



NSPRA's Communication Audit Report

for

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District

April 2017

National School Public Relations Association

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Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
Fairbanks, Alaska

April 2017

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Contents

Introduction.....5

Key Findings and Observations.....9

Guiding Principles..... 13

Recommendations.....17

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations..... 51

Appendix..... 53

Introduction

The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD), Alaska's third largest district by enrollment, has undergone some significant changes over the past few years. A change in senior leadership, a challenging state economy resulting in sizeable budget cuts and highly visible legal issues have created a new dynamic in the district. In response, FNSBSD is re-examining a number of its processes and programs, including how well it communicates with both its internal and external stakeholders.

FNSBSD has a solid communication program in place that is based in sound public relations practice and is using a variety of communication tools to reach stakeholders. It is fortunate to have a respected and experienced team in the Community and Public Relations Office who do a commendable job managing a complex program that must continually balance rapid response needs in crisis or breaking news situations with substantive, informational and timely ongoing communication with multiple audiences.

District leaders and staff are working hard to keep the schools and community connected and challenge students to excel in a safe and supportive learning environment. The Strategic Goals encompass not only academic elements, but also effective communications and parent and community engagement.

The FNSBSD Board of Education and Superintendent Dr. Karen Gaborik are committed to effective communication throughout the school system and the diverse communities it serves. This communication audit was contracted for, approved, and supported by the Superintendent and Board. It demonstrates the willingness of FNSBSD leaders to address communication challenges and continue to create and strengthen educational opportunities for all students.

The goal of this communication audit was two-fold – to seek and use data, opinion and perceptions to assess the effectiveness and management of communication, public relations and engagement efforts throughout the district; and then to provide recommendations on strategies that continue to build and enhance the overall communication program while strengthening the relationship between FNSBSD and all its audiences.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Office of Community and Public Relations or any other department or individual school, they are intended to build effective communication in a school-district that is committed to continuous improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all of its students and constituents to the best of its ability.

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

Opinion research as a foundation

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

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of focus groups and interview sessions representing a variety of FNSBSD's internal and external publics. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group sessions were approximately one hour in length and were held November 14 and 15, 2016 at the district office in Fairbanks.

- Parents (four groups, including separate sessions for military and minority parents)
- City and Borough Officials/Business Leaders
- Teachers (two groups – elementary/high school and middle school)
- School & Administration Center Secretaries
- Support Staff (Assistants/Maintenance/Custodial/Transportation/Food Service)
- Student Council Representatives
- Principals (two groups – elementary and secondary)
- District Directors
- Executive Directors
- Board of Education

Processes and procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communication from an “outside” perspective. The consultants for this communication audit were Steve Mulvenon, Ed.D, veteran NSPRA member and retired Director of Communications for the Washoe County School District in Nevada and Frank Kwan, APR, Communications Director with the Los Angeles County Office of Education and a past NSPRA President and Vice President at-Large. Their vitae are included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in the NSPRA communication audit involved the Community and Public Relations Office submitting samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., publications, marketing materials, reports, program information, etc.) with various audiences. The auditors also reviewed and analyzed the district

and school websites as well as social media platforms. Additional online surveys of principals and department administrators were also completed and studied.

These materials and websites were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. Attention was also paid to the various social media platforms used by schools and the district. In addition, the auditors reviewed news media coverage, demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, staff and community surveys, etc.

The core of the communication audit is the onsite focus group component designed to gather perceptions from the school district's internal and external audiences. In our audit of FNSBSD, the auditors met with 15 focus groups and conducted independent interview sessions with Superintendent Dr. Karen Gaborik, Director of Community and Public Relations Sharice Walker and Communications Coordinator Rebecca Hurbi. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions.

This communication audit was designed to:

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

Following the review of materials and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, and Associate Director Karen H. Kleinz, APR. The recommendations focus on strategies FNSBSD can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve and enhance overall communication practices.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations, and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication and engagement practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

Assumptions

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

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist FNSBSD leaders in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the Community and Public Relations Office and FNSBSD and to suggest options and considerations for expanding and improving the communication program.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this *Communication Audit Report* contains seven major recommendations for improving communication and engagement with FNSBSD's internal and external stakeholders and becoming more strategic and effective with outreach and messaging efforts. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems across North America. The district may choose to implement all or some of the recommendations, depending on factors including timing, budget and organizational structures.

Copies to participants

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

Key Findings and Observations

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

- **FNSBSD has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to improving communications and community relations.** Over the past several years, the district and its Community and Public Relations Office have undertaken a number of surveys, opinion polls and other research initiatives to assess communication effectiveness and to seek ways to improve. This audit and the communication audit conducted in 2011 are clear evidence of that commitment.
- **Across the focus groups, there was general agreement about the following district strengths:**
 - There is a real sense of community and pride in the schools.
 - The variety of options for students in both programs and types of schools is appreciated.
 - Given its small size as a two-person department, the Community and Public Relations Office is well respected for the quality and quantity of its work.
 - FNSBSD’s racial and ethnic diversity is seen as a strength.
 - The district’s leadership (both elected and staff) is seen as accessible and responsive.
 - Parents have strong and positive relationships with teachers.
 - Communications related to weather-related closings are appreciated.
 - Teachers are valued by community members.
- **The lack of a formal comprehensive communication plan is a concern.** Without a formal plan, communication efforts are often reactive rather than planned and proactive. The district’s new Strategic Plan and its strong commitment to, “Establish transparent and consistent communication to increase student, parent, staff and community connectedness with the district” provides an opportunity for moving forward with such a plan and align it with FNSBSD’s broader strategic goals.
- **There is a wide variety in both quality and frequency of communications at the school level.** This leads to inconsistency and “mixed messages” about important topics. This issue extends both to print materials in the form of newsletters and to school websites.
- **An increased focus on internal communication is needed to improve message consistency and procedures across the district.** Internal focus groups noted a lack of consistency in both the dissemination and timeliness of information and the messages shared, which contributes to uneven building communication and confusion about actions required. FNSBSD administrative groups did not seem to have a clear sense of their communication roles and responsibilities. Communication protocols and expectations are needed at all levels to ensure key messages and critical information cascade effectively and efficiently so that all employees are able to communicate in “one clear voice.”

The parent focus groups also noted inconsistencies in messaging and procedures among schools. Participants also indicated they receive mixed messages from the district and schools and felt messages are at times unclear because they do not contain enough specifics. At the same time, they said some district publications are too long, so it may be that specific information is being overlooked if it is buried within the newsletters.

- **There is a need to continue working to rebuild trust and confidence in FNSBSD’s decision-making.** Following highly publicized incidents of alleged abuse involving students and employees and the subsequent dismissal of senior leadership, both employees and community members are still unsure of how future incidents will be handled. Based on focus group comments, the level of uncertainty is greater inside the district than outside. Continued attention to expanded engagement efforts can help bridge this gap. The efforts of the Superintendent in rebuilding trust are acknowledged and appreciated, noting the difference with increased transparency from a year ago in the district. Even amid continuing uncertainty, there were expressions of confidence in the district’s leadership. As legal developments continue to unfold, there is a need to reiterate that the rebuilding process is gradual, and there have been real gains in trust for FNSBSD.
- **There is wide recognition among both internal and external audiences that budget cuts have had a negative impact.** Increasing class size was frequently mentioned as a serious concern. FNSBSD’s legislative priorities for 2016-17 lists improving class size as its Number 1 priority. This issue can be a rallying point for the entire community during the 2017 legislative session.
- **FNSBSD has a consistent record of community support for bond issues.** As recently as October 2016 the community approved a significant bond issue for both the school district and the Borough. As a result of this reinvestment in infrastructure, there is a great deal of pride in the overall condition of the community’s schools. For example, the auditors heard about the recent makeover of Ryan Middle School from more than one focus group. Such consistent support is not always the case in other parts of the country and it should be a point of pride. Voter support for these measures is not possible without a solid communications effort
- **Current communication vehicles need to be reassessed and evaluated.** Although FNSBSD employs a variety of delivery vehicles to distribute information, no primary news sources emerged from either the internal or external focus groups. For staff, meetings, email, and their peers were the most mentioned sources; for parents, school websites and principals appear to be the best read and most consistently cited sources of information. There is a real need to target and streamline the communication effort to deliver messages and information relevant to each audience group.
- **The website is attractive and improving but in need of expanded content and better navigation features.** Effective websites are by nature dynamic and constantly evolving which is challenging for most school systems that typically do not have the luxury of a dedicated web team. FNSBSD’s website is getting better, but is still in somewhat of a “bare bones” mode in terms of depth of content and its value as a marketing tool. Focus group participants found it difficult to navigate at times and complained that the search function was not helpful.

- **Publications reviewed are attractively designed, well written and are largely free of jargon and confusing acronyms.** For example, the 2016-17 Legislative Priorities pamphlet, the Ryan Middle School rededication brochure and the Elementary School attendance flyers are clear, crisp and serve their purposes well. There are, however, several areas where improvement should be considered:
 - The ELL Parent Night flyer should be printed in more languages than just English.
 - The special education recruiting brochure and other Human Resources materials could benefit from being included on the department's section of the district website. The same can be said for the Federal Programs Department's 2016-17 Overview publication.
 - All publications should include information about which office, department or program created it, the date of publication and contact information. Assuming that many publications were created by the Community and Public Relations Office, that attribution can be an effective marketing technique for the office.
 - The Superintendent's Quarterly Newsletter provides detail on developments in the district. The articles may not need to be as extensive as they are currently, since as a quarterly newsletter, much of the information is already known. Featuring shorter articles on a wider range of topics would be beneficial and simply be a faster read as well as free up time for the Superintendent in drafting the articles.

- **There is a sense that the Board may be overly reactive to public criticism.** The feeling in some focus groups was that a relatively small but highly vocal group sometimes affects Board decisions. Parents with issues can receive more attention than staff recommendations, and the Board may not be hearing groups that are representative of a broader range of opinions.

- **Staff communication responsibilities need better definition.** Although the district is reliant on cascading communications, staff is not clear on what is expected in terms of sharing information. *Who* to tell *what* should be more clearly defined to avoid staff feeling as if they are acting on their own.

- **FNSBSD is well positioned to raise its profile as a leading school system in Alaska.** The district has the leadership and communication team in place to effectively meet its communication goals and build strong support for the schools. The district has a solid reputation as an excellent school system with quality teachers and programs. The strong commitment to effective communication that exists in FNSBSD will provide the foundation for success as it continues to grow and move forward.

A comparison between this report and the *2011 Communication Audit Report* shows some overlap and similarity in both the findings and recommendations. The auditors made an effort not to be overly influenced by the 2011 report and to make recommendations as their findings and experience dictate. While substantial progress in FNSBSD's communications program since 2011 is evident, making lasting change in an organization as complex as a school district takes time. Given significant changes in FNSBSD leadership and Community and Public Relations Office staff since then, where similar or continuing recommendations were found to be necessary we have included them in this report.

Guiding Principles

The following principles, based in research and practical experience, should guide the communication program for Fairbanks North Star Borough School District.

■ **Communication efforts should be tied to the district’s Strategic Plan objectives.**

To be effective, communication efforts must support FNSBSD’s overall mission and goals as stated in its Strategic Plan. As we outline in Recommendation 1, communication should involve a structured, ongoing process to engage internal and external stakeholders and promote an open dialogue on education issues and goals. It is imperative that communication occur consistently and information be presented with clarity. By tying communication planning, strategies and tactics to the district Strategic Plan, the function will contribute most effectively to having a positive impact on student achievement and academic success.

■ **“Core messages” should position FNSBSD as a successful school system with leaders and staff committed to providing an exceptional education for all students.**

The identity and image of every school district should be directly related to its core beliefs and values. We heard clearly in the focus groups of a strong, traditional and ongoing commitment to the success of FNSBSD on the part of staff, parents and community members. The district’s beliefs, mission, vision statements and strategic goals refer to the following core values, which also were reinforced by numerous stakeholders in the communication audit focus groups:

- **Student-Centered:** Center everything we do on the student and student learning.
- **Respect:** Embody respect for the diversity and dignity of all.
- **Safe Environment:** Strive to provide a safe learning environment.
- **High Expectations:** Maintain high expectations and educational opportunities to inspire high achievement.
- **Collaborative:** Actively collaborate with students, family, and community to support student success.
- **Diverse:** Welcoming, accepting and inclusive of all students and families.
- **Innovative:** Aim to be innovative and adaptive to student needs.

School leaders should take every opportunity to incorporate core beliefs and values when creating messages to internal and external stakeholders, thus making them “core messages” and reinforcing the FNSBSD image or brand.

■ **Openness and transparency are vital to maintaining credibility with stakeholders.**

Honesty and transparent communication are necessary to maintain credibility, as well as trust, with stakeholders. FNSBSD’s current Board and Superintendent embrace transparency and openness. It is imperative that this also becomes a core message to be emphasized, as discussions with district leaders and comments from focus group participants revealed questions about open communication under past district leadership.

■ **Communication must be multichannel to be most effective.**

FNSBSD uses a variety of communication channels to keep stakeholders informed. These include print, electronic, personal interaction, stakeholder engagement and social media. Given the constant evolution of communication technology, the district must continue to stay current and seek to identify the best method or vehicle for reaching specific stakeholder audiences.

As we emphasize in Recommendation 5, no single channel of communication reaches every member of the community, and it is unrealistic to assume that the school district can drive stakeholders to one source for information given the options available today. The challenge is ensuring that information is consistent, relevant, multilayered, readily available and offered in appealing, easily accessible formats. It is important to note that although technology can greatly expand a school system’s communication “reach,” it does not totally replace traditional print communication or valuable face-to-face interactions.

■ **Internal communication must be a priority.**

No communication effort will be successful unless employees become ambassadors for teaching, learning, student achievement and the schools. Staff members have the ability to make or break the perceptions of FNSBSD. Timely and consistent internal communication creates knowledgeable, articulate employees who are able to respond confidently to questions and requests from parents and the public. Employees can become true ambassadors when they receive regular and concise updates on issues and programs and are provided with the tools and training needed to support them in their communication and customer service roles.

■ **School-level communication should be a major component of the communication effort.**

Research in school communication shows that the local school is usually seen as the public opinion barometer of how well schools in general or school districts are doing. It’s a natural hub for communication with parents and others, especially in a district like FNSBSD with neighborhood elementary schools. Providing communication training and support for administrators and staff at the building-level will be critical to their success as communicators and ambassadors.

■ **Every staff member is a communicator and must accept a portion of responsibility for that role.**

Employees of a taxpayer-funded organization, such as a school district, need to be aware of news and information about the district, as well as the rationale behind decisions. They also need to know that they have a responsibility to have current knowledge about FNSBSD through newsletters and messages sent by the district and stay informed as a standard and condition of employment. Staff also should be made aware of how increased communication will help them.

When staff members are informed and effectively communicate with key stakeholders, such as parents and community members in their “sphere of influence,” the following are more likely to occur:

- Parents will be supportive of and involved in their children’s education;
 - A true picture of the school district – its successes and issues – will be conveyed to people not connected directly to FNSBSD;
 - The school image, or brand, will be reinforced; and
 - Support for the district will be reaffirmed among community members and taxpayers, even those without children in FNSBSD.
- **Direct communication and engagement with stakeholders builds relationships and inspires trust.**

“Telling your own story” is vital to strategic communication. School districts cannot depend on news media to be their first line of communication with stakeholders. Even if district leaders have a professional and productive relationship with reporters and other media representatives, as appears to be the case with FNSBSD, information and messaging is still subject to editorial decisions and the uncertainties of the news business.

Two-way communication also is vital to the engagement process. When district leaders make connections to staff, parents and community members, relationships can be established and stakeholders engaged. By creating opportunities to listen and give stakeholders a voice in an authentic manner and keeping them well-informed through personal interaction, FNSBSD leaders are more likely to garner support and build trust than through any mass communication activity.

- **Strategic communication is a management function.**

To be most effective, communication should be viewed as a key management function and overseen by a member of the leadership team. Analysis and assessment of communication and public relations implications should be carried out as part of all decisions, initiatives and changes, whether related to district operations, policy and procedures, or student achievement.

Recommendations

FNSBSD has the opportunity to advance its reputation and improve outcomes for students through the implementation of its new Strategic Plan. District leaders have made a significant commitment to improving communication and engagement by making them top priority goals. The research and recommendations provided here provide a foundation for acting on these commitments. Every employee at FNSBSD is responsible for effective communication. It is the responsibility of the Community and Public Relations Office to develop strategic, two-way communications that will lead to better understanding, stronger relationships with key audiences, and increased community support for FNSBSD.

Recommendation – 1

Develop a comprehensive, strategic communication plan.

Internal and external communication is most effective when efforts are strategically planned. Meaningful communication requires an ongoing, system-wide effort, recorded and adopted in a formal plan. Without a comprehensive plan, strategic communication that reflects FNSBSD’s priorities and delivers key messages to target audiences may be lost in the reactive, day-to-day activities that can easily overwhelm school districts. While time-consuming, good communication planning usually takes much less time than dealing with controversies that arise due to poor communication. Thus, as our primary consideration, we recommend that the Director of Community and Public Relations lead an initiative to develop a strategic communication plan that would cover proposed activities for the next year. There are the beginnings of such a plan in the *PR Department Critical Tasks* and the department’s *Student Achievement Goals and Objectives*, but they need to include many of the elements in the following Action Steps.

Action Step

Align the communication plan with FNSBSD’s Strategic Plan.

The development of a formal communication plan is needed to align the communication effort with the FNSBSD Strategic Plan, and the new Strategic Plan that is under development. This is particularly important as changes are implemented so that the vision and direction of district leadership is communicated clearly and consistently. Aligning communication goals, strategies and activities to broader district goals also makes the Community and Public Relations Office and the communication function more accountable for its role in impacting the “bottom line” – student achievement. Since Goal 2 in the plan already lists “Effective Communication” and Goal 3 calls for “Parent and Community Engagement,” the district has the philosophical underpinning it needs to move forward.

The ultimate goal of any school district communication program is to have a positive influence on student achievement by engaging parents and ensuring a well-informed and supportive community and staff. During the last 10 years, NSPRA has been collecting evidence through the [Communication Accountability Program \(CAP\)](#) that supports the hypothesis that communication does have a positive

impact on achievement. School leaders can find more information about NSPRA’s CAP project, including formal and informal research collected, on the NSPRA website at www.nspira.org/cap.

Action Step

Determine the components of the communication plan.

There is not one “correct” way to develop a formal communication plan, but a good plan should follow RACE (Research, Assessment, Communication/Implementation, Evaluation) model, beginning with research and assessment. The following components constitute a plan based in sound public relations theory:

- The first step in creating a plan is **research** – determining all communication, public relations, marketing and engagement activities currently underway in FNSBSD. This should not be limited to the responsibilities of the Community and Public Relations Office, but should include the efforts of all staff and individual schools to build relationships with district stakeholders. This will create a more accurate picture of how communication is integrated into district and school operations and provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks that fall under Community and Public Relations, and those for which the Director can provide assistance and support to other staff.
- The next step involves **assessment** of current strategies and activities and reviewing the recommendations in this report to develop goals and action steps that address communication needs. As noted previously, this does not mean that the Director is solely responsible for implementing all communication strategies. That would be unrealistic for a small two-person office. All employees share responsibility for the communication effort, but the office should have the responsibility to track and assess all communication activities and to assist colleagues in understanding and fulfilling their roles as communicators. We saw evidence that some solid efforts have already been taken to assess the effectiveness of current efforts, such as biennial opinion polling and the PR Department Feedback Survey. Another aspect of assessment is identifying target audiences. Similar to the focus groups convened for this communication audit, groups should include:
 - **Parents** – which may be broken down by grade levels, “involved” and “non-involved” parents, and parental organizations such as the PTA.
 - **Students** – such as high school Student Council leaders or active club members;
 - **Employees** – teachers, principals, administrators, office staff, other support staff;
 - **Business, military and community partners** – civic leaders, faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, Realtors (an important audience who can be invaluable allies or damaging detractors), and others active in the schools and community;
 - **Elected officials** – city government, borough officials, state legislators;

- **“Empty nesters,” seniors** – and other community members without children in FNSBSD;
- **Alumni** – the graduates of the district, either living in Fairbanks or elsewhere; and
- **Media representatives** – local newspaper editor and reporter, regional newspaper contacts, radio news directors and TV news reporters.

Key messages should be created to disseminate to each target audience. An initial message could be that FNSBSD is taking steps to improve communication and provide an account of what is happening, including information about:

- How effective communication has a positive impact on student achievement (parent involvement, community support, and well-informed staff);
- Board and administration commitment via policy and goals;
- This communication audit; and
- Development of a formal, written, strategic communication plan.

A more specific message might be one related to an issue such as facilities improvements or addressing issues and perceptions regarding state assessment scores.

Also important in the assessment phase is determining desired outcomes or changes in behavior that can be measured to evaluate the plan’s effectiveness. Examples of measurable objectives include:

- An increase in positive statements from employees about “being well-informed,” measured via comments in staff meetings, meet-and-discuss sessions, surveys, focus groups and evaluations;
- Recognition by parents, measured via surveys at school events;
- Number of people who agree to serve on an Key Communicator Network (see Recommendation 4); and
- Recognition of school success stories by non-parents, measured by a community survey.

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

- In the **communication/implementation** step, continuing/ongoing activities and new activities to be implemented must be determined. The recommendations included in this report provide some direction for identifying communication activities to accomplish the desired outcomes. Other ideas may come from discussions about key messages related to the strategic plan or from a group such as a communication advisory council (see Action Step that follows). Responsibility must be assigned to someone for each action step to ensure accountability and completion.

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

- Equipment;
- Materials and supplies;
- Printing and duplicating;
- Advertising;
- Professional development;
- Staff travel;
- Subscriptions; and
- Professional dues/fees.

As another budgeting consideration, Community and Public Relations may be able to better serve the district if a process is developed for school and department administrators to alert the office to any communication activities they have planned or would like assistance with during the year. Incorporating all such activities under the “communication” function can help realize economies of scale in the purchase of supplies and printing services.

- Finally, regular **evaluation** of all communication activities should take place to determine whether outcomes were achieved and to refine the plan and consider the addition of new tactics and strategies. The communication plan must be a dynamic document that can be updated as needed given the fast-paced changes in school district needs and operations that occur in today’s environment. NSPRA can provide examples of school district communication plans upon request, and the auditors are available to provide advice and counsel to the Director.

Action Step

Evaluate all tactics and activities.

Especially important to an effective communication plan is the evaluation component. We recommend that specific evaluation components be planned for each of the goals and activities conducted under a new communication plan. Being able to measure outcomes will be important when decisions must be made about continuing specific communication activities given limited resources and staff capacity.

Research required for formal evaluation does not have to be expensive and time consuming. There are several effective tactics that can be employed. Some suggestions include:

- **Reader/user surveys of publications.** Conduct surveys annually or biennially to determine reader expectations and desires and how well they are being met by the publications. Surveys can be conducted online or by distributing handouts to parents at parent-teacher conferences, open house programs or PTO/PTA meetings. Some schools use inexpensive web-based options such as

SurveyMonkey as well as mass notification systems that have at least some limited phone survey capabilities.

- **Focus groups.** Determining parents’ opinions also can be accomplished in short focus group sessions as part of school open house programs or PTO/PTA meetings. Questions should focus on one or two specific school or district communication vehicles and activities. Longer focus groups (such as those conducted for the communication audit) could be held during the year as part of the ongoing planning process.
- **Reader/user surveys of the website and social media platforms.** In addition to analytics measuring use of the website and social media, interactive surveys could be used to determine satisfaction with the content of these communication vehicles. The website should have a section containing an evaluation form, and evaluation questions should be posted periodically on social media to solicit responses.
- **Parent and community survey.** A random sample, scientific survey could be conducted of parents and community members (households without children enrolled in district schools). An option used by some school systems is a telephone poll. These can be conducted inexpensively by working with a business partner or sponsor that would provide staff volunteers to spend a few hours phoning community residents.
- **Exit/entrance surveys.** Questions relevant to specific communication activities could be included on exit and entrance surveys given to families and staff when they leave or enter the district.

Action Step

Consider creating a communications advisory council or an ad hoc issues team to gather input and help frame messages.

Educators often frame issues very differently from the public, and in order to connect with and engage stakeholders, FNSBSD needs to understand the public’s perspective and present messages in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences. A communications advisory council or issues team composed of parent, community and staff representatives could provide assistance in assessing and framing messages around specific issues impacting the district and identifying key delivery vehicles and strategies to incorporate into the communication plan. As FNSBSD moves forward with personalized learning and a possible shift to K-8 schools, this step will be especially vital.

FNSBSD also may be able to tap the expertise of business, military, university and community leaders who are interested and willing to assist the district with its strategic communication efforts. Seek out community members with a background in public relations, communication and marketing who would be willing to share their expertise. This council could provide ongoing input regarding strategies and tactics for the communication program, as well as serving as a “sounding board” whenever changes to the plan

are proposed. Members of the council could become strong allies and advocates for the district if they are kept engaged in issues impacting the schools.

Action Step

Review and update Board policies and administrative regulations to reflect communication program changes.

Current FNSBSD School Board policies contain a number of references to communication and public relations. We recommend that once a strategic communication plan is developed and implemented, district leaders review policies related to communication and consider any needed updates. District and Board policy should reflect current practice and account for new initiatives, particularly those in electronic communication and social media.

Action Step

Consider a district-wide survey to assess the effectiveness of the new communication program in two years.

Statistically valid research is a solid foundation from which to evaluate the district’s new strategic communication program. The communication audit is an important first step in evaluating current communication efforts. Audits offer qualitative feedback; they provide a snapshot of opinion based on feedback from small groups of stakeholders. They provide important insight and serve a valuable purpose as districts begin to assess the quality of their communication programs.

A professionally conducted survey (or one done in-house using similar methodologies) takes the effort a step further by providing quantitative data. Quantitative data can be projected to represent the broader community. We encourage FNSBSD to consider creating a regular survey schedule designed to update the Board of Education on public opinion. The current survey that the district does of parents should be expanded to the broader community. Repeating several key questions – to both groups – over a number of years gives district leaders insight into community perceptions over time. It enables the district to determine differences in attitudes between parents and the general public. If the district elects to survey its stakeholders via a statistically valid survey, questions should be included that are designed to help evaluate the communication program. Give the renewed program a chance to take off and then look for feedback from the community on what is going well and what still needs attention. Asking these questions every two years would enable FNSBSD to make effective course corrections to the communication program to keep it on track.

Recommendation – 2

Focus the vision and priorities for the communication program.

The Community and Public Relations Office attempts to be responsive to a myriad of internal and external audiences and the staff is involved in a multitude of communication, public relations and engagement activities, both strategic and tactical. The day-to-day communication demands alone of a large and complex school system can easily consume staff time. Such demands can leave little time or resources for strategic planning and evaluation. This can result in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools. Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. When “urgent communication” becomes the focus, proactive communication opportunities that support the district’s overall mission and goals can easily be overlooked.

Because Community and Public Relations has not had a written communication plan to help guide its work, it has not always been able to keep core functions and initiatives on track with strategic outcomes in mind. This *Communication Audit Report* and the comprehensive communication plan outlined in Recommendation 1, in conjunction with FNSBSD’s *Strategic Plan*, should be used to determine critical communication and engagement priorities and outline the related roles and responsibilities for all administrators and staff. The key to a successful communication program is ensuring everyone understands the driving vision, what the district is trying to accomplish, and how all can contribute and support the effort.

The Community and Public Relations Office is staffed with two skilled professionals who handle the official communications for FNSBSD and support the schools’ efforts, but communication is ongoing on multiple levels in a large district so more direction is needed to ensure accurate and effective two-way communication is taking place. It is now time to increase the focus on organizing and stabilizing a consistent foundation for effective communication that includes *all* district leaders. For example, just as the Accounting Services Office is responsible for creating the official district budget, it also develops capacity for central office and school administrators to prepare department and building budgets as components of the official district budget. Budget expectations and responsibilities are part of each administrator’s job. This same goal should apply to the Community and Public Relations Office – to increase the communication capacity of all district leaders. Effective leadership and effective communication go hand in hand and should be viewed as an integral part of administrators’ roles.

Action Step

Set communication expectations for all administrators.

Effective communication starts at the top in any organization and a school district is no different. In a district the size of FNSBSD, it is critical that the superintendent lay out a set of clear expectations for the entire administrative team that includes an accountability component. Communication expectations

should be articulated in writing and distributed and discussed at district-level administrative meetings so that there is no question about each team member's communication role and responsibility. In order for principals and department heads to serve successfully as the lead communicators for their schools and offices, FNSBSD leaders must, 1) Define expectations for communication; 2) Clarify what it means for administrators; 3) Remind them regularly expectations and their role as communicators; and 4) Evaluate their efforts and results.

The role and responsibilities of the Community and Public Relations Director and her staff should also be delineated, along with the support the department will provide to individual administrators as needed. The same accountability should apply to the Executive Directors in modeling communication for other administrators and staff. Successful communication efforts depend on FNSBSD leaders setting very clear expectations for administrators and staff.

Action Step

Clarify communication responsibilities and define guidelines for administrators.

One of the findings that emerged from the internal focus group discussions is that administrators did not have a clear sense or understanding of their specific communication roles, which contributes to the inconsistency in messaging and information dissemination throughout the district that was noted by the focus groups. While some administrators are effective in managing communication in their departments or schools, others are not following through in closing the communication loop or they see that function solely as the responsibility of Community and Public Relations.

There does not appear to be a clearly defined process for message dissemination, so that instead of important information cascading throughout FNSBSD in a timely manner, bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. As noted in the prior Action Step, communication responsibilities should be clarified for administrators at all levels.

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

- Outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared;
- Set guidelines for what administrators are authorized to disseminate;
- Designate specific target audience responsibilities (internal and external);
- Provide tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department-to-school communication;
- Identify specific communication vehicles to maximize effectiveness and efficiency; and
- Provide forms for noting key messages and reporting the outcomes of meetings.

By establishing a common understanding of the communication responsibilities of district administrators, FNSBSD can broaden its reach and ensure the timely cascading of information while creating more capacity for the Community and Public Relations Office to focus on overarching strategic communication priorities.

Action Step

Provide training to support administrative leaders to become effective communicators.

As communication takes on a greater priority for FNSBSD leaders, the Community and Public Relations Director can assess what support is needed to assist administrators with their communication efforts. In order to increase communication capacity, appropriate training opportunities and support materials must be provided for leaders to be effective communicators. The survey of principals conducted as part of this audit showed that many would welcome more guidance and assistance. Conducting a needs assessment of individual administrators should be the first step to see what type of training should be offered in the future and how it might best be delivered.

Areas of need may range from media relations to face-to-face communication and engagement, to marketing, to crisis communication, but once expectations are set, the district must provide the support administrators need to improve their communication skills. Providing regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans as well as new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, cultural competency, and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their important communication role.

Given the size of FNSBSD, we believe it is particularly important to train principals in media relations so that they can serve as the spokesperson for their campuses on routine issues rather than depending on the Community and Public Relations Office. As lead spokesperson for the district, the Director serves as the point person on major policy and on crisis-related communication, but at the building-level her role should be to provide support and guidance for principals as needed on the positive stories and routine events that occur on school campuses. Since people generally relate most readily to their neighborhood school, it is critical that those leaders at the building-level accept and succeed in the role of “chief building communicator.”

Action Step

Re-examine and continue to improve the communications component in the evaluation process for administrators.

FNSBSD has a component in its evaluation system for administrators that relates to Effective Communications and Parent Involvement and Community Engagement. That is commendable. It is an important final step in ensuring timely and consistent communication in a large district. The expectation is set, it is supported and then it is monitored. One way to approach this is to create rubrics for communication that allow individual administrators to focus on the skills that he or she may still need to

be a successful communicator in FNSBSD. (NSPRA’s [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking resource (available in NSPRA’s Online Store at www.nspra.org) could be useful for this purpose.) Additional training may be required or a successful administrator in this area may be assigned to serve as a mentor for a peer in a similar position in the district.

Another way to continue work in the area of evaluation is to assign a yearly goal around one particular aspect of administrators’ communication responsibilities. An example of this might be: the school website or part of the district website is up-to-date with content; the crisis plan is up-to-date and staff training has been held; or communication about the *Strategic Plan* has increased and reached a broader audience. This goal can then be discussed and evidence of progress shared in the evaluation conference because the expectation was set at the beginning of the school year. This approach to monitoring is helpful when a communication gap has been identified and there is a need to focus on closing it across the district.

Recommendation – 3

Improve message consistency and frame issues for clarity and transparency.

While FNSBSD’s *Strategic Plan* provides a strong foundation for communicating specific messages around a dynamic set of goals and objectives, it is also essential to identify issues and projected solutions inherent in this work and build them into the plan. Proactive communication can be fostered by implementing an issues framing process that breaks down the communication elements to provide a clear framework for articulating and targeting key messages. This involves:

- **Identifying key issues impacting the district** as well as challenges and opportunities related to accomplishing the *Strategic Plan*;
- **Determining what different stakeholder audiences need** and want to know about each issue as well as the best vehicle for delivering the information;
- **Framing choices and options** in language the public can understand; and
- **Engaging stakeholders** in helping to realize positive outcomes.

A major challenge FNSBSD faces as a large school system serving geographically diverse communities is ensuring consistency in the communication of key messages and information. Improving message consistency was a major theme across the focus groups. Focus group participants not only noted the need to improve message consistency across the district, but the timeliness of delivery was also a frequently mentioned concern.

FNSBSD has made positive progress in improving transparency and expanding engagement opportunities. It must continue to work on rebuilding trust around new initiatives such as K-8 schools and personalized learning. Ensuring that important issues like these are clearly framed and delivered consistently will help to strengthen the overall communication effort and forge more productive community relationships.

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

Action Step

Use communication planning and assessment questions to guide decision-making.

Communication – how, when, and what to share with others – is often an afterthought in the decision-making process of many organizations. By incorporating several planning questions into discussions of major decisions, communication is integrated into the process and not overlooked or added on at the end. These questions help raise awareness about important communication issues, highlight the importance of closing the communication loop, and are also helpful in shaping decisions. This process can be used as a regular component of cabinet meetings and adapted for department or school-level meetings. It can be used at Board of Education meetings as well. Planning and assessment questions include the following:

- ✓ **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- ✓ **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how to outline the issue or problem from the district’s perspective, and how to present it to stakeholders.
- ✓ **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 internal and external stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for 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 statements or “talking points.”
- ✓ **What are the potential objections or issues that might be raised?** Identify questions, objections or concerns in advance, and address them proactively.
- ✓ **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.
- ✓ **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.

- ✓ **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson on the issue with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.
- ✓ **What “talking points” need to be shared with FNSBSD employees?** Identify critical information items that all staff should have in order to speak in “one clear voice” and be positive ambassadors for the school system.

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

Action Step

Continue to provide talking points on important topics and critical issues.

To ensure that district leaders and staff speak in “one clear voice” on breaking news and important issues, it is important that they be provided with talking points that target the messages FNSBSD wants to deliver. For example, as the transition to K-8 schools is completed and boundaries are realigned, it will be especially important to ensure that frontline employees can clearly articulate the changes and respond to questions from parents. Another example would be making sure staff can describe the Schools of Choice when questioned by parents or community members who may have moved to the area from another state or country and don’t understand the differences. In the event of a crisis, basic response statements and messages should be provided to district and school front office personnel and teachers because they will be fielding questions from parents and the public.

This strategy can also be applied to more routine activities that take place during the year. Create a calendar of times when schools are likely to be holding events that bring parents into the schools – open houses in the fall, parent-teacher conferences, holiday and spring concerts, etc. Provide talking points for principals and teachers to use as they are meeting with parents. This is also an ideal time to distribute information to parents. For example, at a parent-teacher conference, the teacher can deliver one or two key messages about goals or a new academic initiative, and then offer a related one-page fact sheet.

In addition to talking points related to a specific issue or topic, whenever Board members or administrators are asked to provide a general overview of the district at meetings of parent or community groups, they should have a list of programs and initiatives that highlight the Strategic Plan goals as well as information on progress toward those goals. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that school system leaders appreciate having it in order to feel confident that they are truly voicing the district’s position and key messages.

Action Step

Use a Communication Responsibility Grid.

One way to address inconsistencies and assist communication follow-through with meetings is to consider using a responsibility management grid for each meeting where decisions are made or responsibilities set. It helps with closing the communication and responsibility loop. The ambiguity of “who does what” for each resolved agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. The grid can be an e-template sent to all administrators and their assistants so everyone is on the same page. This type of grid can also be used with any councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated. Rotate the responsibility for completing the grid when possible to engage administrators in the process.

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Who Is Responsible for the Next Step	Timeline/Deadline
1			
2			

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add three boxes, “FYI,” “To Be Shared” or “Confidential” to the right of meeting agenda items. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with that 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. The Communication Grid could then be employed. Simply noting what is to be done with specific agenda items will help ensure that the right people are informed in a timely manner.

FNSBSD may have developed a similar process, but the point is to identify steps for communicating important information so that everyone is in the loop. Time is valuable to everyone, especially in meetings. Making communication a priority on meeting agendas follows through with the communication expectations set for FNSBSD administrators.

Action Step

Create internal “toolkits” for introducing new policies, initiatives, boundary realignment and bond information.

Whenever a new policy, program, or initiative is introduced, each school should not have to “reinvent the wheel” in order to explain and roll them out. Provide a toolkit with resources such as the following:

- Related background, research, and articles;
- PowerPoint visuals and scripts for presenting information to staff;
- Templates;
- Effective practices;
- Teaching and learning resources (as applicable) – videos, lesson plans and interactive materials; and
- Tips for collaborating with colleagues from other schools.

This type of toolkit would ideally be posted in a Staff Portal page (see Recommendation 6) where resources can be added as they are developed, and staff at different sites can upload examples of what they are doing, discuss issues they are facing, share ideas, etc. By being proactive in getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the frontline of communication, FNSBSD can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the gap, thus co-opting the district’s ability to manage its message and communicate effectively.

Action Step

Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.

Clarity and transparency are facilitated by communicating the rationale behind decisions and reporting the outcomes on all issues and projects. Although it is understood that district leaders always strive to make good decisions on behalf of FNSBSD students, negative perceptions and misunderstandings can emerge if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with the staff and community. Explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale behind decisions that impact specific schools, programs, projects and procedures, and then reporting back to them on results will help complete the information loop and build trust in leadership. A critical role for Community and Public Relations is ensuring that the rationale for decisions is communicated, along with the outcomes.

AS FNSBSD prepares to transition to some K-8 schools, it will be critical to keep stakeholder audiences (and taxpayers) informed and involved in every stage of the process. Communication should be designed not just to provide information, but also to build community pride and ownership of the schools. This will be key as FNSBSD guides families and staff through the challenging process of shifting neighborhood loyalties to new or different schools. In some focus groups we heard that the district is “pretty good at saying *what* it’s doing but not so good at explaining *why*.”

This strategy also extends to any committees, improvement teams and advisory councils. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with any studies, recommendations or reports so that group members don’t think their time has been wasted or their input wasn’t valued. Communication follow-through is critical to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way. This is particularly important for

employee groups as focus group participants indicated they often feel their input is sought for appearances but not given real consideration.

One simple tactic the Board can employ to ensure the communication loop is complete is to incorporate regular updates into its meeting agendas. By reporting on the status of decision-making processes and the implementation of actual decisions as the district moves forward on each step of the Strategic Plan is a more effective communication strategy than waiting to announce the final outcomes. It also allows stakeholders to ask questions and offer input throughout the process, rather than just at the beginning and end, leading to more buy-in and a better-informed public.

Recommendation – 4

Create a focus on personal, one-to-one communications.

In an era of increasing technology, it is all too easy to slip into the habit of over-relying on computers, smartphones, tablets and other devices to handle our communication needs at the expense of personal contact. One of the themes that emerged in the focus groups was a desire that FNSBSD not fall into that trap. We concur. While there has to be a place for email, autodialer calls, text messages and websites, personal contact trumps all other methods for creating trust and confidence, building goodwill and fostering public understanding and support. For example, the automated phone menu rather than a live receptionist at the district headquarters was mentioned several times as an obstacle to easily accessing needed information. The need to balance between the human touch and fiscal realities is often difficult.

Focus group participants expressed a clear desire for FNSBSD to provide more options that allow them engage in meaningful ways with both the schools and the district. We encourage district leaders to create more “listening” opportunities and pathways for stakeholders to have an authentic voice in decisions that impact students, staff and the schools.

Action Step

Develop a formal Key Communicator Network.

A Key Communicator Network is a formal program designed to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community and staff and can be a powerful communication tool. Although current technology has made it easy and convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of people in a timely fashion, it does not replace the value and effectiveness of face-to-face communication with a small group of influential community and staff opinion leaders. We recommend that FNSBSD consider extending its outreach by developing a formal Key Communicator Network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with key stakeholders within the community and district. These individuals, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” in advocating for the schools.

What makes this type of group effective is that they are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents, are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. FNSBSD can use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas, as a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents, and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns. This group could be jointly facilitated by the Superintendent and Director of Community and Public Relations to elevate the level of participation by positioning it as an important community connection group for city, borough, military and other community leaders.

Implementation steps for developing a Key Communicator Network include:

- **Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.** The individuals invited to participate should be credible and trusted members of target audiences identified by the district; people that others go to for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building.

Ask principals, district administrators and Board members 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, ask *those* individuals who *they* consider to be opinion leaders in the community. PTA leaders play a very important communication role throughout the district and should be engaged as allies and advocates and included in the Key Communicator Network.

FNSBSD’s network should also include veteran and retired teachers and support staff, and senior citizens in the community. Add the names of elected officials plus local leaders of well-known civic organizations, foundations, businesses, and churches within the district. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

- **Hold an orientation meeting with invited leaders.** During this meeting, the Superintendent and Community and Public Relations Director should discuss the vision for the district and the participants’ role as important conduits for information. Review with them the Strategic Plan as well as any other pertinent studies and reports. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the Key Communicator Network – one at the start of the school year to discuss upcoming plans and another at the end to review accomplishments. Depending on the number of leaders identified, it may be more effective to break them into smaller groups that meet at different times. This can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.
- **Encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information, rumors or misinformation about FNSBSD or individual schools.** Key communicators should be given a “hot line” number or email (usually the Community and Public Relations Office) to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. Whenever such information is reported,

district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate, and inform the Key Communicator Network of the district's response.

- **Develop a regular e-update specifically for the Key Communicator Network.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information. A short, bulleted e-update sent on a regular schedule (monthly or quarterly) can serve this purpose well and ensure key communicators have solid talking points on priority issues. In addition to disseminating information, updates can alert the group to breaking news (i.e., crisis situations) and help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about critical initiatives. Key communicators also should receive any regular publications such as the Superintendent's Quarterly Report covering a wider range of district issues using a shorter, more condensed format for a quicker read.
- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** It's important to ascertain whether the Key Communicator Network is functioning effectively and meeting the district's needs as well as those of the participants. Questions that might be asked of key communicator participants could include:
 - ✓ How satisfied are you with the operation of the Key Communicator Network?
 - ✓ Is the information FNSBSD provides you accurate and timely?
 - ✓ How frequently should we meet?
 - ✓ Are the e-updates serving your needs?
 - ✓ Who else should be invited to join the Key Communicator Network?
 - ✓ How can we improve the Key Communicator Network?
- **Hold an appreciation event at the end of each school year.** Invite key communicators to a breakfast or luncheon at the end of the year to thank them for their support and involvement. This event should be hosted by the Superintendent and attended by the Board of Education members. Celebrate the year's successes in FNSBSD.

Action Step

Create connections and expand communication with "empty nesters."

"Empty nesters" and senior citizens are a growing and important resource for today's schools.

Not only can they provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors, and mentors, as voters they also have a great impact on the district. School systems can benefit by finding ways to serve this growing population while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students. In the focus group with the Board of Education, this group was identified as underserved and in need of renewed attention. Some ideas to consider include:

- **Create a team of “parent mentors,”** once-active parents whose children are now grown, to assist new parents in navigating the school system and to mentor them in how to work effectively as partners with teachers and the school.
- **Promote involvement opportunities in community newspapers and publications.**
- **Have students publish a newsletter containing articles on teaching and learning** in today’s schools. Distribute it to senior and community centers and post it on the website.
- **Include “empty nester” representatives as Key Communicators and on committees.**
- **Create a “News of Interest for FNSBSD Patrons” section on the website homepage** with short items of specific interest to taxpayers, such as budget information, facility issues, and events open to the community, as well as important updates on district initiatives. Keep the site fresh by posting new information weekly and rotating more static information like how to volunteer, or how tax dollars are used.
- **Encourage student groups with an interest in technology to teach interested senior citizens new communication skills** (i.e., using digital photo and video software or social media sites).
- **Make annual presentations at senior and community centers** on what schools are teaching and include students from different grade levels in the presentation.
- **Send extra yearbooks and school publications to senior and community centers.**
- **Contribute school information to senior residence and community center newsletters.**
- **Provide informational materials for doctor/dental offices** or other businesses where people sit while waiting for services.

Action Step

Consider establishing a CEO forum with members from local government.

The Superintendent, the Mayors of Fairbanks and North Pole, the Borough Mayor as well as the Chancellor of the University of Alaska Fairbanks have much in common. All direct and manage complex organizations with obligations to their employees, stakeholders and taxpayers. All depend, to one degree or another, on state funding. They also have interdependent and overlapping constituencies. During the focus groups we heard that there are sometimes surprises and that these other organizations get caught off-guard by decisions, directions and initiatives undertaken by FNSBSD. To minimize such gaps and increase overall community cohesiveness, we recommend that these leaders meet with some regularity, at least quarterly.

In other communities with similar forums, these meetings are often informal events held over breakfast or lunch. They are done without other staff being present and have no formal agenda. Rather, they are designed to foster common understandings and a free flow of communications with a focus on working together to maximize resources and improve the quality of life for the entire area.

Action Step

Maintain a strong focus on Parent Engagement and outreach strategies.

The district is building a framework through its Parent Engagement Committee (PEC), which has provided a comprehensive report in September 2016. It is encouraging to see survey data, with mini-surveys proposed for ongoing feedback. The direct parental input is critical in assessing needs and future direction of engagement efforts.

We recommend appointing a lead for the Parent Engagement effort. At the time of the audit, there was not an identified staff lead for this initiative. Many of the parent initiatives were being managed by the Community and Public Relations Office, and as a recommendation, the Director of Community and Public Relations could be considered as the lead. Having a clearly identified person offers accountability and responsibility for the significant work outlined in the PEC report.

An issue that was raised in the parent focus groups during the audit concerned guidance counselors not providing adequate direction for students. Some minority parents felt that counselors evaluate their children based on perceptions, and not on the actual student. The parent/principal interaction step in the PEC report may provide an avenue in the future to address parental concerns and frustrations over issues like this.

For online support for parents, consider creating an item in the “Families” drop down menu of the website entitled “New to the District” (see Recommendation 6). Although there is much information that currently exists under “Enrollment Information” that is useful, an area that quickly provides new families with information can be particularly helpful, given the number of military families who are relocated into the district. Useful information is already on the site, but could be better organized under the New Families header.

Expand the information that PowerSchool offers to parents. In the focus groups, PowerSchool received positive mentions, but there was also an expressed desire that it provide even more information. Parents already accustomed to PowerSchool felt it was a ready-made channel to help them understand what was going on with their children. Another suggestion would be to use video as a PowerSchool learning tool in addition to the online manual on the website.

Action Step

Consider developing an Alumni Association of FNSBSD graduates.

The Fairbanks community places a high value on its members, and to those who have come through the district. FNSBSD can tap into the well of graduates who can be a source of pride and community support for their accomplishments. Creating an alumni group offers a resource of success stories and extends the connection to the district. There were many positive mentions about Superintendent Gaborik as a district graduate, and alumni are a living reminder of what the district has accomplished through its graduates.

Action Step

Provide additional opportunities for public input.

To solicit greater participation from parents and community members, consider offering additional opportunities for stakeholders to express their opinions and thoughts about critical issues, in addition to speaking at a Board of Education meeting. We suggest that FNSBSD leaders consider the following tactics and activities and determine those that are feasible and appropriate for the district:

- **Hold Board of Education listening sessions.** These could be held several times a year, for a half-hour before the start of a work/study meeting. Board members can hear about issues and concerns directly from parents and community members. The meeting room should be set up with several round tables, with a Board member and administrator at each table. This tactic would enable stakeholders to converse in a less intimidating and more personal manner with district leaders. It should be clearly stated that these are “listen and discuss” events and that no decisions will be made based on conversations that take place. It is helpful to post a specific topic for each session so they do not become open-ended “venting” sessions. FNSBSD leaders also need to honor the official “chain of command” for addressing individual complaints.
- **Continue to expand opportunities for public input that do not require attending a meeting.** The district has begun using technology to allow stakeholders to submit comments on issues via email or the website, which is a strategy that should be continued. Mail-in comment cards are also an option. Offer online opportunities that allow constituents to record their comments or reactions to a specific question, issue or proposal before the Board. Some website providers now offer dialogue applications to facilitate engagement that may be of future interest for FNSBSD as the website is improved and expanded. Another option is to provide comment cards at Board meetings and in schools that ask a specific question about an issue the district is dealing with that patrons can write a response on and return to the Community and Public Relations office.
- **Hold “Coffee and Conversation” sessions** in the elementary schools or at a local coffee shop or restaurant partner, to give small groups of parents an opportunity to talk with principals, district administrators and Board members. These sessions should be designed to let people express concerns and ask questions in an informal setting about current issues and changes being

considered. We encourage you to use these sessions as an opportunity to share key messages about district initiatives and issues, as well as provide explanations for decisions made by district and school leaders. These can be open sessions that interested staff and parents can sign up for, or they could be structured as “by invitation” sessions with invites sent to randomly selected people or to individuals identified by school and parent leaders. Times should be set to accommodate working parents and we encourage district leaders to consider some Saturday opportunities.

Recommendation – 5

Expand stakeholder communication through a multi-channel effort.

FNSBSD also faces significant communication challenges in reaching all stakeholders due to the lack of technology infrastructure in some areas of Fairbanks. This limits the district’s ability to effectively deliver information electronically as there are many families and staff who have limited or no access to the Internet, who live out of range of cell phone towers, or cost is an issue. This impacts not just communication, but is also an issue for those unable to access PowerSchool to know the progress and status of their students from home.

No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community, but these infrastructure limitations make it especially important that FNSBSD take a multi-channel approach to delivering information. The challenge is in making sure interesting and important information is regularly available in a variety of convenient formats, ensuring people know where to find it, and creating opportunities for positive interaction.

FNSBSD should consider conducting a survey of families to determine what digital services and communication vehicles (i.e., computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) they do have access to and of those, which is their preferred source. This is also important, as there are expenses associated with some delivery sources that may be an economic issue for some families. Surveys can be mailed home or distributed at parent-teacher conferences and open houses, or questions can be included with school enrollment paperwork.

The advent of social media and a wealth of new communication technology tools have greatly expanded how stakeholders can get information. We commend FNSBSD for continuing to expand the use of social media. Parents in the focus groups noted that they rely on Twitter and Facebook for news and announcements, especially on weather-related closures and bus stop changes. The Facebook page is being fully integrated into the communication program and has grown to over 6,500 followers. The district also has a sizeable following on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

In order to deliver information to parents and community members more proactively, it is important to balance print and electronic communication and address publications from a reader perspective. Also consider how they can be used for marketing efforts. We encourage FNSBSD to consider not only how information can be “pushed” to parents and community members more proactively, but how the school system can more effectively “pull” stakeholders in by becoming the go-to source for “what they want,

when they want it.” Lack of access to information is not the problem. The key in a world where the public is saturated with communication from multiple entities, both at home and at work, is getting stakeholders to read materials.

In addition to delivering key messages and important information to parents and community members, it is important to address communication vehicles from a reader perspective as well. If an e-publication or social media site is not delivering the information they need, people will hit “delete” and seek other sources. Annual readership/user surveys should be conducted to ensure publications and online offerings stay on target and remain a valuable source of information.

A consistent management system for all of the communication options for internal and external audiences should be established and communicated so that families and staff understand how and where to access specific information as needed. Develop a list of all communication vehicles for internal and external audiences that outlines the purpose and intent of each vehicle and how to access the information. This will help guide users to the appropriate communication option to meet their needs. This reference list should be available on the website and be distributed in other communication vehicles and at school sites, so that users are aware it exists.

Action Step

Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.

Part of the transition from information delivery to strategic communication is increasing FNSBSD’s ability to tell its own story well. As news media outlets, particularly newspapers, find the business climate increasingly challenging and difficult to sustain, their ability to cover education in-depth has diminished. There were several mentions in the focus groups about perceiving the media as taking a negative view of the district. This is often the result of how educators see the role of the media, and how media sees its role. In today’s information rich environment, it is important that FNSBSD establish direct lines of communication with stakeholders.

This does not lessen the need for FNSBSD to be responsive to the media, which continues to play a role in the Fairbanks community. It is important to maintain a solid working relationship with reporters and editors. However, this focus needs to be balanced with effective direct communication efforts.

As noted above, FNSBSD has done a good job in building its social media networks. The Facebook page is frequently updated and an effort is made to respond quickly to comments, questions and concerns posted. More in-depth research is needed into the analytics of the various FNSBSD digital platforms to find out the demographics and user-patterns for content development. These are likely to vary from parents to business/civic leaders to “empty nesters” and staff, and the more these preferences can be broken down to match audiences and vehicles, the more effective and efficient the overall communication effort will become.

A strategic communication program should focus on developing and maintaining transparent two-way communication designed to reach stakeholders directly in a myriad of ways. By continuing to build strong

relationships with key stakeholders, FNSBSD will be more successful in delivering its message and communicating in “one clear voice” to its stakeholders.

Action Step

Be more purposeful about using advisory committees and other groups as key communicators.

FNSBSD has a number of committees that connect with specific audiences, though their effectiveness as communication conduits can be improved based on comments from the focus groups. It is not enough to say that you have Advisory Committees (Audit Committee, Citizen Budget Review Committee, Board Curriculum Advisory Committee, Board Diversity Advisory Committee, Legislative Committee, Parent Engagement Committee, and Policy Review Committee) and assume that action and information shared with them filters to the constituencies they include. There was concern in the focus groups about how to increase participation in the advisory committees. A systematic communication process for these groups should be defined and shared broadly with the audiences represented in order for committee members to become effective communicators on behalf of the district.

Many school systems utilize the power created by Key Communicator Networks to create knowledge and understanding, and prepare both internal and external participants as ambassadors to deliver key messages (see Recommendation 4). FNSBSD has a significant number of advisory councils and committees that are very involved in the district and the schools. We recommend that in addition to engaging these groups in their specific charges and tasks, FNSBSD also include them in its group of “key communicators.” By helping these stakeholders become effective advocates for FNSBSD, the school system can tap into a powerful resource for expanding its message to the broader community.

Action Step

Seek ways to target information about students that is meaningful to parents.

Parents in the focus groups expressed a strong interest in receiving more information from the schools and teachers directly related to what their children are supposed to be learning. PowerSchool has built a strong foundation on providing grade information to parents online, and the focus groups wanted the system to provide even more information. Some parents were interested in receiving or having access to more information from guidance counselors on the college application process, i.e., course requirements, application timelines, etc., so they do not miss critical windows. Providing this access would address some circumstances where parent expressed a lack of full confidence in guidance counselors.

What NSPRA knows from our work in school systems across the country is that parents want useful and timely information about what their children should be learning throughout the year. With this in mind, it is very important to frame information and messages whenever possible in the context of how it impacts their children. If you want to get parents’ attention fast, target your communication at a personal level and how it directly relates to their children’s education. Create a regular feature in the FNSBSD app and

develop short videos of teachers explaining grade level learning targets in simple terms. Focus on presenting information from the perspective of how parents can help their children succeed in school.

Action Step

Treat students as an internal audience and as a communication conduit to families and the community.

Although the school is the main focus of the educational experience for most students, they also should be treated as an internal audience to share information on decisions that directly impact them. It's important to remember that students keep their parents informed about what is happening at school and in the school system – if they feel it is relevant. Ensuring that students are informed and engaged can be a vital strategy in engaging parents. Some suggestions for communicating with students include the following:

- **Students rely on their teachers for information**, so provide key messages/talking points to teachers, especially at middle and secondary school levels. Information about graduation requirements, courses available, career options, college application processes, scholarships, and exam schedules are of high interest to high school students.
- **In-school announcements and assemblies are an effective way to reach students.** Provide schools with scripts for PA announcements. Create PowerPoint slides for the schools whose announcements are presented on TV monitors. Brief PowerPoint presentations or videos could be shown at assemblies. Leverage the student announcements by packaging them into an email update for parents.
- **Use social media to reach students.** Research the social media networks FNSBSD students are using to target information to them. Young people often feel Facebook is for parent use and are less likely to use school websites if information is not directly targeted to them. Twitter and Instagram are more often their go-to tools, but it would be wise to survey first and gather student input to ensure effective outreach.
- **Update websites more frequently with student use in mind.** Research what kids are looking for and provide new content or links to other areas to make information more accessible.
- **Communicate the FNSBSD mission and goals to students in a way that is relevant and meaningful to them.** Help students understand how district goals relate to them and impact their education. Brief information segments could be added to student announcements, and video clips illustrating relevant activities can be posted to Facebook and Twitter.

Action Step

Maximize school newsletters and websites as key communication tools.

School newsletters and websites should be viewed as an important component of the overall communication effort and be used to help deliver key messages and operational information about FNSBSD to parents.

Including a short FNSBSD news section in school newsletters and on websites is an effective way of getting important information in front of parents. Parent focus group participants said their stated preference was to be able to use a single source, preferably their school website, to obtain all information.

Use school newsletters strategically to reinforce key messages about the district rather than repeat information already available on the school websites. These should be framed in the context of how they impact each child's education to catch parents' attention. Community and Public Relations can prepare short messages for principals that can be copied and included under an "FNSBSD News for Parents" heading, making it easy for the school and ensuring message consistency across the division.

The "FNSBSD News for Parents" section could include topics such as:

- Brief updates on progress toward Strategic Plan goals;
- Facility updates;
- Decisions particularly relevant to the school (i.e., schedule or boundary changes; renovations; new programs, etc.);
- Reports on student achievement and safety concerns;
- Reports on policy/curriculum decisions and Board action items;
- Advocacy and legislative news;
- Budget updates; and
- Updates on other issues impacting the schools.

Keep length and readability in mind and use only two or three timely updates for each newsletter issue.

Action Step

Increase the use of short videos as communication tools.

Video is a proven strategy to engage audiences through sharing "soft news" and positive success stories about FNSBSD. Brief videos can inform stakeholders about the work driving educational innovation and what is being done to ensure students receive a high quality education that allows them to become successful citizens. Videos can also be an avenue for Superintendent Gaborik and the Board of Education to personalize the district as it fulfills its mission.

Using the technology that exists today, short videos can be produced, with relatively minimal investment, for use on multiple communication channels including website, social media platforms, e-newsletters, presentations and meetings. As opposed to longer training videos, these videos should be designed to highlight the successes of the district, students and staff. The district can also use its YouTube channel as a dynamic news feed for the community, maintaining a timely and future-focused perspective by addressing current and emerging issues facing the district.

As an example, NSPRA features a video of the week in its *NSPRA This Week* e-news, regularly highlighting videos produced by school districts and schools. Photos and videos that connect audiences to the students and schools are part of the Glenbard South High School Facebook page, produced at intentionally low cost. It can be seen at facebook.com/GlenbardDistrict87.

By keeping stories short and using links to provide additional information to interested readers, a range of topics can be addressed. Stakeholders want pertinent information but they tend to want it in “small bites” that can be scanned quickly for critical points. Consider using headlines to provide key information for those who only scan articles or the titles of videos (i.e., *New Features Added to PowerSchool*) and bold words or statements in the copy that you want readers to remember.

Video testimonials from new parents and students stating “I chose FNSBSD schools because...” or “I love my new school because...” could be created and incorporated as a branding/marketing feature on the website. In addition, consider using short segments from district alumni, demonstrating the value of the education they received from FNSBSD and its teachers and staff.

Increasing video communication immediately may be dependent on resources and staff capacity in the Community and Public Relations Office, but should be incorporated into the overall Communication Plan as a long-range goal.

Action Step

Increase the focus on diversity and inclusive communication.

With the diverse and mobile nature of FNSBSD’s population, it is important to expand the focus on inclusive communication strategies as well. Diversity needs to be understood in the broadest sense, creating a welcoming environment for every child, family member, and community member, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, family structure, religion, differing abilities, or sexual orientation. FNSBSD needs to think carefully about any individuals or groups who may not currently see themselves reflected in the life of the schools or district, or those who face barriers, be it physical, mental, emotional, or linguistic. Ensure that every communication plan has a diversity/inclusion component. NSPRA’s [Diversity Communication Toolkit](#), available as a free download to NSPRA members, could be a helpful resource in expanding communication to diverse audiences and building cultural competency.

Action Step

Assess whether district and school processes are welcoming for all types of families.

Do registration forms accommodate same-sex parents and blended families? Do school communications go only to the parent with primary custody or are there flexible arrangements for separated/divorced parents? Are there provisions for students with specific religious requirements? Are translated forms or assistance available for those who don't speak English? Conducting a review of current processes will identify areas that need to be improved or procedures that should be added.

Another effective strategy for non-English-speakers is to connect parents electronically with a multilingual outreach team. If bilingual staff members are geographically scattered, few in number, or unavailable to assist non-English-speakers, a strategy being used by some school systems is to use online virtual chat options such as Skype or Google to quickly connect an interpreter or outreach specialist with newcomers in any school or office. Training school and central office secretaries on these virtual meeting tools makes every school a welcome center, and starts new families who don't speak English off on the right foot by connecting them with a friendly staffer who speaks their language. This strategy could be used any time an interpreter is needed, especially in an emergency or time sensitive situation.

Action Step

Use the website as a communication hub for all families.

As updates to the website are made, FNSBSD also should begin to investigate ways it can be used to communicate with non-English-speaking families. Although the website includes a Translator feature, the district should not rely on this type of general translation tool for important documents or key messages, as these translations can transcribe words but lack the context to communicate accurate messages.

When resources allow, consider including predominant language links on the homepage that direct non-English-speakers to translated information and important documents. Providing clear positioning and direction that allows these families to access key information, notices, news, resources and contact information for ELL staff will extend a welcoming atmosphere and help build a respectful and understanding relationship with the district and schools.

Two districts that do an excellent job providing translation support on their websites are [Peel School Board](#) in Ontario, Canada, and [Minneapolis \(Minn.\) Public Schools](#). Speakers of languages other than English can now find information about their schools in one click from their website homepages. Webpages have been created in Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish and Vietnamese among others to enable non-English-speaking families to more easily find news, documents and information about services. Visit their sites at www.peelsb.com and www.mpls.k12.mn.us for ideas on how to use the website for multilingual communication.

Recommendation – 6

Make the FNSBSD website “communication central.”

A school district’s website should be everyone’s go-to communication tool. Based on the responses of focus group participants, and our review of the site, the website can be improved. While some participants listed it as a primary source of information, others said they rarely if ever visit the site and many felt it was difficult to navigate and contained outdated information.

Action Step

Continue to assess and expand content.

The tabs on the website homepage segment audiences fairly well, but we believe there is an obvious omission. In a community with a large and fluid military population, it is curious that there is no tab or section for new families, or those “new to the district.” Although there is specific information for military families within the registration section, we would recommend that it have a more prominent place on the homepage. Not only should it contain information on how to register for school, but also featured prominently should be marketing material on living in Fairbanks, major employers in the community, UAF, shopping and all the information newcomers typically look for.

Action Step

Improve and expand the Administrative Services Section.

In its current form, this section of the website is best described as minimal. It is a repository of required documents such as District Adopted Budgets, Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, forms and documents etc. What is lacking from an interested citizen’s perspective is any explanatory material or guidelines on how to read and understand what’s there. We recommend that a special “How to Understand the FNSBSD Budget” document be developed as soon as possible and posted prominently. If it is designed in a pdf format, it could also be distributed as a stand-alone brochure. As the district looks at a challenging financial environment and ongoing concern about budget cuts, such financial material will take on even greater importance.

While the following two school districts are much larger than FNSBSD, we offer the budget sections of their websites as exemplars and food for thought.

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/budget/>

<http://www.houstonisd.org/budget>

Action Step

Seek input from website users about their needs and preferences.

We recommend convening several focus groups from internal and external audiences to delve into their opinions, experiences and suggestions for improving the website. Additionally, consider adding a comment feature to each major section or page. To make the website more interactive, site visitors should be asked to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or by emailing responses. Feedback links that let users offer comments could be made available in most sections. Comments collected from these links can offer valuable insights into the information needs of users – and how well the current site is meeting them.

Action Step

Use the website to deliver key messages.

Information placed on the website should be considered in the context of how it delivers key messages. Borrowing from a tactic many morning television news shows are now using, FNSBSD should consider creating a “Four Things to Know This Week in FNSBSD” slide box that focuses on what people should know if they don’t have time to scan the website for any other news. Make sure that it includes an RSS feed. This is another strategy that would add to the multi-channel communications mix.

Action Step

Continue to review website analytics to direct the integration of key messages.

As the website improves, it will offer a great deal of information for target audiences. However, most people head to a website for very specific information, such as school listings, the district calendar and event information, job postings or the staff directory. Regularly reviewing website analytics should provide insight into how to integrate key messages into the most visited pages.

Action Step

Add a Frequently Asked Questions section to the homepage.

A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section in the “About Us” menu on the homepage would be a useful resource for the public and staff. Keep it current by asking central office and school secretaries and other staff to track the questions they are most often asked by callers. These can then be compiled and added as updates.

FAQs can also be used for “myth busting” and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another a prominent spot on the homepage

for easy access. School and district publications should promote the website as a source of information when people have questions. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be accessible within no more than two “clicks” and not buried deep within the website.

The district is commended for adding a “District Facts” feature to the *About Us* section since our onsite visit. It provides useful information to a variety of audiences.

Action Step

Include a “How to Use this Website” page on the homepage.

Many focus group participants said that they have a difficult time finding specific information on the website. When site visitors’ experience becomes time-consuming and frustrating they will seek information elsewhere, which the focus groups indicated is happening. To help address this problem, post tips and guidelines for navigating the site and finding specific content areas. In addition to being a helpful tool for site visitors, it will save time for office personnel who often have to guide parents and others through the site by phone.

Action Step

Strengthen the marketing components of the website.

The redesign of this important communications tool is an excellent opportunity to rethink how the website fits into the overall marketing and public relations efforts for FNSBSD.

Action Step

Investigate how the website can be used more effectively as a staff intranet and communication tool.

The “Staff” section of the website currently functions as a resource vault and doesn’t include current news, updates or key messaging about the direction and goals of the district. As district leaders consider these website improvements, we recommend that you investigate adding a true staff intranet site. We believe it would be more advantageous to have an “employees only” intranet that contains current information that staff should be aware of along with relevant HR and professional development information, forms, meeting calendars and responsibility/action grids and minutes, important announcements, etc. Post time-specific “news to know” and reminders at least weekly, and as the site is developed over time, plan to add interactive components that will allow staff to submit ideas or comments, ask questions, share innovative instructional practices and communicate with each other. A staff intranet also would allow the district to segment relevant information to specific staff groups (i.e., instructional, support, administrative, etc.). It should also allow a single login rather than multiple ones as is now the case.

It is also important that staff be kept apprised of information that is being shared with parents and the public and provided with related talking points so that they are prepared to answer questions or clarify issues. Include links and updates on information being distributed to parents and the public along with a short statement explaining that as frontline communicators and “ambassadors” for FNSBSD, the district wants to make sure employees are well informed in advance. Doing so will create an enormous amount of goodwill among employees who now say they are too often overlooked and out of the communications loop.

Action Step

As time and resources allow, work with individual schools to improve their websites.

There is a wide range in quality among school websites. Some are fairly good in terms of content and timeliness while others are clearly an afterthought. In the online survey of principals we conducted, several said they welcomed support and training in this area.

Recommendation – 7

Build capacity in the Community and Public Relations Office to focus on strategic communication needs.

As FNSBSD’s communication needs evolve with the advent of advanced communication technology and social media, the Community and Public Relations Office is increasingly challenged in balancing critical strategic communication with the daily information tasks, media response, and small crises that can consume staff time in large systems like FNSBSD. In order to keep pace, it is imperative that the department continues to adjust and transform itself as FNSBSD changes. Consideration must be given to how the office can build the capacity needed to focus on strategic communication that is aligned with the Strategic Plan and designed to meet the communication expectations of staff and constituents.

FNSBSD is fortunate to have a knowledgeable and skilled communication professional in Sharice Walker, who is highly respected by staff and the community. The office has a Communications Coordinator, but that person is also responsible to support Board of Education meetings with video, consuming a significant amount of available time. Even with the current situation, including no dedicated secretarial or administrative support, the Director has been able to put a solid communication program in place and has done an impressive job to date in managing multiple major responsibilities. However, it is our assessment that the department is now beyond its capacity to expand the communication effort without additional support. In fact, when principals and administrators were asked how the office might better support them and their communications responsibilities, a majority simply shook their heads and said there was nothing more that could be accomplished with such a small staff.

Action Step

When resources allow, consider adding a Webmaster/Social Media Specialist.

We encourage district leaders to consider creating a position that would be responsible for managing the district website, providing support for school website content and managing the district's growing social media presence. These related functions would allow FNSBSD to make full use of the variety of opportunities and potential for making its websites and social media core components in telling the FNSBSD story in a way that resonates with stakeholders. This position would also support televising and recording Board meetings, freeing the Communications Coordinator to concentrate on communications tasks.

Action Step

Add the Director of Community and Public Relations to the Superintendent's Cabinet.

NSPRA considers public relations to be a management function and that the Director's position be positioned to provide strategic counsel to the Superintendent and other senior leaders. That function can best be fulfilled when the Director of Community and Public Relations is in the room as a full participant when issues are first raised and decisions are being made. Only then can she offer her advice and counsel and be best equipped to understand and communicate the thought processes leading to decisions. This is especially critical during crisis or emergency situations, when it is important to establish the most effective means to communicate with FNSBSD stakeholders.

Action Step

Turn a critical eye on communication tasks and ask the hard questions.

We urge Community and Public Relations to take a hard look at all of its functions and ask how current projects and tasks fit into and serve the Strategic Plan. Some questions to ask include:

- What would happen if a specific program, task or service were eliminated?
- How critical are the ramifications of the program, task or service to Strategic Plan goals? If eliminated, how will they be impacted?
- What goal does the program, task or service fall under?
- How will the eliminated program, task or service provide more staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives?

Community and Public Relations staff should be the best judges of what should stay and what should go based on their assessment. Every great communication office always has too much to do, so eliminating a task or function should not be threatening. The cuts may even include a sacred cow or two that may be

upsetting to those who feel some personal ownership. But now is the time to make room for new, critical, strategic measures that support FNSBSD’ desire to be a leading school district.

Action Step

Evaluate and track time on task.

The Director of Community and Public Relations and the Communications Coordinator are involved in a variety of different projects related to the communication effort at both the district and school level. In order to ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful to record the actual time spent on each task. This would allow the Director to evaluate efficiency and determine if there are tasks that take time away from communication priorities that could be shifted to other departments or that could be managed differently.

Create a workflow plan to track each ongoing task or special project (i.e., e-newsletters, special events, crisis communications, media response, Board and policy tasks, website updates and social media posts, mobile app updates, etc.). This will allow for quickly assessing the status of the workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary. Sharing this information with cabinet members can also build awareness and understanding of the communication function and help set priorities for the year.

Action Step

Evaluate outcomes as well as outputs.

At the culmination of any major communication initiative, campaign or project, evaluate success in terms of outcomes, as well as outputs. For example, preparing support materials, media releases, etc., for kindergarten registration is an “output.” An increase in the number of inquiries and registrations is an “outcome.” Evaluation should also determine which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which can be improved in the future. This evaluation step is critical in demonstrating the impact strategic communication has on FNSBSD’s goals.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

FNSBSD is a district where leaders and staff are committed to providing students with a high-quality education. With the development of a new Strategic Plan, the district is moving forward under a strong leadership team to accomplish its mission and goals and build its reputation as a quality school system.

FNSBSD faces the same communication challenges all school systems face in today's complex education environment. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and district leaders understand that effective communication is critical if the school system is to move forward. By making communication and engagement major goals in the Strategic Plan, FNSBSD leaders have acknowledged the need to improve in this area.

Making the commitment to improve communication is the first step in creating an exemplary communication/public relations program that builds support for education and understanding of the important role public schools play in our communities and nation. We believe that FNSBSD has the components necessary to continue to improve and excel – strong leadership, dedicated staff, solid community support and a commitment to planned, strategic communication.

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report*. The recommendations offer strategies and tactics designed to address immediate needs, as well as those that are ongoing or that we believe should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. **There is certainly more here than can be accomplished in a single year.**

The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping FNSBSD to not only enhance and expand current efforts, but to continue incorporating new components that allow it to take the communication program to the next level. This report is intended to serve as a “roadmap” for the future and a compendium of best practices in school communication that the district can use as a resource to build and expand its communication program. **New communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow.**

There are a number of recommendations that apply to all departments and schools that the district can begin implementing right away, but it would be unreasonable to expect the Community and Public Relations Office to undertake more than two or three of the major recommendations in a year given current responsibilities and staffing. This report can serve as a planning guide for the next several years to help keep the work on track.

It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem unmanageable or overwhelming. FNSBSD has made significant strides in developing a solid communication program over the past few years and is increasing the use of new communication technology. The recommendations presented are not intended for the Community and Public Relations Office alone. All FNSBSD leaders must be accountable for improving communication and taking the lead in some of the areas addressed in this report.

We encourage district leaders to review the recommendations in this light and with an eye to how specific communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among administrative teams. The Superintendent and Board of Education will need to prioritize recommendations and future staffing considerations based on budget and resources. You may also choose not to implement some recommendations. We have provided a broad spectrum of options based in proven practice that will allow FNSBSD to focus on those it feels are most applicable and appropriate to current needs.

Strategic communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. It is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. FNSBSD has an experienced leadership team that is well positioned to build on the foundation of the existing communication program to ensure it meets the needs of a growing, 21st century school system.

Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions
- What Is NSPRA?
- Auditors' Vitae

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Questions for Public and Staff

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
 - From your perspective, have perceptions about FNSBSD changed in recent years?
2. What do you like best about the schools here?
 - In what areas can the district improve?
3. When it comes to communication with you, what does FNSBSD do well?
 - In what ways can communication continue to be improved?
4. What (or who) is your best source of news and information about the district and the schools?
5. What is the best way for the district and schools to deliver important information to you?
(For parents)
 - Is PowerSchool a helpful tool for you?
6. Is the content on the district website helpful and informative?
 - Is it easy to find what you are looking for?
7. Is the content on your school website helpful and informative?
8. Are the district's social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram) helpful sources of information for you?
 - Which do you use most often?
 - Do you use the district's mobile app?
9. *(For staff)* As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
 - Are current communication vehicles effective in delivering information?
10. Do you feel that district leaders provide opportunities and truly *listen* to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
 - What kinds of engagement opportunities would interest you?
11. What is the greatest communication challenge facing FNSBSD in the future?

Additional Focus Group Discussion Questions for Administrators

- As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job?
- Are your communication responsibilities clearly delineated so that you know what information to share, who to share it with, and when?
- What are your greatest communication challenges in your role?
- How can the Community and Public Relations Office better assist you with your overall school/department communications?

Questions for School Board Members

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
 - From your perspective, have perceptions about FNSBSD changed in recent years?
2. What do you consider to be FNSBSD's greatest strengths?
 - In what ways can the district continue to improve?
3. When it comes to communication, what does FNSBSD do well?
 - In what ways can communication continue to be improved?
4. Which of the district's current communication vehicles (i.e., the website, social media, quarterly newsletter, etc.) do you think are most effective in delivering FNSBSD's message? Why?
5. Do you feel that the opportunities now provided for people to have input and express their views on important decisions are being accessed?
6. What is the greatest communication challenge facing FNSBSD in the future?

Questions for Student Leaders

1. What do you like most about your school(s)?
2. What has been the best part of your high school experience so far?
3. What could the school do better to improve your high school experience?
4. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?

5. How do you learn about what's going on at school and around the district?
6. How can FNSBSD better engage students in decisions that impact your education?
7. As a student, what information is most important for you to receive from your school and the district?
 - What is the best way to deliver information to you?
8. Do you ever visit your school website? The FNSBSD website? Are they helpful to you?
 - How could they be improved for student use?
9. Do you follow FNSBSD or your school on social media?
 - What social media do you use?
 - Do you use the district app?
10. What does the community need to know about your high school and FNSBSD schools?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Auditors' Vitae

Frank Kwan, APR

Frank Kwan, APR, Director of Communications for Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) in Downey, California., has held leadership positions in the fields of both media and education. He currently oversees communications and marketing for the educational programs and major initiatives of the nation's largest regional educational agency that serves 80 K-12 school districts. Frank has an extensive background in marketing, public affairs, digital media, video, community relations, professional staff development, and special event management.

As Director of Communications for LACOE, he provides strategic counsel on public relations and marketing to the superintendent, senior level management, and the Board of Education. He also supports communications requests from the County's schools districts as well as coordinating emergency planning and response, acting as the K-12 liaison to the County government's Office of Emergency Management.

Frank directs the efforts of the Communications department in producing effective and award-winning results in multi-channel marketing, media relations, social media strategies, video production, online learning support, publications, constituent relations, strategic partnerships, and crisis/issues management. In addition, he is also the Executive Director of the Los Angeles County School Trustees Association, composed of more than 500 K-12 school board members and community college trustees.

He came to LACOE from NBC 4 Television in Los Angeles. His positions included executive producer, director, writer, and on-air host; he produced news, public affairs, documentaries, and special event /political programming. Frank's experience includes communications consulting for national organizations and has served as a communications auditor for the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

He has been active in the National PTA, serving on the Board of Directors and as chairman of the National Communications Committee. Frank served as NSPRA President in 2011-12 and as the Vice-President for Urban Issues from 2001-2003.

He is the recipient of major awards from NSPRA, the California School Public Relations Association, and the Public Relations Society of America. Frank's work in broadcasting was recognized with four *Emmy* Awards and two National Education Association's *Advancement of Education Through Broadcasting* awards. He has also received the *Jimmy* Award from the Asian Pacific American Artists Association and *Image* and *Imagen* award nominations from the NAACP and the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

Frank has been a senior lecturer at the University of Southern California and is also active in community organizations in the Los Angeles area. He is Accredited in Public Relations (APR) by the Universal Accreditation Board.

Steve Mulvenon, Ph.D.

Dr. Steve Mulvenon has a 42-year career in public education as a high school teacher, debate coach and administrator. He retired in 2010 after spending 24 years as the Director of Communications for the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada. In that leadership position, he successfully oversaw the passage of four bond issues, started the district's school-business partnership program, launched the first district website, began a comprehensive community engagement process (for which the district received NSPRA's highest award, the Gold Medallion), a parent involvement program, and oversaw the move into a coordinated social media program. He also served as the district's principal media spokesman.

Before moving to Nevada, Steve held a similar position with the Salina (Kan.) Public Schools serving as its first Director of Public Information. He served two years as the president of the Kansas School Public Relations Association (KanSPRA). While in Kansas he also served for two years as the Director of Admissions for Marymount College.

Steve has been a presenter at various national conferences including the NSPRA National Seminar, the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association annual conferences. He has authored a number of articles for NSPRA's online publications on topics such as marketing, test security, parental involvement, copyright infringement and media relations. In 2009, Steve was honored by the Sierra Nevada Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) with induction into its Hall of Fame.

He has taught graduate level classes in school/community relations for both the University of Nevada's College of Education and the Reno campus of the University of Phoenix. He is active in the Reno community and currently serves on the Community Advisory Board for Reno's PBS station (KNPB) and is the past-president of the Board of Directors for the Northern Nevada International Center.