public Relations Society of America. His work in broadcasting was recognized with multiple Emmys and the National Education Association's Advancement of Education Through Broadcasting awards. His program projects were also acknowledged by the Asian Pacific American Artists Association, the NAACP and the National Hispanic Media Coalition. He is a graduate of the University of Southern California and is an emeritus member of the USC Alumni Association Board of Governors.



Communication Audit Report

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National School Public Relations Association

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