

NSPRA's **Communication Audit Report**

Prepared for the
Chesterfield County Public Schools
Chesterfield, Virginia

March 2008

National School Public Relations Association ■ 15948 Derwood Road ■ Rockville, MD 20855 ■ www.nspra.org

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Introduction

The goal of the communication audit

Superintendent Marcus Newsome and the members of the Chesterfield County School Board are committed to improving communication between the schools and the communities throughout Chesterfield County. This audit was contracted for, approved, and supported by the Board and superintendent. It clearly demonstrates their willingness to risk change in order to improve educational communication and to continue and enhance the culture of support for the Chesterfield County Public Schools (CCPS).

The challenges of maintaining public confidence, dealing with an expanding and increasingly diverse constituency, reaching broad consensus on the local priority of education, and communicating effectively on emerging issues with all segments of a growing population affect not only the division but the community as well. Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of school employees and community representatives, it was obvious to the auditors that there is a solid base of support for, and pride in, the division. It is respected as a leading division in all of Virginia as those we interviewed held your staff and programs in high regard.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to propose recommendations that could ensure improved management of your communication and community relations efforts, enhancement of two-way communication and engagement, and the development of a better understanding of your Design for Excellence initiative.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the division's community relations office or any other department, they are intended to improve communication in a school division that is committed to addressing the challenges of education in the 21st century.

It is difficult to measure public relations. However, you can assess individual elements. You can determine whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program — including a public relations/communication program — is to determine whether it is helping the organization work toward its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the auditors reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of the division's plans and strategies for CCPS.

As noted above, throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of internal and external audiences, it was obvious to the auditors that CCPS has an excellent reputation in the community. However, the challenge of reaching out to all segments of the community is great. Maintaining public confidence and support, reaching broad consensus on the local value and priority placed on education, and engaging people in meaningful ways require constant diligence and continuing open and honest communication. Evaluating communication efforts must take into consideration a variety of factors, including the increasing diversity of the community you serve.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of CCPS provides an important foundation for developing a comprehensive communication plan for the division. The audit gives you information about attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and it offers recommendations to enhance the overall community relations program. The audit also gives you a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. Developing 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 more than 20 focus groups who were almost equally divided among internal and external groups. In addition, the auditors met with members of the School Board, the media, and the community relations department staff.

Division officials invited focus groups participants to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group sessions were 50 to 60 minutes long and were held on October 22, 23, and 24, 2007, with the following groups:

- Principals (3 groups)
- Seniors
- Parents (4 groups)
- Community members (3 groups)
- Teachers (3 groups)
- County Council of PTAs and PTSA Executive Board
- Bus drivers, custodial, and food service
- Office managers — Central Office
- Office managers — Schools
- Non-teaching professional staff
- Superintendent's direct reports
- Faith leaders
- Education committee of CBC
- CIS Board and CPEF Board

Processes and procedures for this audit

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communication from an “outside” perspective. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the division’s current communication programming;
- Elicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns, and perceptions of focus group participants who represented various internal and external stakeholder groups that are important to the success of communication; and
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and for improving the management of public relations, marketing, and communication activities for CCPS.

Seasoned communication professionals with many years of experience in educational public relations and communication performed this audit. The auditors for this communication audit were:

- **Richard D. Bagin, APR**, executive director of NSPRA,
- **Edward Moore, APR**, NSPRA consultant, and
- **Nancy Kracke**, NSPRA consultant.

Background information on each auditor is included in the *Appendix* of this report.

Step 1: Analyze materials

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the community relations office gives us samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., newsletters, brochures, reports, videos,) with various audiences. We examine these for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use.

Generally, the auditors also review the division and school web sites and items such as news clippings, demographic data, and communication budget information. We also review the division’s strategic plan, communication policies, and surveys, including a customer satisfaction survey, as well as some individual school management plans, which included examples of public engagement activities. The CCPS materials that we reviewed include:

- Super Senior Passport
- Volunteer pamphlet
- *Lifelong Learning Institute for Older Adults* pamphlet
- CCPS The Office of Business and Government Relations Facts
- *CCPS from Crayons to Computers* donation pamphlet
- 2007-2008 Elementary School Menu
- 2007-2008 Middle School Menu
- 2007-2008 High School Menu
- CIS Mentoring Program pamphlet
- Second CIS Mentoring Program pamphlet
- CCPS ACTS
- *A Day on the Job: Exploring Careers Together* pamphlet

- 2006-2007 Business & Community Partners in Education Appreciation program
- *Design for Excellence: Superintendent's Proposed FY 2008 Operating Budget*
- CIS Annual Giving Campaign flyer
- CIS Fact Sheet
- Community Relations department description
- 6/7/2007 Community Relations Divisional Chart
- 09/27/2007 News Release: All Chesterfield County schools are accredited for 2007-2008
- CCPS, a school division with the WOW! Factor
- CCPS Mission and School Board Vision for 2012
- 2007-2008 Organizational Chart
- Central Services Survey 2007
- 2012 Vision Implementation: Communication Plan
- 09/18/2007 News Tips
- 10/2/2007 News Tips
- 2007-2012 Overview and Discussion of Initial Draft of Design for Excellence
- CCPS Welcome web page
- *The WOW! Factor Minority and Critical Needs Recruitment Day* flyer
- 06/14/2007 *The WOW! Factor* newsletter
- October 2007 *The WOW! Factor* newsletter
- *The WOW! Factor* employment brochure
- *Design for Excellence* brochure
- 2007 R.E.B. for Teaching Excellence Awards flyer
- CCPS Mission Statement
- 2007-2013 Design for Excellence Strategic Plan: Goal 1
- 2007-2013 CCPS Six-Year Plan Overview
- 2007- 2013 Design for Excellence Strategic Plan: Goal 3
- 2006-2007 MCD Award brochure
- August 14, 2007 School Board Work Session
- 2004 School Bond Fact Sheet
- 3/21/2007 *Leadership and Communication: Next Generation Academy*
- *Crisis Manual*
- 06/10/2007 *CCPS at a Glance: Candidates Briefing*
- *Chesterfield County Fall 2006 Program Guide*
- 9/18/2007 *The Community Weekly*
- 10/16/2007 *The Community Weekly*
- *CIS of Chesterfield 2004-2005 Annual Report*
- *Design for Excellence 2006-2007 Annual Report*
- *Secondary School Choices* view book
- Chesterfield Technical Center 2007-2008 Course Offerings
- Foundation brochure

Step 2: Conduct onsite focus groups and survey of principals

The core of the audit is the onsite focus group component designed so that we can listen to and gather perceptions from the school system's internal and external audiences. In the audit of the Chesterfield County Public Schools, we met with 18 focus groups and conducted individual and small-group interviews with key division leaders and communication staff. We guided each focus group through similar sets of discussion questions. We report participants' responses in *Perceptions of the Focus Groups* in this report. In addition, we conducted a survey of Chesterfield County school principals on their methods of communication and additional needs they may have for assistance from the Community Relations office. For the results of this checklist survey, see the *Appendix*.

Step 3: Prepare recommendations

After reviewing the materials and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared recommendations, which we present in the *Recommendations* section of this report. The recommendations concentrate on strategies that the division can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve its overall communication practices.

NSPRA's guiding definition

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

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

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

Our assumptions

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

However, some caution should be observed about the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are elicited about an institution and its work, people have 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 about what may need to be changed. The auditors also noted a large number of positive comments during the review of the CCPS Community Relations Department, which speaks well about your present program.

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

Identifying perception and communication gaps

Another purpose of an audit is to discover communication gaps. Often we hear completely different “facts” about the same program from internal audiences and external audiences. Frequently, the internal audience knows the facts and can’t believe what we hear from the external audience. But both audiences are telling us what they know and believe. This falls into the maxim that “Perception is reality.” More importantly, it pinpoints a content communication gap, calling for a communication solution.

Another type of gap deals with the understanding and knowledge of communication programs and activities. For example, some external audiences may say that the division does not have a partnership program when, in fact, the division is proud of the accomplishments of its partnership program. Once again, a gap exists between perception and reality. The communication effort needs to make more audiences aware of its partnership program. Learning about perception gaps and ways to fill them is another component of the communication auditing process.

Recommendations

In response to our key findings, this report contains recommendations for improving communication with CCPS’ internal and external stakeholders, and specific comments and recommendations for the Community Relations Department. We based the recommendations on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around the country.

Supportive quotes

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

Copies to participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement — along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility — we recommend that each focus group participant receive a copy of this report for review and feedback. If you cannot send the full report, we recommend sending a summary of the report for their review.

Key Findings and Professional Observations

Overall findings and observations

Overall, we are pleased to report that the Board and top management of CCPS are to be commended for the commitment they are making to the communication and community relations function. CCPS is fortunate to have a well-structured communication team and, with some refinement based on the findings of this audit report, it can also become a more valuable asset to your total division.

As all top communicators realize, the function changes according to the needs of the division. This audit is the first step in changing some of the work of the Community Relations office and giving its leadership some opportunities to implement changes in the years ahead.

We identified several common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, interviews, and information. These, plus additional observations from our experiences and expertise include:

- **People expressed high expectations for all students — and equally high demands for the staff who serve them.** But they see the community and division as partners in these aspirations. Both division employees and community members take great pride in their schools and in their school overall. There are strong levels of community involvement and partnership in school programs. People routinely point out that new residents moved to the county because of its schools. They see the division as an important contributor to the region’s overall success — in the past and in the future.

- **Participants stressed that both the ongoing growth of the system — and the accompanying diversity and program offerings — are sources of strength for CCPS.** But, of course, many participants noted that growth trends also present challenges. They expressed concerns about the division’s ability to continue to accommodate the kind of growth it has experienced.

- **The division’s communication effort was seen as more tactical than strategic.** The team is to be commended for its productivity on a number of fronts, but we urge leadership to refine the recommendations in this audit to develop a more strategic communication effort. That will mean eliminating some current items — even sacred cows — so more time can be spent on proactive strategic communication efforts.

- **The long-standing inability of the Board and county supervisors who are not working or planning together was seen as a negative by many participants.** They see their community being driven by two governing bodies that are not on the same page. They would like to see that corrected.

- **The recent engagement effort was seen as a plus for the Board in building relationships with the community.** It has built positive expectations with your community. It is imperative that you keep the community informed and involved.

- **The Board indicated it was looking for new ways to reach the diverse populations of your community on key issues because they felt it was now lacking in this area.**

- **Community leaders wanted to know more about the future challenges CCPS will be facing.** They appreciate receiving “puff and celebration” information, but they want to know which issues you will be wrestling with in the years ahead. They also offered to help in any way that could be productive for both you and them. They too recognize how demographic changes will have an impact on the schools and the community and want to help CCPS cope with that impact.

- **A number of community leaders — whether they are part of your “Faith Group,” CIS, or foundation boards —all offered to assist in being involved and reaching more non-parent constituents in your community.** It was obvious that they care about their schools and want to keep CCPS a high-performing division.

- **Inconsistency of supervisors, principals, and others “spreading the word” was mentioned often as the reason for communication breakdowns.** Too much information from many different sources going to the same people also led to more confusion than clarity.

- **A need for a “division calendar with teeth” came up a number of times from internal groups.** Also, participants repeatedly mentioned needing a better staff directory as well as a list of the most common questions and answers about the division and your programs so that more employees can be better equipped to answer questions.

- **The newly designed web site received mixed reviews.** Some like it, but others thought navigation needed improvement. Participants also mentioned that they would appreciate a search engine for the Intranet.

- **Many publications now produced by the Community Relations office were seen as very professional, but too many participants were unaware of many of them.** More investigation will be needed to attempt to measure their impact.

- **The diversity issue — from barriers to communication, cultural differences, and related achievement gap situations — all will need increased communication and engagement efforts** as soon as they can be implemented.

- **Both internal and external constituents expressed strong beliefs that CCPS should continue to work to expand its communication programming — with a particular focus on further strengthening internal communication efforts because it was perceived to be one of your weakest areas in communication.** We must note that internal communication is not just the role of the community relations office; it rests with all employees.

- **The Community Relations office was praised by principals for its work during a crisis or potential crisis situation in their buildings.** The principals appreciate the work of the Community Relations office so they can spend time on key matters other than the myriad critical communication tasks that are created by a crisis.

- **For many, CCPS has a solid track record of scholastic and program excellence.** Some expressed the belief that these facts and examples should be highlighted in marketing-communication efforts to help build better understanding of the system and its many achievements. It will also help build support for needs that will be faced in the future.

- **Many also commended the division’s recent steps to expand its online initiatives to better use new technology to communicate.** And importantly, many also suggested that the division continue to explore ways in which it can continue to expand its technology-driven communication efforts. Participants clearly support and appreciate recent telephone messaging and online grade book programs. In particular, they praised **Parent Link** and **EdLine**.

- **Many participants were unaware of elements of the Design for Excellence** and much work and strategic planning will need to be completed to build better understanding of what this initiative means for the future of the CCPS community. You must develop key messages about the program and you need a strategic outreach plan.

- **Participants also urged the division to continue further developing the web site as an information source.** Many participants clearly expressed beliefs that online and other technology-driven communication tactics will continue to become more and more important in keeping communities informed — and linked to the division. They are looking to the division to support developing additional individual school and program web-based communication, expanding the use of e-communication to digest and report key information, and finding other ways to use new technology to serve the many existing and emerging information needs of the division’s many constituencies.

- **The media offered mix reviews on the performance of the Community Relations office.** You will need to address areas of access, responsiveness, follow-up, and equity with all news media to build stronger relationships with them.

- **Information overload is commonplace for many employees in CCPS, as it is for most school districts throughout the United States.** As an example, principals are bombarded with memos from internal and external sources, asking for feedback, reports, etc., — often with little consideration of tight and even simultaneous deadlines. Tracking these requests and creating a centralized approach to them can help alleviate this problem. This is a division-wide problem in most school systems. The communication staff may be able to help look at ways of reducing this burden for the administrative team and others. **You also need to review e-mail policies and practices** to set standards on consistency, frequency, and responsiveness.

Clearly, the future communication challenges that CCPS faces are considerable. These include:

- Maintaining programmatic excellence and public confidence in an environment that includes continued growth and expansion;

- Engaging the many new segments of a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse community;
- Addressing accountability and achievement in an environment sure to be driven by new financial challenges; and
- Maintaining a working consensus on a philosophy of education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for improvement are based on our review of CCPS materials, input from focus groups and interviews, and the experience and expertise of the NSPRA auditors. As mentioned under *Key Findings and Professional Observations*, you now offer a very comprehensive program that is one of the better programs for divisions of your size. You cover the organizational communication and operational information functions quite well. Once patrons and parents become aware of your efforts, they can find an answer to a question from your wide array of publications and web site offerings.

Many recommendations focus on looking at what CCPS is doing from strategic and relationship perspectives. We are also asking you to see if any of your current program activities can be eliminated, reduced, or replaced with additional strategic and relationship-building activities. We have touched on a few, but you need readership surveys and other evaluative measures to say with certainty which items you should drop or reduce.

Because the scope of communication vehicles CCPS offers is so wide, we could not assess the impact of each vehicle. However, we have commented on those that were mentioned during the focus groups. You will need to analyze these recommendations to see how they may be a fit with your strategic plan.

One final note is that we have given you more recommendations than you can accomplish in the next year. Select those that have the most merit and build them into your plan for next school year. Consider the others for the future.

Recommendation 1: **Stop and assess how your current communication products and services are meeting the changing needs of your division.**

If you look at the self-description to the right, you will see a very productive communication effort by a busy and competent staff. From an operational communication standpoint, it is one of the better programs we have seen in more than 100 school audits in the past 10 years. Residents seeking information receive answers. Fellow administrators praise the program and rank it extremely high. The program should serve as a model in helping principals in times of crisis.

For the most part, you send timely information to a multitude of internal and external audiences. For

Community Relations
The department's primary role is to increase internal and external understanding, involvement and support of the goals of the school division through communication, relationship building, training, recognition and legislative services.

Communication
Central Office receptionist
News releases and daily responses to media
School division web site
Crisis management
Schools Today in the Community Weekly
The WOW! Factor employee newsletter (formerly known as Direct Line)
Communication plans for projects, such as the new attendance policy
Marketing campaigns, such as WOW! Factor for teacher recruitment and Tech Center package
Printing and reproduction services to schools and departments, making 16 million impressions annually
Graphic design for schools and department publications
News Tips to media and schools each week
Comcast "School Connection" program
Publications, including parent handbook, school menus, budget summary sheet, newspaper ad and brochures
PR network in schools and departments - More than 4,000 e-mail responses annually
Emergency school closing communication through www.SchoolsOut.com
Telephone directory for schools and administrative offices
Updates to Chesterfield County and Virginia Department of Education directories
Approval of community fliers before distribution

Relationship building
Support to five Communities In Schools sites
Support for County Council of PTA
Liaison for faith community partnerships
Conduct United Way campaign for school division
Media relations
Business partnerships through CIS
Technical assistance on partnerships to all schools
Assist Chesterfield Retired Teachers Association
CIS grants and fund-raising, including \$1.6 million in private donations in less than 10 years
Programs for older adults, including spring prom and Super Senior Passport
Advisory Council of Teachers and Staff (ACTS)
Liaison for bond campaigns
Represent the school division as members or board members of community groups such as Leadership Metro Richmond, Lifelong Learning Institute, Rotary, Midlothian YMCA, Greater Richmond YMCA, Communities In Schools, Chesterfield Business Council and National School Public Relations Association

Recognition
Recognition of student, employee and school successes during School Board meetings
Teacher of the Year selection process
Annual retirement luncheon
Superintendent's congratulatory notes
Service pin program for employees
R.E.B. Awards
Success boards in three central offices
Gala for Blue Ribbon schools
Special event planning

Legislative services
Legislative liaison
Legislative conferences and issue monitoring

Staff members
Schools consistently give Community Relations high marks on the annual central services survey.

Debra Marlow
Susan Blair
Tim Bulla
Karen Payne
Martha Frickert
Sandy Pope
Brian Morris
Tony Melara
Leigh Ann McKeown
Thomas Kelly
Nicol Tinsley
Reva Mitchell
Lori Pettit

many years the program has served the role as the center for information throughout the division. It also is the hub for media relations as well as the coordinating contact and information source for numerous Board and advisory councils for the division.

Your crisis management manual is top-notch. Recent engagement efforts have also become a factor for involving the Community Relations office. When time permitted, the office also offered some creative and proactive tactics that have served the division well.

From a more global view, the current program is seen primarily as a collection of very good tactics that, for the most part, are working well. This audit, however, provides an opportunity to begin looking at the communication effort from a more strategic standpoint. And we urge you to do just that.

New division initiatives and your strategic plan are underway. Your community and your student population is changing. Growth continues to be a factor. The major question is how your communication effort helps you achieve anticipated results for your 6-year plan and your Design for Excellence program. Some of this is now underway, but more needs to be done.

When we recommend doing more, we always note that either some tactics may have to be deleted or new staff or contracted services be added. We urge the entire Community Relations team to take a hard look at all that it does and ask how the tactics fit into the new goals and plans of CCPS. It is good to look at all that you do and ask the questions once every few years:

- What would happen if this program, tactic, or service were cut?
- How critical are the ramifications of the cuts to the 6-year strategic plan or the Design for Excellence program?
- What will the cut do to provide more staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives?

The Community Relations team should be the best judge of what should stay and what should go. Every great communication office always has too much to do, so eliminating a tactic or function should not be job-threatening to anyone. The cuts may even include a sacred cow or two that may cause some teeth-grinding and upset long-term employees' stomachs. But now is the time to make room for new, critical, strategic measures to add to your division's success. The NSPRA auditors will be happy to react to the list once the current Community Relations team makes its recommendations.

Recommendation 2: Develop a strategic communication plan

Key to developing a strategic communication plan that supports the CCPS long-range strategic plan and the Design for Excellence program is establishing communication goals that link the plan to the division's overall goals and objectives. It is not enough to say that you do this; you must identify just how your communication effort helps make the division's goals achievable. It is important that communication be imbedded into all division initiatives and programs and that employees understand their roles as key communicators.

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

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

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know?
- When do they need to know?
- How are we going to tell them?
- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
- How will we evaluate the outcomes?

The strategic communication plan should incorporate communication goals and strategies that address the division's strategic plan and the Design for Excellence program. In addition, you should include some specific marketing strategies to continue to build the division's image both within and outside of the Chesterfield community. The plan should include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, responsible people, and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative.

The plan should clearly show how communication and engagement programs support the overall mission of the division. For example:

- What should the Community Relations office be doing to help close the student achievement gap?
- Which tactics (parent centers, parent centers online, translations services for parent involvement, forum for parents of at-risk students, teacher communication training, etc.) could become part of your plan?
- What would your messages be to these parents?
- Who else can help you reach these parents in a credible fashion?

The recommendations included in this report give you some proven strategies that you can incorporate into a comprehensive plan.

A strategic plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the division's communication efforts because all projects are considered in terms of whether they support the division's goals and objectives. It also helps ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm school systems and builds understanding and staff involvement in division communication efforts, encouraging them to tell the division's story in one clear voice. A comprehensive strategic communication plan also gives you a vehicle to report on progress and demonstrate accountability through evaluation criteria built into it.

However, you must remember that a plan is just that — it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in concrete. You will need to revise and adapt it as you accomplish objectives and as new communication challenges arise. NSPRA can provide you samples of strategic plans upon request.

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

Define key constituent groups and assess communication needs and modalities for each.

The communication plan should clearly indicate key groups and the most effective communication vehicles to use with them. For example, the plan might show the following:

Audience	Communication tool	How delivered?
Parents	Weekly communications from school buildings on activities, calendar items, etc.	Backpack flyers and e-mail, web site
Non-parents	Regular updates on division building plans, future direction, finances	Web site, e-newsletters, and local media
Employees	Regular updates on issues or decisions affecting the schools	E-mail, Intranet, and staff meetings

Improve the transparency of communication.

Focus group participants clearly stated their desire for open, honest, and transparent communication from the division. As you plan new initiatives and programs, you must include strategies for communicating the rationale behind these efforts and opportunities for engaging stakeholders in the decisionmaking process as essential components from start to finish.

Establish key measures for both short- and long-term communication goals.

Evaluate results by setting goals for the communication efforts. For example, a long-term goal might be, “By 2009-2010, 85% of parents will be able to articulate key elements of the Design for Excellence Campaign, and 90% of Key Communicators will be able to do the same.” A short-term goal might be, “By 2008-2009, 75% of faculty and staff will read e-mail updates from the superintendent.” Continuously assess the effectiveness of the communication plan, message delivery methods, and information provided through progress towards the key measures.

Action Step **Develop a process for identifying and framing issues so that information is clear and consistent**

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

While core value statements give you a foundation for communicating clearly and consistently, you should view managing the content and delivery of messages around key issues as the framework for the communication plan. Proactive communication involves:

- identifying key issues facing the division;
- determining what stakeholders need and want to know related to each issue as well as the best vehicle for delivering the information;
- framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and
- engaging stakeholders in helping to determine outcomes.

People appreciate hearing the “good news” about their schools, but you build trust and credibility through open communication about the business of the school system — both good and bad. The public is interested not just in what decisions are being made about educating students, but also the rationale behind the decisions, particularly in the area of funding and fiscal expenditure. It is important to foster open communication so that the school system is perceived as one that is transparent in sharing all the news. In our focus groups, business and community leaders noted that they wanted to hear about CCPS challenges as well as the good things happening in their schools.

Key issues and challenges that will affect communication in CCPS on an ongoing basis include enrollment trends, demographic changes, boundary changes, school safety, the achievement gap, new construction and its timelines, special needs programs and more. Our recommendation is that you look at these issues from a broad perspective and outline key talking points or messages that explain how decisions will be made and how they will help shape the future of the division.

Consider adding a “How This [*issue, decision, information*] Will Be Communicated” section to agendas for administrative, principal, and advisory committee meetings as well as Board meetings. This suggestion is simple, but it can help you create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. Such a reminder on agendas will stimulate discussions about decisions and issues and will lead to better and more timely communication with key stakeholder groups.

One effective strategy is to create teams based on identified key issues to help assess just what you should say and how you should communicate it. We recommend,

however, that you leave the “wordsmithing” to the Community Relations office. For each issue’s hot buttons, you may want to consider creating a single fact sheet — produced in both print and electronic versions — that you could then use in numerous ways. As an example, a fact sheet outline on building equity and space needs might include the following:

Issue at a Glance	School Building Needs
Description	<p>Growth and population movement continues to require changes in school facilities and school boundaries.</p> <p>■ ■ List key messages or talking points on this issue.</p>
Work to Date	<p>Explain programs underway to make progress in this area. Planned timelines for changing building needs.</p> <p>■ ■ This saves staff time in explaining what has been done on this issue in the past.</p>
Barriers to Progress	<p>■ ■ List items such as budget, time, community groups, approvals, etc.</p>
What’s Next	<p>■ ■ Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. List next meeting dates, if appropriate.</p>
Your Involvement	<p>You can help the Chesterfield County Public Schools with this issue by ...</p>
Further Info	<p>■ ■ List contacts.</p>

You could release these fact sheets periodically in numerous ways. You could place them on your web site as key issues. With a click, patrons could access the fact sheets easily. You could also e-mail them to your Key Communicator leader network (see the upcoming recommendation). You could adapt your messages to use them in other regular internal and external communications, thus ensuring that consistent messages on key issues are being disseminated and reinforced.

You will need to update these fact sheets as you make changes, but they could become a “go-to” resource on key issues for all school staff, Board members, community and parent leaders, and other involved people.

Action Step Develop targeted communication plans for specific initiatives as needed

In addition to the overall strategic communication plan, the director of Community Relations should develop specific communication plans for any major division initiatives or projects planned for now and the future. Your Design for Excellence program is a great example of a program that needs a communication and marketing plan so that more people understand and support the initiative.

So once again, you will need to identify and brainstorm target audiences, key messages for each audience, and the goals of the communication effort. Your Design for Excellence program must overcome the age-long “fact” that people judge today’s schools on what and how they were taught when they went to school.

Messages dealing with the need to change (*Change is big this political season, isn’t it?*) and your current message of going from good to great can help in the marketing effort. You will also need to reassure parents that CCPS is still committed to having each child attain the best of the basic past while, at the same time, leading them into the future with a new set of technological and problem-solving skills that will help them be successful in whatever they choose to do. You will then need to decide which tactics will help you deliver these messages.

This communication strategy also applies to any unexpected developments or crises that might arise during the year. With the increasing minority population that you serve, you must give special attention to planning communication for these groups.

The CCPS Community Relations team should work with those administrators and departments who are responsible for various projects to develop communication plans and help them implement communication strategies. This type of solid planning will help the division avoid the controversies that can arise as a result of poor communication.

Recommendation 3: Establish a Key Communicator or Opinion Leader Network

At our meeting with the School Board, we heard about the frustration of not enough key community leaders who understand the work of the Board and the division as you move forward. Board members also were seeking more involvement by community leaders in the strategic plan and Design for Excellence program.

The strategic tactic to help in this area is a *Key Communicator* or *Public Opinion Leader Network*. Some others call it an *Influential Network*. This network is a compilation of your community-active and “official directory of leaders” in your greater CCPS community. When implemented correctly, it will become one of your best communication vehicles to build trust and understanding with your community. It normally serves as a credibility enhancer for superintendents, the Board, and other leaders.

Here is how we see it working for CCPS:

You currently have a list of members who serve on your numerous community boards and committees and perhaps others in your community who receive your publications consistently. This list can be a starting point for identifying and expanding the key communicator list.

We recommend that you consider fine-tuning your outreach efforts by developing a formal key communicator network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with influential members of the community who, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” for the division. It can also serve as a feedback device that helps build understanding and support with this group of influentials.

We believe that expanding this to include a formalized Key Communicators’ Network would provide additional opportunities for two-way communication with influential community and staff leaders that could be very beneficial to the division.

The people you invite to participate should be credible members of target audiences that you identify; people to whom others go for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size (or divide them into groups to meet with them separately) to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building.

Some divisions about your size may have a list of 200–300 participants on the Key Communicator Network. It is normally best to meet with up to dozen people at a time throughout the year. This allows for more interaction and gives an opportunity for the superintendent and the participants to get to know one another more personally. Some districts hold breakfast meetings in their schools or the central office.

What makes this type of group effective is that it is composed of people who are respected and influential members of a specific group of stakeholders. The public perceives them as having access to “inside” information and considers them to be a believable and credible sources of accurate information. You can also use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas or

provide insight on legislative agendas, a conduit to deliver key messages to stakeholders, and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns. You should also give these key communicators a “hot line” number (usually the Community Relations office) to call if they need information or hear of an erroneous statement or rumor that must be corrected.

It is often productive to ask each principal and their clerical/administrative assistants to name two or three residents they would consider key communicators in their attendance areas. Add those people to your current list, refine it, and send a letter inviting them to participate in a new communication effort aimed at saving time and money. Ask them to fill out a directory form giving you information about where you can send them their own e-newsletter. Occasionally invite them to a small-group meeting. The only requirement you ask of them is to share information about the schools with others and to alert the schools about rumors or other matters of concern. You should also strongly encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of information communicated by the division that people do not believe is accurate.

Send periodic e-newsletters to this group about division news and challenges. Some districts use a question-and-answer format for the newsletters based on the ongoing small-group meetings. You can also send them alerts when a crisis occurs because it gives you the opportunity to tell your side of the story.

One of the keys of this tactic is the follow-through on questions that people ask. Responsiveness is a critical component of this tactic.

NSPRA offers a step-by-step *Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Key Communicator Programs* if you need more information on starting a key communicator network.

Recommendation 4: Continue to develop and expand public engagement or outreach strategies

As a component of its curriculum audit, CCPS initiated a public engagement process about the perceptions of internal and external groups. In addition, the division has used a variety of advisory committees and boards to help division leadership study and address issues and challenges. However, in our focus groups, when asked whether they feel that the division gives stakeholders opportunities to have input into decisions in general, many participants expressed doubt as to whether their voices are truly “heard” by division leaders. This perception appears to be driven in part by a lack of follow-through on the division’s part in closing the communication loop by informing stakeholders about the outcomes of actions taken as a result of their input.

That was in October during our site visits, but recent reporting about the curriculum audit is a very good step toward closing the communication loop for the people who participated in those sessions. You are making progress.

Timing is critical to all successful engagement initiatives. To include opportunities for parents and community members to participate in a dialogue with the Board and administration on major initiatives or program and policy changes that affect the schools, you must factor this into

decisionmaking timelines. While it is difficult to put exact start and finish times on any given issue under discussion, one way to begin is by determining the outside deadline for a final decision, and then working backward from that point. The bottom line for planning is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process and are not just brought in at the approval stage after you've done the bulk of the development work. It is also important to evaluate what works and what doesn't in order to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future.

Karen Kleinz, APR, NSPRA Associate Director, has counseled CCPS senior leaders and Board members on factors to consider when it comes to public engagement. One thing to remember is that not every decision requires an engagement process. One way to assess this is to consider what Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, calls *Gateway Questions* that lead to engagement:

- **Is this a problem that affects me?** — People first have to connect the problem or issue to what they deem valuable before they will get involved (or engaged).
- **Can I do anything?** — Even if they feel the problem is serious, they have to feel they can personally do something to make a difference.
- **Who will join me?** — People often feel powerless if they see themselves as acting alone, but believe they can make a difference if others like them join in.

The curriculum audit process was successful because it addressed all three of these Gateway Questions. We strongly encourage you to build on the success of this effort by using it as the framework for ongoing engagement work. Because the Chesterfield community is now familiar with the process and experienced a positive result from those efforts, great potential exists to make additional dialogues an integral part of your strategic communication plan. Some additional engagement strategies to consider include:

- **Schedule study circles on “hot topics” affecting the division.** Use study circles to address specific concerns that affect target audiences, such as overcrowding, school safety, and student diversity, etc. Because of the format and large numbers of people involved, community forums don't often lend themselves to discussing specific topics of concern in-depth. Study circles are more appropriate. Study circles are facilitated groups that involve 10 to 15 people who discuss a particular topic. They give you an opportunity to surface all sides of an issue as well as some underlying concerns that may affect the outcome. You can use study circles very effectively for individual school issues as well. NSPRA can provide more information on coordinating study circles.
- **Give the public opportunities to have input that do not require attending a meeting.** Make sure your web site includes a link that allows patrons to e-mail you questions or comments. Consider expanding this by offering a button on the home page that allows people to record their comments or reactions to a specific question or issue your division is studying. At Board meetings and in schools, provide “communicards” that ask specific questions about an issue that you are dealing with so that patrons can write a response and return that response to the Community Relations office.

- **Continue using community committees and boards to study issues and concerns.** CCPS has a variety of advisory committees that serve the division. We encourage you to continue these committees because they offer opportunities for interested stakeholders to become more involved with the division. However, it is also important to regularly evaluate their effectiveness to ensure that the work they are charged with is meaningful and directly supports the Board’s goals.

Recommendation 5: Improve internal communication

Place a strong emphasis on expanding and strengthening internal communication throughout the division. As frontline communicators, whenever possible, give employees important information before it’s released to the public and reported in the media. Regularly emphasize that employees are communicators and ambassadors for education, and support them in this effort by giving them timely information, a clear and consistent message, and training when appropriate.

Newer communication technology makes such devices as e-newsletters, interactive content areas, and blogs, much easier to use than they were just two years ago. Your Intranet could be a positive factor in delivering messages to your employees. We recommend that you consider implementing several strategies for improving communication with staff. These include:

- **Consider publishing the *WOW! Factor* as an every-other-week e-newsletter.** Focus group participants saw the current *WOW! Factor* as a nice celebratory piece with outdated, not fresh, news. They liked seeing their colleagues highlighted and saw it as morale-builder for those who were in it. In addition to the print version, you also carry the current issue on the Intranet in an expanded edition. We think that the time is ripe to make it a more effective piece that you publish more frequently and electronically.

The new *WOW! Factor* could help keep all staff focused on key division issues and messages. Done in an online format, it could be brief but could link to other articles and documents for those who seek more information on some topics — helping to make better use of the wealth of materials already in place throughout the CCPS. Survey employees to determine what type of information they would find most useful. Any employee newsletter should be a “must read” document and noted as such at all new-employee orientation sessions. You should publish it often enough that it contains current information.

Topics that we have found to be of interest to employees include:

- Policies, procedures, and rules that govern their jobs and their relations with students and other employees
- Opportunities or suggestions for improving job performance
- Best practices
- Specific updates for teachers and others about the Design for Excellence Program
- Promotional and job opportunities in the system
- Messages from the superintendent and other administrators

- Strategic plan and financial updates
- Explanations of system philosophy and direction
- Updates on projects or programs
- Legislative updates
- Background and resolution of campus incidents (for example, bomb threats)
- Communication tips on sharing information with parents and public
- Special events, activities, and awards at school sites
- Recognition and appreciation of staff achievements

NSPRA can provide samples of staff e-newsletters upon request.

- **Give all new employees an orientation packet** that includes general information about your system, your mission, beliefs, and strategic directions; an employee handbook; tips on being an “ambassador for education;” and any required forms. It is important to include support staff because they are also key communicators who are viewed as credible sources of information by the community. We suggest that you review the existing orientation program to ensure that it supports the division’s strategic plan and communication efforts. Make sure you send employees a clear message that communication is an important part of their jobs and not just a function of the principal or division leadership. Also relay the message that reading district information is a job requirement. Have the Community Relations office present at these orientations to review all items that employees receive, their purpose, and ways to contact the Community Relations office.
- **Institutionalize division e-mail standards.** Many focus group participants noted that e-mail was a powerful tool on one hand, and a growing burden on the other. Many felt overwhelmed by it and sought some standardization that may help streamline e-communication with parents and their colleagues. With the advent of e-mail and other online communication options, parents and community members have much greater access to teachers, school administrators, and Board personnel. While this is positive and increases opportunities to communicate, it is also important to set reasonable timelines for responding to requests and inquiries.

We suggest that you create a committee of staff members and parents to develop a set of guidelines for e-mail communication. These should address response times (for example, all contacts will be returned within 48 business hours) and expectations for using these communication tools, such as what constitutes unreasonable demands of a teacher’s time (for example, how many daily e-mails you should respond to from a single individual or what the expectation is for an immediate response). Once you determine these guidelines, widely distribute them to staff and parents. Also include them in student handbooks and on the web site.

- **Visit schools.** Whenever possible, administrators should find ways to visit the schools and support buildings, share information directly with employees, and create two-way communication opportunities with staff. No one has enough time to make this happen regularly. But our recommendation is to get out to the schools without much fanfare as best as you can. You may want to write about these visits in your superintendent’s blog to demonstrate that your leaders are visiting schools and seeing great work in action.

Not only is this an excellent opportunity to get better acquainted with division employees, it provides first-hand information about their interests and concerns. Also consider scheduling regular coffees or “brown-bag forums” where the executive central office administrators can informally meet with staff to listen to ideas and concerns, share progress reports, and discuss issues and initiatives. Plan visits in advance so that staff who wish to talk with these administrators will know when and where to find them.

Focus groups reported that the ACT program lacks follow-up and that is another area you may want to address when it comes to communicating with employees.

- **Celebrate staff contributions and efforts.** In today’s busy world, it is easy to overlook the daily efforts of staff and forget to take the extra time to say, “Thank you.” You do a nice job of this now, but producing an e-newsletter on a more timely basis gives you more opportunities to do this. Most educators shy away from formal recognitions, but the small day-to-day acknowledgments of their efforts can make the difference between a motivated or disgruntled staff.

We recommend that the division, individual schools, and departments seek out ways to celebrate successes and express appreciation to staff for their efforts on behalf of students. This can also be a great opportunity to engage a diverse group of employees, certified and classified, to brainstorm possible recognition and celebration activities.

Develop a standard procedure for reporting the outcome of meetings involving staff. Some school representatives are more conscientious about reporting back than others, so there is often a lack of consistency in the amount and quality of information distributed. One way to address this problem is to designate one person to regularly attend a specific meeting and to keep information from the discussion in a grid that includes the topic, decisions made, responsible parties, timelines, etc. You can share this grid with meeting participants, place it on the employee section of the web site, and use it to report actions and outcomes from the meeting. A grid makes it easier to track the discussion as it takes place and eliminates the need for lengthy minutes.

Make sure that key clerical and administrative support staff receive copies of these reports because they noted that they often feel out of the loop on results from meetings that they do not attend.

A sample grid may look like this:

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Who Is Responsible for the Next Step	Deadline

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Some suggestions for disseminating key messages internally include:
 - Communicate messages to staff through face-to-face meetings, the e-version of the *WOW! Factor*, or e-mails. Give staff opportunities to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for staff to become advocates.
 - Communicate with staff before you disseminate messages to external audiences and the media.

- **Solve the inconsistency factor.** Most organizations are riddled with pockets of inconsistency. The same is true of larger school divisions like yours. Parents and staff in our focus groups noted a pattern of inconsistency in communication at many levels. Parents were quick to point out that the tone and quality of communication were set by the principal and some principals were much better at communicating than others.

To solve this problem, some school districts have provided additional training for principals, sometimes making these sessions mandatory. Other school districts have included a new evaluation component for principals in which communication becomes another core factor of the evaluation. Parents and staff are asked to rank the principal’s communication efforts as part of those evaluations. This same approach is also used in evaluating key central office leaders who need to communicate effectively with principals.

During our focus groups, a few principals said that they felt clueless about some issues, policies, and practices and often called fellow principals to see how they were handling certain situations. They often found that their handling of a situation was completely different from the one of the principal they called. This is just another example of how inconsistent communication can create problems with staff and parents.

The key to eradicating inconsistency is in the effectiveness of evaluation process. If you ignore inconsistent communication behavior, nothing will change. When principals are not open or don’t communicate, they create a communication void and parents and others normally fill it — whether you want them to or not. Inconsistent communication by the principal and other key leaders begins creating a negative image that is often difficult to resolve. You must hold principals and others accountable for their communication efforts.

In addition, encourage principals to share minutes or information on key issues with their teachers, secretaries, and other key staff. Some said they receive this kind of information from their principals, but others did not. Hold administrators accountable for making sure that information from board and leadership meetings “cascades” to their employees and that copies of district publications and other communication tools are made available to them.

- **Review the need for a Division Calendar and Directory.** Focus group participants noted that a “division calendar with teeth” would make communication easier throughout the division because it would save time and reduce conflicts. We understand the complexity of this task with such a large division, but you may want to consider creating the calendar in phases so that, in a few years, all schools, parents, and employees may be reading from the same page.

Focus group participants also asked for a division-wide directory. Many administrative support people also thought it would be productive to include a question-and-answer section along with a graphic design which enables users to find the numbers and main contact for various program areas. You may want to consider involving some of these staff members in designing the directory — whether it is printed or electronic. Our research tell us that you do publish a directory, so this may be one of the perception or communication gaps mentioned in this audit. In that case, it is easy to fix.

- **Consolidate memos and requests from division office departments.** Develop a process for consolidating memos from division office departments to simplify and clarify important information for principals and other administrators. Principals and others expressed concern about the volume of e-mails they receive and the confusion caused when different departments send duplicated information or overlapping requests. Some common issues included:
 - Deadlines for requested information were too short or were concurrent with another department’s request.
 - E-mails are received days after items have been covered in a meeting, creating confusion.
 - Clear explanations aren’t given for some requests.

One technique that has worked for other school divisions that have experienced similar complaints is a consolidated Management Memo. This single weekly memo combines all routine information from all division office units. Have a top-level administrator responsible for condensing and compiling these topics. Many districts find that this technique eliminates a dozen or more separate memos each week and saves many minutes of principals’ valuable time.

Please note that some districts have created a Management Memo which they send by e-mail to all recipients. Others have placed such a memo on an internal Intranet with special access for respective audiences. Doing so cuts down on paperwork and individual requests that pile up on the desks of busy principals and their secretaries. Also make sure that all clerical and administrative support staff receive copies of the Management Memo as well.

Recommendation 6: Regularly train staff in communication

The success of a few recent training sessions by the Community Relations office shows that a valuable asset of the office could be providing more training for all levels of employees. Communication is firmly everyone's responsibility who works for CCPS.

Design inservice training to help staff members as well as administrators become effective communicators and ambassadors for the district. On the *Communications Audit Checklist for School Principals* survey (found in the *Appendix*), a majority of the principals expressed interest in having some inservice training in communication for their staff members.

We understand that inservice training time is limited, given the current focus on accountability and testing. However, since one component of a strategic communication plan is ensuring that staff members have the skills necessary to communicate effectively, we strongly encourage you to seriously consider this need. The community relations director has offered optional training sessions for administrators and others on the key components of communication as well as other topics. We recommend that you expand communication training to include all staff groups and that some training be mandatory.

Some communication inservice opportunities to be considered include:

- **Mandatory media training.** We recommend that administrators receive annual training in media relations to develop and update their skills in delivering effective messages in an interview or during a crisis. This will help them feel more comfortable when they find themselves in a spokesperson role and will ensure that key messages are delivered effectively. One of the lessons we've learned from member districts that have been affected by large-scale crises (for example, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the recent San Diego fires) is that a communication or public affairs office alone cannot manage the communication effort without help from the entire administrative team. When team members are trained and comfortable in their roles, crisis communication is more proactive, smooth, and effective, which contributes to faster response and resolution.
- **Provide training and support for customer service or ambassador efforts.** It is not enough to simply emphasize the importance of good ambassadorship and customer service. To institutionalize a culture of service excellence, you must adequately train staff to support them in that role. Inservice workshops on dealing with difficult people, telephone etiquette, and general communication with the public will give them the tools and skills to support their efforts. It may be helpful to survey staff to determine what they would like to focus on and in which areas they could use assistance.

Another key component of a customer service or ambassador program is to involve staff in creating standards of service. You can get greater employee buy-in for improving customer service by involving staff directly in establishing standards of service for the district and schools. Standards of service provide clear guidelines to follow and also provide a way to evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts in this area.

By training staff, you give them tools to support their roles as ambassadors and customer service agents for your schools. Recognizing that it is difficult to pull staff away for lengthy

in-service sessions, you may want to consider breaking customer service training into smaller time units. NSPRA’s *Unlocking Sensational Service* CD-ROM offers a variety of options — from meeting starters to hour- or day-long workshops — for delivering this type of training.

- **Conduct effective Parent-teacher conferences and Open Houses.** Parent-teacher conferences and Open Houses are often critical first impression opportunities for good “ambassadorship.” Inservice programs and regular reviews for teachers on how to conduct an effective conference and prepare an Open House presentation can have a major impact on parents’ perception of the quality of the school.

- **Develop training school and classroom communication and PR plans.** We recommend that a component of your strategic communication plan include the development of school communication plans that tie directly to it. These can be fairly simple and straightforward and should be designed to deliver key messages and measure the success of building-level communication. You can also develop individual classroom plans that support the schools’ and division’s communication goals. NSPRA’s *Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy* guidebook and CD-ROM provide practical tools and tips for teachers that may be of use.

- **Newsletter design and content are important.** Research shows that school newsletters are an important source of information for parents and focus group participants confirmed this in CCPS as well. Training in basic layout techniques, effective use of type fonts, graphics, and color for staff members who are responsible for producing the newsletters — both print and electronic — would ensure greater readability and consistency across the division and help the schools create publications that are a “must read” for all parents.

Recommendation 7: Enhance your e-communication

Action Step Create additional e-newsletters

In addition to the recommended e-newsletter for staff and for key communicators mentioned earlier, consider developing a third e-newsletter for the non-parent population of Chesterfield County. You could publish it once a month or every other month. It would contain information on a variety of issues:

- good news stories;
- progress you're making on key issues;
- a school construction report card to demonstrate how you are spending tax dollars;
- future challenges of the division;
- collaboration with other government bodies; and
- always a request to serve as a volunteer or participate in a school partnership.

You would need to complete a marketing effort by asking residents to sign up for the free newsletter on your web site. You could put a registration link on your web site's homepage. Other school districts using this inexpensive delivery system have found it to become a valuable asset in reaching the largest segment of their residents who do not have children in their schools. NSPRA can provide samples of these newsletters upon request.

Action Step Address e-infrastructure requirements

An effective school communication program should be able to reach key constituents within a 30- to 60-minute time frame when it must reach them with critical information. NSPRA member Nora Carr, APR, offered the following checklist to share with school leaders. As you look to your future in communication and the infrastructure you may need, in your planning also consider:

- Do you have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders, including those in business, politics, government, houses of worship, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and nonprofit organizations?
- Do you have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?
- When news breaks, can you get information posted on your division web site and broadcasts on your division cable television channel within minutes?
- Can your Community Relations staff quickly provide talking points and develop key messages for senior staff and principals?

- Do you have a bank of crisis messages and letters posted on an intranet or shared file that principals can access at any time and adapt to communicate more effectively with parents?
- Does your system give you reports that show which groups and individuals the division has contacted through e-mail and whether they are accessing the content you're providing?
- Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive division news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts, and other communications?
- Do employees, parents, reporters, and community members turn to your web site or cable television channel first for current news and information about your school division and your schools?

You must coordinate with your IT department to make most of the above a reality. Many of today's parents expect quick communication and leading school divisions like yours are starting to deliver on this type of communication service.

Action Step Enhance your web site

The just-completed redesign of your web site was in its first few months of existence when we completed our onsite work last fall. Focus group participants gave it mixed reviews, primarily based on navigational issues. But that is often expected when a new design is launched. Our tech auditors found it to be a good, fresh new start. It contained practical and fresh information and was also an information archive for parents and others seeking operational information. It is one of the better school division web sites because it contained all that was needed in a functional fashion.

Of course, in order to get from good to great, you must give constant attention to the web site. You do need to continue to expand, improve, and standardize your division and school web sites. One of those tasks becomes an ongoing project for your Community Relations office.

Many focus groups participants cited the division's web site as being a vital communication vehicle. The current division site contains a substantial amount of information. And, importantly, it has undergone recent improvements in content and design. But you should continue the improvements. Many focus group participants identified division and school web sites as holding even more communication potential. Many felt that the division should continue to invest in improving its web offerings and support developing better web standards and offerings for all schools as well.

View the division's web site — including a number of potential additional sites for individual programs and schools — as key communication and marketing tools for all key constituencies you serve. Given its size and projected growth, the division must commit to staying current in its use of technology to communication. You might explore even more external design and research expertise to support staff web development efforts. A user-sensitive and research-driven web

development effort ensures that your technology investments will yield the highest payback. And doing so ensures that you will remain competitive in your education marketplace.

The division's web offerings — and those of its schools — might be viewed as a series of living, ever-changing “publications” that can provide information on major system news and initiatives, new programs and services, standard parent information such as the calendar of events for schools, bus schedules, governing policies, and so on. You should also evaluate your web sites in the context of how they deliver your key messages. Ask users to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or by e-mailing responses. And you must assess site traffic and user opinions for clues as to how you might improve the architecture and resulting navigation of the sites to deliver information more effectively and efficiently.

It should not be difficult to include most system publications in PDF format on the site — as well as postings of more translated items serving specific audiences. It is important that you constantly update information on the site. While it is fairly easy to get people to visit a web site once, the challenge is getting them to return regularly for new information. It also is important that the information on the site be easily found. While the current site offers a search function, you might also consider offering a page of direct links to those items most commonly sought — based on surveys or web traffic data.

The division has made tremendous online communication strides given the limited staff and resources devoted to it. But eventually, continued success of online communication efforts will require more staff and external support at some point. You should see this as an investment in delivering the division's key messages. While the division's web content will never supplant other communication channels, its potential as a primary communication channel will continue to expand.

Web sites are also becoming important marketing tools for school systems — essential to attracting students and recruiting teachers, administrators, and other staff. You should expand sections of the site with these and other administrative functions in mind and include links to community sites of interest.

Plan and evaluate individual school web sites with an eye to communication and marketing. Articulate guidelines or standards for required standard information, but give individual schools enough freedom to allow them to emphasize the programs and partnerships that make them unique. Train the school and technical support staff to enable them to keep their web offerings up to date. As parents and others in the community come to expect more and more ready access to online information about their children's schools, it is also important that the school web sites provide current information and opportunities for parents to supplement the school program at home.

Increase the use of your online offerings in crisis communication situations such as controlling rumors and correcting the misinformation that often moves quickly across community grapevines in times of calamity and controversy. Post accurate, factual information in a prominent spot on the web page for easy access. Use school newsletters and other print publications as well as local media to help promote the web site as a source of immediate information when people have questions. Encourage local media web sites to link directly to updated sections on the school and division sites in times of developing issues.

Some districts now offer parent centers within their web sites. Items normally carried on the Parent Handbook are included, but it also answers frequent questions and provides links to other items such as policies and forms contained within the web site. Some parent centers are interactive where parents can post questions that staff members answer. By providing this type of parent service, you create a go-to resource for your parent populations. You can repeat much of what is carried on the division's parent center site on school web sites as well.

A number of people interviewed for this report noted that Internet access continues to expand throughout the community. People also are increasingly using the Internet to communicate and stay in touch in their workplaces. This behavior, combined with ongoing expansion of information-on-demand made available online by many businesses and organizations, has created new expectations for information-on-demand from schools as well. All constituencies important to the CCPS can be served by strong online communication — and more and more they will expect it.

Recommendation 8: Improve communication with diverse populations

Growing diversity in the Chesterfield County community will require that you seek new and different ways to develop genuine two-way communication with your families and patrons. Traditional publications may be ineffective in reaching non-English speaking and immigrant populations. Research the best ways to communicate with the different minority groups you serve. Some strategies for connecting to minority stakeholders include:

- **Create a diversity council or network.** Talk to employees involved in community-based programs, faith and business leaders, community groups, and organizations, nearby colleges, and government agencies to identify people who are recognized as active, involved members of minority communities. Consider having each school with a high or expanding minority population also identify parents to represent the school. Use this network to advise you on effective ways to reach minority constituents and to respond to projects and programs under development. Give the group a synopsis of your 6-year plan and the Design for Excellence program so they better understand just what your division is attempting to do for all children.

- **Increase efforts to translate informational materials for non-English-speaking parents.** While it is unrealistic to think you can translate all materials into multiple languages, you can translate into a variety of languages the phrase, *This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you.* You can also attach this reference sheet to school documents so it will signal non-English-speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information.

- **Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families.** Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when you approach them in environments where they are most comfortable, such as their churches or homes. Communicating face-

to-face with parents in their primary language in their homes builds strong connections to the schools. Some districts have bilingual liaisons who work directly in the neighborhoods with families. You may want to conduct research to determine whether you need this type of outreach in some of your neighborhoods.

- **Build partnerships with ethnic agencies.** A strong relationship between the CCPS and community agencies that serve specific ethnic groups will allow you to benefit from their advice and expertise and help give you access to these communities. You already do some of this with your faith group leaders and we suggest that you continue to build on those relationships.

- **Provide visual signs of welcome and an appreciation of diversity at schools.** Consider displaying posters that say, “Welcome,” in many different languages — a simple gesture that can make a positive first impression. Displays that highlight an appreciation of different cultures also add to creating an inclusive climate.

- **Provide diversity training for staff.** Develop diversity training for staff to build understanding and sensitivity to cultural concerns. Often, these training programs aren’t “real world” or relevant, so be rigorous in your search for effective programs.

- **Create a Welcome Center or telephone helpline for non-English-speaking families who are new to the division.** If space is available, consider creating a Welcome Center where new families can receive an orientation to help them navigate CCPS. This would include assistance in getting children immunized and registered for school, information on community and district resources available to them, background on programs for second-language learners, including information about testing, English classes for adults, and other educational opportunities. Alternatively, you could offer and publicize a telephone helpline (preferably staffed by a bilingual staff member, not a recording) that new families can call for information and answers to questions.

Recommendation 9: Brand the look of CCPS communication vehicles

If you placed all of your current print communication vehicles on a table, you would see that it is difficult to tell that all of these publications come from the same organization. Looking at them from this vantage point demonstrates more of the viewpoint that “every program is in it for itself” rather than having an organized team approach to your library of print communication. You don’t even use your logo in all publications.

If you want to present a more unified branding approach to help people recognize and reap credit for all that you do, consider the following:

- **Review all that you do with an eye for branding.** Repeat the exercise we did with the Community Relations team as well as others who are not employed by CCPS. See if they can instantly tell that they are looking at a CCPS publication. Start planning to change the worst offenders the next time they are scheduled to be printed.
- **Create a graphics stylebook.** Create a stylebook for CCSS publications and other communication vehicles that gives departments information and guidelines on using the logo and future positioning statements and messages, graphic design tips and guidelines, and writing style and punctuation. Once completed, hold managers and supervisors accountable for following the guidelines in the stylebook. (NSPRA can provide school-related stylebooks that you can easily adapt.)
- **Create a cover sheet or stationery template for all electronic publications.** At minimum, create a cover sheet or stationery template including the CCPS logo for ongoing e-mail communications that you send to the field. Right now, it is often difficult at first glance to determine where these e-mail transmissions originated. Offer a training session for designated staff from each team on how to use the template. Set a deadline for implementing the new format. If you are serious about branding, you must implement this type of effort.
- **Consider developing a tagline or theme with your logo.** Taglines are often high-risk endeavors because it is often difficult to find the right one and to have enough people agree that it is the right one. But when done right, taglines can be powerful positioning statements about organizations. As you are in the early stages of a 6-year plan and the Design for Excellence program, it may be an appropriate time to launch a theme or tagline. Your theme or tagline must be both believable and motivational. Staff feedback will be important and you may want to run a few final selections by focus groups of staff so you can listen to why they like or don’t like them. The current information surrounding the PDK curriculum audit found the phrase of, “Going from good to great,” surfacing by some of your officials. So something like “CCPS... On the Move from Good to Great,” or “Growing from Good to Great” may be potential taglines for you. One other may be “CCPS... Designed for Excellence” from the current program now underway. On other note about a tagline: Once you are sick of hearing it, it will just be beginning to make an impact with your target audiences.

- **Consider developing a new logo.** This is another high-risk activity related to branding, but it may be worth the effort. Your division and your geographical location are admired for its culture of history and tradition. If you feel that changing the logo would upset a great many leaders, it would not be worth the effort. Sometimes, a sacred cow should remain sacred. But a new logo would be another triggering icon to communicate that change is underway as you are changing your curriculum to better meet the needs of the changing world. Changing a logo is a difficult process because it is often hard to reach consensus on picking the final one. But it may be time well spent if it helps communicate that positive change is part of CCPS evolving from good to great. One final note about new logos: Do not offer a competition or contest for students. Contests mean you have to pick a winner, even if none surface. You are a \$569 million-dollar company. Even though it sounds nice, you don't want your logo designed by a 5th grader.

Recommendation 10: Enhance media relationships and results

Please note that only three or four media outlets were represented in this focus group. More than 20 outlets are served by your communication office and all were invited to participate in this session. Our experience tells us that many representatives who are pleased with their relationships often do not participate. CCPS needs to still address the items in this recommendation, but the numbers attending also helps to place their responses in perspective.

Our focus group of print and broadcast media representatives offered mixed reactions about their relationships with CCPS and its Community Relations office. On one hand, representatives who have been in their positions for some time reported that access to and responsiveness by the Community Relations office was reasonable. Or because of their experience, they have learned to go directly to sources and get what they need.

On the other hand, newer representatives were quite unhappy about access and responsiveness and felt they were being pushed aside, even when they announced they wanted to do positive stories about CCPS. Their sentiment was that favorites were being played and that the office wanted to primarily deal with those they trusted from their experiences over the years.

Even some veteran reporters noted that a quick return to their calls is critical. They see themselves as the last “speed bump” before the rumor they are calling about going downhill very quickly. They want to confirm what they hear from other sources and seek a response about it. Getting no response creates a vacuum that other sources then fill.

Our research shows that one incident brought up by the media did point to a problem with how CCPS responds to media requests. But it is a bit more complicated than just not returning a phone call. A media representative wanted to interview a supervisor about a program, and the supervisor told the Community Relations office that the supervisor would not talk to the media. The Community Relations office could not make the interview happen and the media representative was less than happy. This sort of problem must be fixed so CCPS does not receive a black eye in its relationships with the media.

Consider the following:

- **Internally, decide who makes the decision about implementing your policy on talking to the media.** The media naturally wants to talk to the people who are in charge of the programs they are covering. So if the media wants to talk directly to the program person and the person refuses, decide who is accountable for that action. If negative media relations feelings grow, it will create an unhappy media group and that is never a good thing for any school division.

- **Internally, look at the responses you give to the media.** Some have been labeled “mushy” by the media and “defensive” by some community and business leader groups. The community members want you to tell them something like the following:

- Here is what we know.
- Here is what we have done or are planning to do.
- And, yes, it is a problem but we are taking care of it.

The perception of the business leaders was that the division never talks about problems and challenges. They would like the division to be more transparent about issues.

- **Set up a meeting with Superintendent Marcus Newsome, Community Relations Director Debra Marlow, and the media representative to iron out issues with one another.** You could air and resolve some concerns about access and relationships. You could also discuss little things such as not telling cable representatives about the changes of times and possible dates of Board meetings or talk about shooting “B-roll” on campus in the future.

- **Continue media training** on an ongoing basis, especially with new administrators.

- **Continue the News Tips announcements** because they provide good information about possible stories for the media.

- **Evaluate the time spent on developing news releases and their “hit rate.”** Across the nation, the trend is to cut back on these releases and use them in division or school e-newsletters or not do as many as in the past. This is a local call that the Community Relations team should discuss as it looks at new assignments possibly generated by this audit.

- The *Schools TODAY* page carried in *The Community Weekly* was recognized by a number of participants in our focus groups. To get more mileage out of the work you provide for it, **consider investing in a framed-sleeve for each school so you can post it in a highly visible area each week.** You may also want to carry it as a weekly feature on your web site.

Recommendation 11: Expand communication with the non-parent public

In CCPS as in most school divisions today, the non-parent population constitutes a significant portion of the community, so it is vital that you develop communication strategies for reaching this group. You have a number of outreach and engagement activities that appear to be working including your CIS program, division foundation, and Faith Groups as well as some other partnerships and volunteer programs now underway. In addition to the Key Communicator program and new e-newsletter recommended for the non-parent populations, some additional activities to consider are:

- **Provide news inserts for business and community publications.** Most organizations that publish regular newsletters always seek interesting information as filler. The Community Relations office could prepare short news updates — as you do for your building newsletters — about the schools and division that businesses and civic groups can use in their employee and member newsletters.
- **Use retirees as a possible advocacy group for CCPS within their communities.** Some school districts ask selected retirees to be part of their outreach program by keeping in touch through newsletters and other devices with their fellow retirees. They can help you build relationships and carry your messages within their circle of influence. Also invite them to register for your new non-parent community newsletter.

Your relationships with county government officials need work

One of the more intense comments we received in our focus groups and interviews was the fact that the county commissioners and the school division do not get along. The perception is that a wall, based on past experiences, prevents either party from meeting and at least talking about issues that influence the operations of both bodies.

Unfortunately, this is often a common occurrence as we work with school divisions around the nation. To your credit, we have heard about your attempts at joint summits in the past, and the fact that Board members attended their meetings and you were being ignored. We are sure the list could go on.

One focus group member from a previous audit noted, “This is like me fighting me. I pay taxes for each of these bodies, and now they waste money arguing and possibly suing each other. I’m the real loser in that scenario.”

Another public relations scenario we see in schools throughout the nation also help us make our point. In teacher negotiations, teachers often criticize the Board and administration, and then the Board turns around and blames the teachers. And the public believes both of them. So it seems you may be headed in that direction. We urge you to get aggressive, make your actions public, and invite the commissioners to sit down and discuss common issues with you.

Suggestions for reaching out to elected officials and connecting them more directly to what is happening in the classroom include:

- **Start at the CEO level.** Superintendent Newsome and his counterpart, the county administrator, should first meet to see what common ground may be available. It is important to start with a few success items before tackling major issues within your county. Starting at the executive level often serves as the catalyst to begin collaboration.
- **Set a special meeting where each board can discuss items ripe for collaboration.** This could flow from the work of the executives and, again, it is important to reach some harmony and success in the collaboration. It may take more than a meeting or two to reach a solution, but make sure that the general community understands that both boards are working together through all the media outlets both boards have available to them. Eventually, this dialogue should lead to discussing the bigger issues for your county. To some who are steeped in the past controversial culture, this process may seem naïve. But the point is that someone needs to stand up and take the lead in bringing the two boards together. From our focus group feedback, our sense is that your community will applaud this proactive approach.
- **Create an “Adopt a Board of Supervisors Leader” program.** Have a school from their district “adopt” each elected official. The school should invite the commissioner to all special events and encourage him or her to participate in the school as a guest reader or tutor or to play a role in student recognition events, such as by presenting awards at assemblies. The goal should be to let the official see today’s schools in action.
- **Send district publications to all county leaders.** Send all appropriate publications produced in the division — both print and electronic —to the leaders. Be sure to include information that outlines your new initiatives as well as student and staff success stories.
- **Offer student artwork to officials for their local offices.**
- **Invite county officials to teach a class.** Ask officials to teach mini-lessons in the schools on such subjects as how the city government works or about public service.

Consider implementing a “Shadow-Day Program” to shape attitudes.

Our research shows that you tried to conduct an principal for the day program last year and it lacked participation. It is listed here again because such programs can have a major impact; they start slow but normally build momentum in subsequent years. Our recommendation follows:

One of the best ways to shape attitudes is to identify influential members of the community and invite them to see district programs for themselves. This form of interpersonal communication is much more believable than a written message. Once these people see the operation for themselves, they are likely to talk with their peers, resulting in a credible message going throughout the community. FPS may want to identify some community or business leaders and

give them the opportunity to shadow a principal for a day. Start on a pilot basis, perhaps with a dozen community or business leaders at 12 schools the next time you offer it.

Steps to consider in establishing a Shadow-Day Program include:

- Identify staff (for example, principals or teachers) who would want to participate.
- Brainstorm a list of opinion leaders to invite to participate.
- Match an opinion leader with a staff member.
- Send out a letter of invitation to the opinion leader.
- Have a conversation between the opinion leader and staff participant to agree on a day and protocol.
- Welcome the opinion leader at the front door to ensure that you make a good first impression.
- Discuss the experience at the end of the shadow day. This discussion gives the school the chance to bring up any issues and answer any questions the opinion leader might have. Consider inviting participants to a follow-up breakfast or lunch to share their observations and experiences. Some districts videotape participants' comments for use in marketing videos or for cable television programming. What often results is a video or a PowerPoint presentation entitled: *Here's What the Chesterfield Leaders Are Saying About Their Schools.*"

Schools that implement Shadow Days usually ask the opinion leader to spend the entire day at the school and also indicate at the start of the initial conversation that some confidential matters, such as discipline or personnel issues, might arise where the opinion leader couldn't attend.

Recommendation 12: Other considerations

A number of other shorter recommendations include:

Implement Community Relations team meetings

Getting the Community Relations team together on a regular schedule should enhance productivity of the office as well a better understanding of the “big picture” in the function of the office. This report will most likely create changes in the office and an opportunity to discuss these changes normally paves the way for less resistance to change.

Ensure that the Community Relations director is a cabinet member

As the senior community relations administrator, the focus of the director position should be on proactive communication planning and engagement, crisis communication and strategic media relations, marketing and reputation management, public relations counsel to district and school leaders, and overall supervision of the Community Relations Office staff. NSPRA research shows that a strong working relationship between the superintendent and the senior communications administrator is critical to a successful communication effort.

It is essential for the director to understand the pros and cons that are discussed during any planning or decisionmaking process, as well as the final outcome, in order to create an effective framework for communicating issues and to be a knowledgeable, credible spokesperson for the district. Research conducted for NSPRA’s Communication Accountability Project (go to www.nspr.org/cap.htm for more information) supports the importance of communication as a management function and highlights the need for the communication director to have direct access to, and a strong working relationship with, the superintendent and leadership team. As the public relations or communications counselor to the superintendent, Board, and Senior Staff, the director should interpret public attitudes, identify potential controversies and response strategies, and recommend communication strategies that build stakeholder understanding of district challenges as well as successes.

Our research demonstrates that top communication professionals are most effective when they are members of superintendents’ cabinets. That same research shows that nearly 85% of NSPRA members are cabinet members and report directly to the superintendent. Communication thinking needs to be “mainstreamed” in all that you do within your division, and the best way to know about upcoming issues and being a part in helping implement decisions is to have the Community Relations director at the cabinet’s table.

Continue collecting feedback and conducting research

Feedback serves as the lifeblood of any effective communication effort. Learning more about the needs of your audiences in this audit is just one way to help you shape your communication effort. You must continue this feedback effort through surveys of your print and e-communication vehicles as well as the ongoing effort to evaluate the services you provide to principals and others throughout the year.

Collaborate with Human Relations and IT departments

Effective communication departments often work collaboratively with their Human Relations and IT departments because certain communication functions count on those departments for the overall division communication effort. Periodically, it will be beneficial for these three departments to talk about certain functions and to decide where some of those functions can best be served. Topics ranging from placing items on the Intranet, e-newsletters, and recognition pins, etc., call for a collaborative session for the leaders of these offices.

Help parents help their kids

A new major trend in the school communication business is for the Community Relations office to work with curriculum coordinators and others in instruction to help parents become more involved with their children so that they can be successful in school and life. This initiative calls for additional work by the Community Relations office, but ties its work to student achievement.

We recommend that the CCPS Community Relations office consider increasing its work with curriculum coordinators, counselors, and others to complete such projects as:

- **Offer training to parents on the best ways to communicate with teachers about their children.** This initiative could be a program offered at a school's parent group meeting. Perhaps you could give a PowerPoint presentation to each parent group president at your PTSA Council Meeting so they could show it at one of their local school meetings. You could also give it to each principal to use in an orientation packet for new students and parents.
- **Conduct training sessions for teachers on the best ways to communicate with parents about student achievement.** This workshop on communication and achievement will help teachers save time and improve productivity of their students. NSPRA also has materials on this topic if you choose to implement this idea.

Consider implementing a “Be There” campaign

As CCPS moves forward in implementing its strategic plan, you need to get more parents involved with their children and their children’s learning.

NSPRA is a partner in a new research-based multimedia campaign designed to get parents more involved in their children’s education, in everyday life situations as well as in school settings. The campaign helps build the concept that schools cannot educate children alone, and the more parents, teachers and students connect with one another, the more successful children will be. Plans are to produce campaign components in multiple languages as well. Information is available at www.bethere.org.

The program is free except for local production of materials sent to parents and students.



Perceptions of the Focus Groups

This section gives you an overview of perceptions that we identified in the focus group sessions held during the onsite visit on October 22, 23, and 24. The questions asked are included in the Appendix. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the our questions. Rather, it contains comments that appear to identify participants' significant beliefs, concerns, and suggestions. The comments recorded here are perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual. Many comments led to recommendations in this communication audit report. Other comments may be helpful to the leadership of the Chesterfield County Public Schools in addressing staff and community concerns in other areas.

Group: High School Teachers

Strengths

- Consistent effort to improve for students
- Experienced teaching staff
- Attractive schools
- Programs for gifted as well as at-risk students
- Specialty centers in high schools
- Professional development supported; financial assistance appreciated

Improvement Areas

- High class sizes
- More funding needed for programs and textbooks
- Keep gifted classes small, regular education classes are too large.

Image

- Positive image. People move here for the schools.
- Teachers attracted to a strong system like this
- Good test scores. Students go on to college.
- Teachers care about students.
- Parents are involved.

Information Sources

- E-mail — sometimes overwhelmed by the volume
- The division web site, including the Intranet
- Grapevine, particularly parents and neighbors
- Channel 80

- Division newsletter

Division Communication Effort

- Community Relations department does a good job.
- Publications are well designed and current.
- Quality of building communication varies by school. “Some staffs are better informed than others.”
- Would like to hear about issues before students, parents, or media hear. “I heard about the MRSA problem at my school on the radio while driving to work.”
- Communication department exists for the community, not the staff.
- Need a central, reliable information source

Publications

- *WOW! Factor* recognized by all; varied support for new format
- Uncertain about purpose and target audience for many publications

Web Site

- New design not as user-friendly — takes longer to find information
- Intranet seems complete and easier to use

Timely Employee Communication

- Depends on your principal
- Need additional e-mail contact groups developed to eliminate receiving messages that are not personally relevant; improved spam blockers would be welcome.
- Communication often hampered by regular technology glitches.
- Would like to hear important information before parents do

Opportunities for Input and Feedback

- Little opportunity for feedback on day-to-day issues
- ACT is one avenue for input, but not well used.
- Uncertain what happens to feedback when it’s given. “They may ask us, but I don’t know what happens after that. It feels as if they are checking off a box called ‘feedback’ on somebody’s list of things to do. I don’t know if they really listen or just say they listen.”

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- Lots going on to involve parents in the schools
- New phone system loved by parents
- Plenty of opportunity for feedback from community — as recent meetings and these focus groups demonstrate

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Personalizing and targeting information staff members want and need
- Incorporating teacher opinion into decisions on overall direction of the division

Group: Elementary Teachers

Strengths

- High-quality teachers
- Supportive administrators and teachers
- Specialty centers
- Mentor program
- Business partnerships
- Curriculum development

Improvement Areas

- Overcrowding of schools
- Older buildings and equity
- Support for dealing with diversity
- Kinks related to growth: late materials, transportation and bus problems
- Curriculum decisions — chasing the latest good idea
- Parents who go to Board to get their way over policy-related decisions
- Discussed need for half-day Wednesday to catch up on communication and other matters

Image

- Big
- High expectations
- Fertile crescent
- Inequities in PTA funds

Information Sources

- Intranet
- Internet
- *WOW! Factor*
- E-mail

Division Communication Effort

- Community Relations department does a good job

- *WOW Factor* is a good thing to celebrate, but questioned the cost of new format
- E-mail communication needs some standard because it can be overwhelming.
- Claim that e-mail and their principals are the best way to communicate with them
- Superintendent blog. They would encourage a dialogue.

Web Site

- New design not as user-friendly

Opportunities for Input and Feedback

- Little opportunity for feedback on day-to-day issues
- ACT is okay, but everything of consequence seems to get tabled. Not much is done and follow-up is lacking.
- They would like more input on things like school web sites, especially when it comes to content.

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Growth and the building of new schools and the size of those schools
- The growth of the ESL population and more support for working with this population
- Incorporating teacher opinion into decisions on overall direction of curriculum as they see themselves as the “Sage on Stage” when it comes to scheduling (block time) and other matters

Group: Elementary Principals

Strengths

- Great people, passionate about education and students
- Office of Community Relations and the Assistant to the Superintendent — both extremely responsive
- New web site — friendly and easy to use
- First choice of new families

Improvement Areas

- Continued growth causing ongoing space issues
- Continuous change — “Let’s choose a concept and focus on it so we can internalize it before we add more.”
- Employee training assumes people know more than they really do.

Image

- Very strong, positive image in the community
- Our students make it to college.
- Teacher quality is strong at every level.
- Parents and students really identify with their schools.

Information Sources

- E-mail
- Principals' monthly meetings
- The *WOW! Factor*
- Newsletters

Division Communication Effort

- Need to prioritize what is most important
- Principal meetings could be more effective if principals helped create the agenda —
“Much of the meeting consists of talking to us rather than a discussion that involves us.”
- In the last year, the administration is doing a better job of communicating proactively.
- Intranet is very strong.
- Appreciate fact sheets with talking points
- Community Relations Department does well with public, parents, and media.
- Public sometimes knows before we do.
- “If it’s in an e-mail, don’t assume we’ve seen it.”
- This year’s redistricting issue left principals with no Plan B and made parents suspicious. “Parents are savvy; they want answers.”
- Appreciate effort to involve principals. Would like division administrators to work from a central meeting calendar to reduce number of mandatory meetings in the same week.
“It’s tough to be out of the school as often as I am for division meetings.”
- Parents really like new technology to improve communication.

Publications

- Appreciate the diversity of publications
- Publications are well written and well designed.

Web Site

- Parents use both the school sites and the division web sites; both are important.
- Web maintenance is an issue; system in place to update building web site is not effective. “Updating is now done by people who don’t want to do it.”
- Sites are inconsistent even though administration is demanding consistency. Approach isn’t working.

- Need to address needs of families speaking other languages
- Still have families without computers — how do we get the information on the web site to them?

Timely Employee Communication

- Relying on e-mail doesn't always work. "I know they expected that I would get the word out to staff on the MRSA situation, but I didn't see the e-mail until the following morning."
- The public sometimes knows before we do.
- Need to demystify the organizational chart to know who to go to for what. "What's the difference between the roles of the Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Administration and the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction and the Director of Instructional Support?"

Opportunities for Input and Feedback

- Principals are asked for feedback, but don't know what happens to the input.
- Principals represented on superintendent's leadership team; uneven opportunities for feedback on this team
- Use of the customer satisfaction survey on central office departments is good tool, "but we don't know what happens to that information. Does anything change?" Bring it back in a shorter form.
- Would like more communication among schools within a feeder pattern to work collectively on shared issues

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- Division really seeks input from parents and community.
- Public engagement meetings are great opportunity to hear from the public.

Greatest Future Communication Challenges

- Communicating with an increasingly diverse community
- Communicating a consistent message
- Helping all of us better communicate the hard messages to parents and students
- Communication about length of school day; "Too much studying, no action, creates a communication issue for us."

Strengths

- Top-notch teachers
- Variety and quality of programs
- Number of co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities
- Materials, textbooks, resources for the classroom
- Addresses the needs of above average and special education students extremely well

Improvement Areas

- Kids in the middle fall through the cracks.
- Class sizes are too large.
- New schools are so big.
- “If your child is not college-bound, he won’t get the same level of counseling and help.”
- Politics of the area
- 10% drop-out rate
- Hard to get services if you think your child needs them
- New families don’t really know what’s available; hard to find the information

Image

- Overall image is very good.
- Trailers are an issue.
- Location of new schools creates a have/have not issue.
- Schools didn’t open on time; last-minute information to parents and staff

Information Sources

- Parent networks
- Parent Link — “Wish I could listen to the message twice if I don’t catch everything the first time through.”
- Web sites, but inconsistent among schools. Some are great, others out of date.
- News media
- Teacher web pages should be required.

Division Communication Efforts

- “I’m shocked at the decrease in communication to parents once you get to high school.”
- “*Schools Today* would be better if it went directly to parents rather than in the paper.”
- Parent Link is a positive step.
- More e-mail would be welcome.
- Some schools get customer service; some don’t.

Publications

- Menus are used by families.
- Several parents unaware of the Design for Excellence and Parent Handbook
- Many unaware of *Schools Today*

Web Site

- New design is an improvement.
- Most unaware of what is new about the site

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- Improved recently
- Lots of opportunities if people are aware of them; many are too busy or out of the loop.
- People don’t realize they can address the Board at their meetings.
- People won’t choose to be involved if they think it’s a waste of time.
- Non-English-speaking parents don’t have much opportunity.
- “If you have an issue, I think the new superintendent will listen.”

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Communicating with a diverse population
- Handling the variety of parent communication issues. “Perhaps an ombudsman would be a good addition to the communication staff.”
- Using text messaging and iPods as communication tools
- Consistency in messages
- Ongoing evaluation of communication with multiple groups
- “One of the big challenges is helping people understand the investment in communication is well worth it.”

Strengths

- Community support. “Sixty percent don’t have kids in school and they still support us.”
- Lots of resources reflecting a relatively wealthy area. Economies of scale
- Staff members
- People come here for the schools.

Improvement Areas

- Overcrowding
- School safety — becoming a bigger issue
- Need to track trends in forward-thinking districts
- Slow to change in meeting the real needs of a diverse population

Image

- Strongest division in the Richmond area
- These are schools of choice — people want their children to attend
- Well-marketed
- “Some may see us as resting on our laurels, making change harder.”

Information Sources

- Each other
- E-mail
- Community relations department. Talking points are good.
- Individual sources. We know who to call for the information or to get us to the right person.

Division Communication Effort

- Value the support of the Community Relations department in times of crisis
- Parent Link enables quick, accurate information to go to parents.
- Parent Link was a response to parent feedback asking for a better approach to communication.

Publications

- Ad seen as effective
- *WOW! Factor* — Teachers read it.
- Weekly Tips are good, but overwhelming.
- Publications look professional — that’s essential.

Web Site

- New site is a big step backward — low-tech look
- Needs clean, simple look
- School web sites not very good — we're on our own to develop without real expertise.
- New design buries information.
- Intranet — also a problem to find information
- Both Internet and Intranet would improve with coordination.

Timely Employee Communication

- Data warehouse
- Info arrives in a timely manner but short response windows.
- Frequently get too much information too quickly due to e-mail
- Appreciate effort to inform and train principals. Would like division office departments to share a calendar to eliminate multiple required trainings on the same day.
- “Parents are looking for information on boundary changes; I don't know what to tell them.”

Opportunities for Input and Feedback

- “We are asked, but do they listen?”
- Changes should be communicated earlier.
- May be too much opportunity for input on some issues. “Make the decision and we will implement.”

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- Over the top
- People who are involved are activists; may not represent the parent population. “A minority opinion may prevail.”
- “Division does a good job engaging on global issues, but not on the nuts and bolts, high-energy issues.”
- Can be difficult to find out how to be involved
- Tough to get people to come out

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Selling bonds for new schools
- EdLine — trickle down for all grades to create relationships
- Technology use
- Implementing an adequate phone system in every school building
- Safety issues

Strengths

- The priority is, “What’s best for children?”
- Community outreach. People can be as involved as they want to be.
- Willingness to sincerely listen
- Quality of the school experience at all levels
- Gifted and specialty programs are excellent. Well prepared for college

Improvement Areas

- End trailer use.
- Need new system to accurately project enrollment
- Build schools closer to the students.
- Over-crowding
- Find answers to fixing achievement gap.
- Growth may jeopardize quality.

Image

- People move here for the schools.
- Real estate agents talk up the schools to sell homes.
- Involvement is real — schools are a community rallying point.
- “My church stressed the quality of the schools as a recruitment tool for new staff.”

Information Sources

- Our kids
- Regular meetings
- Serving on committees
- Channel 80
- Open Board meetings
- Web site
- School e-mails
- Parent Link

Division Communication Effort

- Excellent communication about student success and achievement
- Coverage of extra-curricular activities outstanding
- How are the 21st century skills they talk about presenting themselves in school? How are they implementing this?
- “Obviously committed teachers”
- Division appears to have good relationships with news media.

Publications

- Familiar with the calendar handbook
- Shopper insert arrives regularly — nicely done
- Many don't regularly see school publications.

Web Site

- New menu is user-friendly.
- Lots of specific information
- School web sites often not updated.
- Hint of propaganda as content focuses on accomplishments only

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- The division is a model. “Colleagues in other areas extremely impressed with our involvement in the schools.”
- “As a representative of a minority faith, I’m pleased to be involved and listened to.”
- Invited to help create criteria for qualities of new superintendent
- Opportunities exist for involvement, but turnout isn’t always good.

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Crisis communication. What are the emergency response plans?
- Working with vulnerable populations — immigrants, disadvantaged, poor
- Open enrollment
- Inclusivity
- Getting the message to County Supervisors and planners. Ask us for help.
- Expand the number of Board positions to better serve community.
- Misinformation about faith in schools

Strengths

- Offerings of schools
- Variety of specialty centers
- Tech Center — a broad-based adjunct to a wonderful public education system
- Up-to-date theory and technical instruction
- Class sizes have shrunk at some levels.
- Good relationships between home and school
- Strong instruction
- Good partnerships which then become advocates of the division

Improvement Areas

- Opportunities for some of the average and below average
- Need another tech school
- The high school time schedule is too early.
- Violence and a closer look at the “anyone involved” policy

Image

- Good education, if you work at it
- Curriculum is good/equal all schools
- Generally, a great reputation
- Really nice schools

Information Sources

- Parent Link
- Watching cable TV through advisory board
- Local TV
- Local media
- Division publications
- Children and letters from school

Division Communication Efforts

- Found the office helpful in a customer service function when they were trying to find information about a bus stop and another with adult education.
- Parent Link is a plus.
- Some reported they liked reading the “touchy feely” stuff in the newspapers to prove that we are doing some things right and noted that such stories most likely started with the division’s Community Relations office.

Publications

- They noted most of what they read reassured their confidence in their division.
- Many parents were unaware of the Design for Excellence and *Parent Handbook*.
- Some were aware of *Schools Today* and appreciated it.

Web Site

- Some said they were unaware of web site.
- Other said it contained old news and was not that helpful.
- One used it, liked it, and shared the URL with those who did not know about it.

Parent and Community Engagement Opportunities

- Some noted that requests for involvement come out so late that they have little time, if any, to respond.
- Some felt that a positive change on openness, by the Board, was well received with the recent curriculum forum.

Greatest Future Communication Challenge

- Communicate evidence of achievement and demonstrate progress
- Work on achievement gaps and communicate about those issues
- Changing populations of our communities
- Use of schools by the community
- Partner with the University of Richmond and its new destination program

CCPS Focus Groups

Group: Non-Teaching Professional Staff

Strengths

- Options and opportunities for students
- Diversity of programming
- Training for teachers
- High expectations — in the system and in the community
- The community supports education.

Improvement Areas

- Overcrowding. “I wish we could address this issue more quickly.”
- Too many trailers. “People feel disconnected in trailers.”
- Diversity is a plus and a minus.
- More resources for early intervention, including Child Find
- Resource allocation. Services could be better apportioned division-wide.
- Size can make it difficult to “come together as a whole.”
- “Sometimes we have a school division and other times a division of schools.”

Image

- Positive
- Good
- People move to get into this system.
- More and more people are trying to enroll here.
- Varies — based on where you live in the county
- Old stigmas that applied years ago to some schools still linger.
- Media coverage is not always reflective of the schools’ reality.

Information Sources

- Many, many e-mails. “Difficult to keep up with them.” “Some important. Some not.”
- Technology is a “double-edge sword” when it comes to communication. Easy to use, but easy to overload people.
- Principals, if they are good communicators
- “Our principal does a ‘Week at a Glance’ wrap-up of what’s important.”

What Is Communicated Well

- Word of mouth still is important, despite many administrative e-mails.
- Personal communication and contacts remain key info sources.
- Communication is more difficult if you work outside of the school division. You're more removed from information.
- Communication and information is very dependant on your administrator or supervisor. If he or she communicates well then you are informed.
- "Our parents love Phone Master."

Publications

- *Schools Today* — "When I get the newspaper." "Not sure too many people really notice that however. It's stuck in with a lot of other ads."
- Design for Excellence — "But most of us didn't get that one."
- Adult Community Ed. Publication has a lot of visibility in the community.
- It would help to have more publications available for pick up in the schools.

Web Site

- They are good if you have access to them. Some do not.
- A lot of good info as long as someone is keeping it up to date.
- School web sites are inconsistent. Some good. Others not.
- Need more centralized support for school sites
- The new division web site seems more difficult to use to find common things.
- Intranet has a lot of good materials, but it too could be easier to use (to find things).

Internal Communication

- Needs to be better
- We need better, quicker access to information that needs to be passed on the community — things people ask about.
- EdLine is great but some people lack access to it.
- Communication can come to "a screeching halt," depending on your school.
- Info is out there but too many times it's up to you to "proactively seek it out."
- Challenge is finding information. "Sometimes you have to ask two or three people."

Listening and Feedback

- Some are good and others are not. Could use more consistency.
- Overall, the system appears to be less open to negative feedback.
- Transparency is the way to go, but not everyone feels that way.
- There is a sense that we sometimes cater too much to those who constantly complain. We could do better at engaging more people.

Opportunities for Involvement

- Strong at the school level — especially elementary
- There are division committees for involvement but, “I have no idea how they work.”
- Division does a good job at being collaborative but it could do a better job at reporting how collected insight and feedback are being used.

Priorities for Improvement

- Especially as growth continues, get people connected to the schools and get the schools connected to the people.
- Train and work with parents on using new technology to communicate as much as possible.
- Strengthen connections with county government.
- Build better synergy. Focus more on keeping the left hand in touch with what the right hand is doing.
- School division needs to communicate better internally. There is an openness to communication, but it could be better structured or articulated.

Group: School Office Managers

Strengths

- Teachers are outstanding.
- Many opportunities for all students
- Specialty centers. Tech center
- Options for students at all levels

Improvement Areas

- More staffing. In all areas, teaching, secretarial, support, guidance.
- Class size
- Looking at needs of individual schools
- Extend hours. Some staff work less than an 8-hour day. Scheduling and availability could be better. Extend some hours.
- County waits way too long to build new schools.
- Discrepancies between old and new schools

Image

- Positive
- People come here for schools.
- School-based
- Employees loyal to schools and students. “We may gripe, but we are committed.”

Information Sources

- Newspapers. “I often read them first for information.”
- Parents. They know some things (“like snow closings”) before we do.
- Internet
- Grapevine
- Principals. “Those who communicate well are good info sources.”

What Is Communicated Well

- Some people respond well to inquiries and questions. But not all.
- Staff, in general, is helpful.
- “But you have to ask” to get info in many cases.
- You can get facts but not much insight or background “when you ask questions about something.”

Publications

- *Wow! Factor* offers a lot of info.
- There are a lot of things for parents. Almost seems like too much sometimes. They can get overloaded.
- “We send things in from our schools for the publications but they never get published.”
- Some info is too complex for parents to understand. We often get a lot of questions in response to publications that go home.
- Need more publications in Spanish

Web Site

- Most are extremely helpful.
- Lots of “wonderful” info
- Put more and more on the web and maybe cut back on some publications.
- Need to accommodate both those with and without computer access

Internal Communication

- More timely information would be helpful.
- “Sometimes I get communication I need to do my job well.”
- Communication has improved. We’re getting more info than before.
- Goal: “Anybody who takes a call should be able to answer, or get the answer, to the question being asked.”
- Principals need to be good communicators. “They are the gatekeepers.”
- “I’m encouraged they are doing this study and invited. It shows somebody cares.”

Listening and Feedback

- Not much listening
- Organization does listen, but it could be more proactive.

Opportunities for Involvement

- Schools have PTAs.
- Involvement is very school-specific. Some very. Others not as much.
- There is an inconsistency when it comes to involvement.
- Division has groups of parents they work with, but it seems like you have to be invited to participate.
- Some principals are welcoming. Others aren't.

Priorities for Improvement

- Making the most of communication technology. The new generation of parents is pretty tech savvy.
- Managing growing diversity
- Get key to the right people quickly.
- Meeting the growing public expectations of information on demand
- Training new principals, administrators, and staff members on their communication roles
- More communication training for office managers and other staff

Group: Central Office — Office Managers

Strengths

- Good schools
- Good opportunities for kids. Other counties try to get into our schools.
- Great benefits for employees
- No evening work; no overtime; summer hours

Improvement Areas

- Overcrowding in schools
- Transportation issues; need more buses; discipline issues on buses
- Neighborhood drop-off procedures for parents need to be enforced.
- Staffing assistance with language barriers with students and special needs student transportation

Image

- Kids are well taken care of.
- Excellent
- Diverse community
- DOE web site lists SOL and violence reports
- Positive
- PTSA driven

Information Sources

- Phone calls from one another
- E-mail chain
- Supervisors
- Grapevine

What Is Communicated Well

- Some people respond well to inquiries and questions. Others pass requests on.
- Not in the know on things we need to know. Inconsistent reporting by supervisors.
- Community Relations office does well in answering questions they can answer.

Publications

- Division does a nice job on publications; just worry about the cost and what that means for my paycheck.
- Need for a division telephone directory that is easy to use
- Along with the directory, need a frequently asked questions-and-answers document
- A Who-Does-What Directory by key operational functions would also be a big help.

Web Site

- Use Intranet more than our web site
- Good information for parents on the web site
- Intranet needs a fast search engine.

Internal Communication

- More timely information would be helpful — often we get info too late to effectively communicate it.
- The delayed opening of the school was a problem; lack of credible information given to us; then we are asked by parents and others and have no or wrong answers.
- We should receive e-mails that are sent to our bosses. That would keep us informed when our bosses don't tell us what is going on; we would also be more productive.

- Communication has improved. We're getting more info than before.
- Divisional calendar would be a help.
- Often requisitions are delayed and no one tells us about it; wastes time in tracking down; should be a way to electronically track what's happening with our request.

Listening and Feedback

- Not much opportunity for input. "This session is the only one I remember."
- Depends on supervisor. Some ask and listen. Others don't.
- Rarely seek our opinions even when implementation includes us
- One parent can make a big impact with this system; too often administrators do not stand up in these situations.

Opportunities for Involvement

- Persistent parents "win" a great deal of the time.
- Involvement is very school specific. Some very. Others not as much.

Priorities for Improvement

- Work with commissioners in dealing with growth.
- Continue use of Parent Link.
- Just don't keep all programs going; cut back on them especially, when new ones are being added all the time.
- Superintendent's memo needs to be read by everyone.
- Review the issue of classifications for employees and pay levels.
- Eliminate inconsistencies in flow of communication.

Strengths

- Quality
- Excellence
- Choices for students
- Offer a lot of wonderful programs
- High academic standards
- Student centered

Improvement Areas

- Communication
- Over-crowding
- Too many chiefs; not enough Indians
- More opportunities for students who are not college bound
- More equitable distribution of resources. “Too much haves and have nots.”

Image

- People move here for the schools.

Information Sources

- Channel 12
- *Chesterfield Observer*
- Students
- Bus drivers
- Active grapevines — “active but not always correct.”
- Direct lines of communication — “but they often break down.”

What Is Communicated Well

- *WOW! Factor* is good, but doesn’t cover all departments.
- Better distribution — “I’ve never seen *WOW! Factor*.”
- A lot of e-mails but there often are breakdowns in how information is disseminated.
- “Some administrators are better communicators than others.”

Publications

- The Park and Rec. Adult Guide is good and seen and used by many in the community.
- We don’t see many publications other than the *WOW! Factor*.

Web Site

- Info is excellent.
- School web sites all differ, but many are good.
- Web sites offer a good overview of what's going on and who to contact.

Listening and Feedback

- They listen but they communicate back about what was heard or done.
- Some of them avoid conflict.
- Situational. Some areas are very responsive with leadership that seeks feedback.

Opportunities for Involvement

- Plenty of opportunities
- PTAs are very good.
- They seem to always be asking for volunteers.
- Excellent links to seniors

Priorities for Improvement

- Communication on safety and security issues
- Making parents more involved and accountable. "This has improved but improvement needs to continue."
- Managing growing cultural diversities

Group: Direct Reports

Strengths

- People
- Quality people who are dedicated to working with children
- Offerings and choices
- Leadership always places the best interest of children first.

Improvement Areas

- Internal communication processes
- Centralized calendar — moving toward it but not everyone uses Outlook
- We are good at using technology but we could be better.
- It would be helpful for all to have a better understanding of how to use communication technology to communicate.

Image

- Outstanding division
- Our ability to attract good people speaks to the strength of our image.
- Strong image is perceived as successful.
- Success of bond referenda speaks to good image.
- People think the division is wealthier than it is. “We get blood out of a stone.”
- “I know we pride ourselves in communicating well with parents. But, as a non-parent, I can’t recall the last time I got something explaining what CCPS is and what it does.”
- Public doesn’t have a clear understanding of what the School Board and school administrators can and can’t do.

Information Sources

- School newsletters
- *WOW! Factor*
- Meetings
- News media
- School visits

What Is Communicated Well

- Crisis communication
- Kick-off video was very effective this year.
- Formal publications, such as handbook, annual reports, done very well

- Typically, administrators understand how to communicate through channels and manage issues.
- Growth and expansion has given us growing pains and may have caused us to continue to rely on too much informal communication.
- In many ways we have become a big division that still communicates like a small one.
- “I feel like a lot of things get lost between the central office and the teachers when you rely on principals for communication.”

Publications

- Design for Excellence is new but we think it is effective.
- Adult Ed program guides

Web Site

- It is very clear that employment applicants used the web sites — both school and division — extensively to learn about us.
- Need to continue working toward more consistency on school sites
- We’ve built a lot of good links and information.
- Central is using the web more to communicate with the public.
- Material is online but it needs to be searched and accessed more easily.

Listening and Feedback

- Advisory groups, including student groups, provide feedback.
- A double-edged sword — if you don’t do what people suggest in feedback.
- People offering feedback sometimes need to be better directed. They don’t always get feedback to the right people — people who can do something about the issue they are concerned with.
- People sometimes “shop” for people to give feedback to.

Opportunities for Involvement

- Many different opportunities for involvement
- Overall, parents are actively involved.

Priorities for Improvement

- Teach people to talk with one another to help find and forge solutions.
- Interpersonal communication and helping people find the right people to talk with.
- Internal communication is a bigger issue for us than external communication. “We work harder at external communication than we do at internal communication.”

Group: Seniors and Other Community Members

Strengths

- A lot of services to offer
- Open to parents
- Teachers are dedicated.

Improvement Areas

- Communication between departments and individual schools
- “Sometimes the left hand doesn’t seem to know what the right hand is doing.”
- Central office is seen by some as “out of touch” with what is actually happening in the schools.
- More visibility for administrators and other principals in the hallways
- Need to be more forthcoming on informal and formal FOIA requests for Information and documents
- Some people in the system seem “stressed and reluctant to communicate.”

Information Sources

- *WOW! Factor*, but it only goes to teachers
- FOIA to get files and documents
- Ask friends or teachers
- News media — but news coverage has limitations

What Is Communicated Well

- Crisis communication; communication on security issues
- Parent Link
- Online grade books — great for parents who can use them.
- E-mail from teachers. Teachers overall are very responsive.
- Web site is useful “because they post minutes, budgets and so on.”

Publications

- Adult Education Community Guide gets wide distribution.
- *WOW! Factor* — but it needs to have wider distribution

Web Site

- Need to get shorter, easier to type links to get to information. Ones that appear in publication often are too long.
- Make the site more user-friendly. Easier to search and find what you’re looking for.

Listening and Feedback

- Community meetings to address some issues
- Meetings are good but they are overly controlled. They give the appearance of determining the outcome.
- Issues communication is a problem.
- Majority of people in the county do not have children in the system. Need more communication and services to accommodate this growing group of people. “School division needs better connections with non-parents.”

Opportunities for Involvement

- Depends on the school
- Many schools have volunteers and activities for involvement, but not all.
- Overall, there seems to be a lot of opportunity for involvement.
- Many people are “fantastic” at encouraging involvement.
- “Many people have much to offer, but they need to be asked.”

Priorities for Improvement

- Listening better
- Internal communication
- Responsiveness to feedback
- Managing growth and the challenges it brings

Image

- Sense that CCPS is the best
- Image remains good.

Strengths

- Benefits for employees
- Diversity of programs
- Arts, sports, and specialty programs
- Lots of opportunity for students with exceptional needs
- Tech. Center

Improvement Areas

- Cuts in benefits have caused loss of some people.
- We are a little behind in using technology.
- It's hard to get some technology resources in some schools.
- Need to keep developing programs for all schools — not all students are going to college.
- Resource issues — the problem of haves and have nots
- Overload of e-mails. "I sometimes get three or four copies of the same e-mail on the same topic."
- If you don't live in the county, you don't get the info that reinforces its good image.

What Is Communicated Well

- Internal communication is not coordinated.
- Better school and central office communication
- Principals become communication gatekeepers.
- Always seem to be playing catch up. Need to think out further when planning.
- Space planning. We seem to have been cramped for space for years.
- Teachers are stressed for time. "I keep hearing, 'Just let me teach.'"

Publications

- My staff thought *WOW! Factor* was a waste of money. It looks expensive to produce. Why not send it electronically?
- "I enjoy it (*WOW! Factor*), but why should we spend so much money on it?"
- Parents enjoy *Schools Today* — but you have to be in the county to get it.
- Not sure we've seen the annual report
- *The Parks and Recreation Adult Education Guide* is a good publication.

Web Site

- New web site is not user-friendly.
- Old web pages looked more professional. Navigation has become more difficult.
- Intranet is very good. It would be helpful to have access to it at home.
- We don't use school web sites much, but parents do. School web sites could be better.

Internal Communication

- “Don’t get the info I need.”
- They are told some things but there are times when internal communication doesn’t work.
- There is a sense of communication overload at times. We can be inundated with e-mails. E-mails often arrive too late to give teachers advance notice of some things.
- Some e-mails are repetitive. Some correct previous info that was sent prematurely or that was wrong for some reason.
- Confusion over Passport Hours. What are they and how do you earn them? Seems to vary from school to school.
- Little sense of order or organization to e-mail communication on some things.

Listening and Feedback

- They listen but sometimes don’t “hear.”
- I feel like it’s starting. It’s getting better.
- Last 10 years, no. Last 6 months, yes.
- “I participate in giving feedback, but I never hear the results.”

Opportunities for Involvement

- Yes
- PTA works well
- Parents can get involved however they want.
- Overall, if parents want to be involved, they can be.
- Would like to see more communication to families in diverse groups to get their involvement

Priorities for Improvement

- Better internal communication to support instruction and teachers
- Better organization of internal communication
- Better communication to foster teamwork
- Reduce class sizes

Strengths

- Academics
- Special education
- High performance
- Staff, people, teachers, administrators
- Parental involvement
- Choices. Opportunities for students
- Uniqueness
- Demographics

Improvement Areas

- Marketing — internal and external. “They don’t know what they have.”
- Inward looking. Can lead to feeling besieged
- They have a great story to tell.
- Turf wars. Politics
- Speed of communication. More info available on demand. There is a growing public expectation of it.
- From an outside perspective, they are about 10 to 15 years behind in using communication technology.
- Curriculum needs input from business leaders before it is implemented.
- Seems disjointed at times. Many schools and programs do not always appear cohesive.

Image

- Big
- Award-winning
- Do a good job of communicating successes
- Take 75¢ of the tax dollar
- Unequal resource allocation

Sources of news and info

- Children
- Homework folders from the younger students
- EdLine. Voice mail. But not every school uses these.
- Education Connection
- Teachers are very responsive if you reach out to them.

What Is Communicated Well

- Great job of getting success stories in local media
- When crisis strikes, they often appear to be or are portrayed as reactionary — offering the same pat responses.
- Overly focused on micro issues when communicating and lacking big, strategy-driven messages
- Need a strategic communication plan
- Businesses could be used even more to help in many ways. There is a sense that you go to business for money, but we can offer much more.
- Business and government relations function is focused more on donations than forging true partnerships.
- Different parts of the system often convey different messages.
- PTAs are strong in schools, not as strong at the division level.
- Current business involvement needs more visibility so others see how they can become more involved in CIS and the foundation.

Web Site

- New web site, creatively, is not great. Not organized well for getting info. Not designed for end-users. Design reflects their inward-looking pattern.
- Really needs an easy-to-find and easy-to-use directory of people — who to contact for what and how to get to them (phone and e-mail info).
- Some school e-mail boxes (general inquiry e-mail addresses) go unanswered. People don't seem to be checking some of those.
- The web still does not reflect the dynamic nature of the system. “If it is your first introduction to the system, you would not get excited.”
- Need to invest in professional support for web design
- School web sites are not updated over the summer, leaving old information up into the new school year.
- Need to study more exactly how people are using the site, what they need from the site, then design to accommodate user needs and behaviors
- Need to establish some standards for all web sites, including meeting ADA compliance
- Need to consider optimizing for use with mobile devices, as that user segment continues to grow

Listening and Feedback

- Too often consult the same people — need more input from the whole community
- No feedback on what happens after forums
- More follow up
- Greater county-level involvement by business on all school issues
- More e-mail communication. Make sure e-mail communication is accessible by all employees.

- Teachers and others need support and training on effectively using new technologies to communicate.
- Parents and other outsiders need guidance on how to effectively communicate with the system — which communication tools to use when, who to contact in what situation.
- Is there a communication etiquette policy to help people know how to communicate in different situations?
- When collecting insight: Make sure it is clear why the community is at the table and is their role there understood by all? “Sometimes we get the sense we are there so someone can put a mark in the checkbox next to ‘We got input.’”

Priorities for Improvement

- Strategic communication plan
- May need some external help on developing a communication strategy
- Need a driving strategy to guide efforts overall. A vision. Not just a lot of things happening.
- Internal communication first. Fix communication inside first.

Group: Parents and Other Community Members

Strengths

- Good schools
- High school choice
- Gifted and other special education programs
- IEPs and process is wonderful
- Choices. Diversity of programs
- Always adding new choices

Improvement Areas

- Overcrowding puts a black-eye on what we do.
- Students in the middle, those with average achievement, seem lost in shuffle. More support and communication when child is not doing well or slipping.
- Security. More security officers are needed.
- Board and others wait too long to make decisions.
- Seems that the Board “muscles” its way into community decisions as it is not communicated until it happens.

Image

- Very good schools
- Wonderful potential
- “Great schools. I would never move from here while I have school-age children.”
- Moved back here because of the schools

Sources of news and info

- *Observer* but it is mostly negative
- Auto-call system EdLine. Voice mail.
- Parent Link
- Check morning announcements on school web site

Listening and Feedback

- The Forum is a good idea, but stunningly empty.
- Need more of them and you need to go to the people
- Need more sessions in more areas
- Consider virtual meetings with school board members.

Priorities for Improvement and the Future

- Issues of financial elections
- Issue of changing demographics an immigration
- Teacher retention and teacher pay

Group: Middle School Principals

Strengths

- Great people
- Supportive atmosphere
- “We are a lumbering giant that takes advantage of an economy of scale.”

Improvement Areas

- Growth creates problems with over 250 trailers.
- School safety issues
- Too often the “squeaky wheel” drives decisions or seems to have more influence than warranted.
- Internal communication, as it seems central office does not communicate with one another as we were to attend two mandatory meetings scheduled for the same time and date.
- People talk about a county calendar but it is not a reality.
- Often seen as right hand not knowing what left hand is doing; more of a silo approach that creates communication problems

Image

- We are the Richmond Area’s school division of choice.
- We have a tendency to rest on our laurels.

- Conservative; do not like change. If it's not broke why are you trying to fix it?

Information Sources

- Each other on many items
- E-mail
- Staff meetings

What Is Communicated Well

- Crisis communication and assistance we receive from Debra Marlow's office; very helpful; they help us succeed.
- The Parent Link system is wonderful.

Publications

- *WOW! Factor* is a nice attempt to celebrate accomplishments.
- Weekly electronic tips are very professional.
- "Never found a typo in anything I received."
- All publications project an air of professionalism.

Web Site

- Parents tell us that they do not like the new web site; it is a big step backwards.
- They claim it is difficult to navigate and that it needs a better search engine.
- Some noted that the Intranet does not have a coordinated approach to its design.
- Material is apparently there but it needs to be searched and accessed more easily.

Listening and Feedback

- Lots of opportunity for feedback at all levels both internally and externally.
- Sometimes it seems we have too much feedback from the same audiences who skew approaches and results.

Priorities for Improvement

- EdLine needs to trickle its way to all schools.
- We talk about partnerships but not sure how they fit into the community involvement plan for helping schools at classroom level.
- Safety issues
- Phone infrastructure is very inconsistent; hurts communication
- Using our laptops in WIFI airports would make us all more proactive.

Strengths

- Dedicated, professional teachers
- Quality of the kids
- Faith-based committees
- Our support for at-risk students
- Community partnerships
- County agencies
- Mental health system

Improvement Areas

- Need to recognize that not all students will be going to college
- Improve inequity of resources for poor students
- Focus more on Communities in Schools programs in helping at-risk students
- More collaboration in the North/South areas as accomplished with CIS
- Need to be more proactive on growth

Image

- Lacks vision
- It is a system of passive recipients with some pockets of energy.

Sources of news and info

- Newspapers/*Observer*
- Television
- School communication materials
- Web site
- Each other
- Advisory councils and others boards they serve on

How to Communicate Better

This group decided to be more proactive on its own and offered its recommendations on content and style for the division's communication program:

- School division needs to project an image of where it is headed and be more proactive on a number of fronts with the entire community, not just parents.
- Communicating by e-mail and the web was the recommended approach for this group.

- Currently the communication effort seems all tactics, no strategy.
- Perhaps it is time for a renewed look at a “Growth Summit” as was attempted in past.
- The culture of leaders in Virginia is one of looking backward so it is often difficult to engage and have them move forward, but it can be done.
- The Board and division need to talk about their challenges and engage leaders to help overcome them. Too often their responses follow a “defensive style” that does not convey leadership and a direction for the division.
- The schools often appear to be reactionary — offering the same pat responses.
- The schools need a strategic communication plan.
- On school budgets, first tell us what you are doing with what you now have. Share with us where the money goes and how the decisions are made on the budget.
- Increase transparency in decisionmaking
- Thinking about developing communication partnerships with other agencies and use items such as utility bills to carry some of your key messages.

Priorities for Improvement

- Become more aware of the changing demographics in the community because it may overwhelm the system if you have not planned for these changes. The gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” will surely increase a financial strain on the system.
- Develop a succession plan for key division positions — one being the leadership of CIS.
- Increase the effort to meet the needs of at-risk students.
- Work with supervisors and other boards — give a good attempt to work with them on key community issues.

Additional information on focus groups not included in this section

Three additional focus groups were held. The first with high school principals represented just two principals so their relevant responses were included in the observation section. The second group dealt with the media.

We asked a different set of questions of the media and we also noted the results of this session in the *Key Findings and Professional Observations* as well as in the *Recommendations* sections of the report.

And finally, the session with the Board focused more on their expectations of the communication function and that feedback is reflected in the Observation section of this report.

Appendix

What Is NSPRA?

Focus Group Questions

NSPRA Auditors

Communication Audit Checklist for School Principals

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and the U.S. Dependent Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission through a variety of diverse services that we provide to our members and to other school leaders who contract with or buy from us.

With over 70 years of experience, we have a reputation in the field for practical approaches to solving school district and agency communication problems. We have useful communication products, offer workshops and seminars, maintain resource and research files, have contacts and resources within the corporate communication industry, and have 32 chapters throughout the country that provide local networking opportunities for members.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides workshop assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations. For many of these groups, we have completed research-based communication audits to analyze the communication flow, targeting, content, and effectiveness of their communication messages.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference anywhere, is held each July. This four-day conference offers more than 70 topics on a wide array of school communication issues. The 2008 Seminar will be held in the Washington, D.C./Arlington, Virginia area.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter *Network* is a communication resource for school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major problem and explains how communication can play a vital role in solving it. *PRincipal Communicator* is our monthly building-level PR newsletter which provides practical help to school principals and other building-level leaders. The planning calendar and a variety of communication topics are helping many to effectively improve communication at the community level.

Our four electronic newsletters, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor*, *NSPRA Alert*, and *Opportunities* provide 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 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 (LFA), a coalition of the leading 17 educational associations in the United States. In addition, NSPRA is a founding member of the Educational Research Service (ERS). The association also sponsors four national awards programs to bring recognition for excellence in communication to individuals, districts and agencies.

Discussion Questions for Focus Groups

- 1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Chesterfield County Schools?**
 - Are there areas needing improvement?
- 2. How would you describe the school division's current image in the community?**
(or How would you describe the school division to someone new to the community?)
- 3. What is your best source of news and information about the division and the schools?**
 - What information do you receive from the division/schools now?
 - What information would you like to receive that you aren't getting now?
- 4. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the division do well?**
 - Where does it need to improve?
 - Has the division done an adequate job communicating important issues about education?
 - What is the best way for the school division to communicate with you?
- 5. I have several school division publications here. Have you seen them?**
 - Which are most effective in delivering information to you?
 - How could they be improved?
 - Do you read your child's school newsletter? Does it provide the information you need about the school?
- 6. Have you visited the division and school web sites? Is it helpful and informative?**
 - What information have you looked for and could you find it easily?
 - What would make the web site more useful to you as a primary source of information?
 - How can the web sites be improved?
- 7. (For staff) As an employee, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manners to that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?**
 - Are current employee communication vehicles (cite examples) effective in delivering information to you?
 - What additional information do you need that you aren't receiving now?
- 8. Do you feel district leaders listen to constituents and provide opportunities for you to have input and express your views on important decisions?**
 - How can the division best provide those opportunities?

9. **Does the division offer opportunities for parents and community members to be actively engaged in the schools and the division?**
- What keeps people from becoming involved in the schools?
 - What additional activities could the division offer to engage more people?
10. **What is the greatest communication challenge facing the division in the future?**
- What should the division be communicating about this issue/challenge?

Focus Groups Discussion Questions For Principals/Administrators

1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Chesterfield County Schools?
 - Are there areas needing improvement?

2. How would you describe the school division's current image in the community?

(or How would you describe the school division to someone new to the community?)

3. What is your best source of news and information about the division and the schools?
 - (If word of mouth) Who do you usually hear it from? What kinds of things do you usually hear about?
 - If you have questions or want specific information about an issue, where or to whom do you go first to find it? Are central office staff responsive to your needs?
 - How do you prefer to receive information?

4. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the division do well?
 - Where does it need to improve?
 - How can the community relations office better assist you as a principal/administrator?
 - Has the division done an adequate job communicating important issues about education?

5. I have several school division publications here.
 - Which are most effective in delivering information?
 - How could they be improved?

6. Have you assessed the division's web sites? Is it helpful and informative?
 - What information have you looked for and could you find it easily?

- What would make the web site more useful to you as a primary source of information?
 - How can the division and school web sites be improved?
7. As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manners to that you can be effective in your job?
- Are current employee communication vehicles (cite examples) effective in delivering information to you?
 - What additional information do you need that you aren't receiving now?
8. Do you feel district leaders listen to staff and provide opportunities for you to have input and express your views on important decisions?
- How can the division best provide those opportunities?
9. Does the division offer opportunities for parents and community members to be actively engaged in the schools and the division?
- What keeps people from becoming involved in the schools?
 - What additional activities could the division offer to engage more people?
10. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the division in the future?
- What should the division be communicating about this issue/challenge?

Focus Groups Discussion Questions

For School Board Members

1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Chesterfield County Schools?
 - Are there areas needing improvement?
2. What image do you believe the community currently holds of the school division?
 - What does the division need to do to strengthen its image and relationships with the community?
3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the division do well?
 - Where does it need to improve?
4. I have several school division publications here.
 - Which do you believe are most effective in delivering information to the public?
 - How could they be improved?
5. Have you assessed the division's web site? Is it helpful and informative?
 - What information have you looked for and could you find it easily?
 - What would make the web site more useful as a primary source of information?
 - How can the division and school web sites be improved?
8. How might the division better engage parents, staff and community in helping address the issues and challenges facing the division?
 - Do you feel ample opportunities are now provided for parents and community members to have input into decision-making and express their views?
 - What keeps people from becoming involved in the schools?
 - Are there additional ways the division could encourage parents and community members to become actively engaged in the schools?

9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the division in the future?
 - What should the division be communicating about this issue/challenge?

10. As a Board member, what outcomes would you like to see from this communication audit?

NSPRA Auditors

Richard D. Bagin, APR

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

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

Bagin has conducted numerous communication audits for school districts and corporate clients. He was instrumental in initiating the NSPRA communication audit process in the mid-1980s and has authored articles on the auditing process that have appeared in various educational and communication periodicals. Bagin is the author of NSPRA's *Communication Guidebook for Teachers; Evaluating Your School Public Relations Investment, Planning Your School Public Relations Investment; and 101 PR Ideas You Can Use Now! ... And More!* He also authored *Principals in the Public ... Engaging Community Support*, jointly published by MetLife, NAESP (Elementary School Principals Association) and NSPRA. In addition, Bagin serves as a workshop leader for major education associations and school districts throughout the United States and Canada.

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

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

Edward H. Moore, APR

Edward H. Moore, APR, is an Associate Professor of Public Relations and Advertising in the College of Communication at Rowan University in Glassboro, N.J. He started his career as a school public relations practitioner with the Macomb ISD in Michigan. He went on to serve more than 20 years as a public relations counselor and journalist working with a variety of education, corporate and association clients in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia.

Moore has taught public relations for 20 years — at George Washington University and Rowan University. He also served previously as an Associate Director of the National School Public Relations Association.

Moore has directed research, editorial, and marketing programs for a variety of publications serving professionals. He served six years as managing editor of *Communication Briefings*, a communication-management newsletter serving more than 50,000 subscribers worldwide. He previously served as Senior Vice President and General Manager of Earle Palmer Brown Public Relations. He also served as Vice President and Deputy General Manager of Carl Byoir and Associates in Washington.

Moore is accredited in public relations by the Public Relations Society of America. Moore has written extensively on PR issues and is the author of NSPRA's *Mastering E-Newsletters and More* and co-author of the Allyn Bacon text *The School and Community Relations* used in more than 200 colleges and universities.

NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication, and it has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States and Canada since 1935.

Nancy Kracke

Nancy Kracke is the Director of Community Relations for School District 112, Chaska, Minnesota. She is responsible for all aspects of the suburban district's public relations efforts including the design and implementation of research-based communication strategies, both internally and externally. She leads her district's communication and marketing planning, aligning each effort to the school board's mission and strategic goals. Nancy's responsibilities also include media relations, writing and editing district publications, and creating processes designed for maximum stakeholder input.

Nancy's 38 years of public relations experience have focused primarily on public education. A proud Cornhusker, Nancy graduated from the University of Nebraska with a degree in broadcast journalism. She began her career in Omaha at Westside Community Schools, serving as communications assistant. She has served as communications coordinator of the St. Louis Park Schools in the Twin Cities, the director of public relations for the Park Nicollet Medical Center and enjoyed several years of free-lance writing and editing before going back to serve public education in her current school district.

Nancy was the editor of the *MSBA Journal*, the magazine of the Minnesota School Boards Association for several years as well as editor of *Research/Practice* for the College of Education at the University of Minnesota.

She is a long-time member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), a founding member of the Nebraska Chapter of NSPRA, and an active member of MinnSPRA, the Minnesota Chapter of NSPRA. Nancy has served twice as MinnSPRA's president and is the recipient of its Professional Leadership Award. She was a co-facilitator of MinnSPRA's highly effective Leadership Academy, a year-long professional development seminar. She currently serves NSPRA as Vice President of the North Central Region.

Nancy's work has been recognized with numerous publication and website awards and the MinnSPRA *Award of Excellence for Outstanding Achievement in School Public Relations* for successful referendum campaigns. She has guided more than 10 levy and bond referenda to victory. She is a frequent speaker on creating successful bond/levy campaigns, and a sought-after mentor and advisor to professional colleagues across the U.S.



Communication Audit

Checklist for School Principals – Tally

Name of District/Organization: **Chesterfield County Public Schools**

The following questions relate to External communications.

1. A school newsletter is sent to parents:

5 Weekly **31** Monthly **19** Other **0** Never

- Quarterly (**8**)
- Bi-monthly (**2**)
- Every 2 weeks
- School – 9 weeks
- 7 or 8 per year
- This year, student made – principal column
- Just started this year
- Bi-Weekly (**2**)
- When pertinent information needs to be communicated ASAP
- Every other month
- 6 times a year

2. Efforts are made to acquaint new families with curriculum/services:

31 Before school begins **33** Regularly during the school year **16** As needed

3. a) The principal responds to questions and concerns from parents and the public:

31 Same day **25** Within 24-48 hrs **0** As I can get to it

b) School office staff responds to questions and concerns from parents and the public:

30 Same day **29** Within 24-48 hrs **0** As they can get to it

c) Teachers respond to questions and concerns from parents:

11 Same day **47** Within 24-48 hrs **3** As they can get to it

4. Parents can voice ideas and concerns **about** the school through:

51 PTO/PTA

7 Advisory committees

17 Site Council/School Improvement Team

9 Forums/study circles

51 Individual meetings with administrators/staff

16 Other (please describe):

- Surveys
- Coffee Talks (**7**)
- Individually with the principal
- Calls a meeting with teacher
- School Curriculum night
- Website/Emails
- Hotline
- Letters/Phone Calls
- Anytime they wish
- Participation in School Based Committees

5. Special programs are offered to help parents help their children learn:

10 Monthly

28 2-4 times yearly

9 At least once a year

3 Never

6. Volunteer programs in the school include:

51 Parents

22 Senior citizens

39 Community members

17 Other (please describe):

- Church (**3**)
- Middle School Students (**2**)
- High School Students (**9**)
- Students (**2**)
- Mentors

7. The school has established business/civic partnerships or other business support programs:

44 Yes

9 No

- Civic - In process of working with business

8. Do you have programs to involve non-parents in school activities?

40 Yes

13 No

12. Support staff can voice ideas and concerns about the school through:

- 45** Staff meetings **8** Advisory committees **7** Suggestion box
21 Site Council/School Improvement Team **19** PTO/PTA **9** Association/Union representatives
53 Individual meetings with administrators **12** Other (please describe)

- Principal's Mailbox
- Anytime
- Focus Groups
- Meetings with Office Manager
- Team Meetings (**4**)
- SPMT
- Emails
- Teacher Meetings with the principal
- ACTS

13. Check any of the following that you use to communicate with teachers:

- 53** E-mail **5** Voice-mail **53** Staff meetings **27** Other (please describe)

- Calendars (**8**)
- Weekly Bulletin (**2**)
- Walk around Chat
- Team Meetings (**4**)
- Curriculum committee
- Principal Advisory committee
- Personal visits (**7**)
- Memos (**4**)

- 5** Daily bulletin **11** Web site **29** Staff newsletter

14. Check any of the following that you use to communicate with support staff:

- 52** E-mail **4** Voice-mail **42** Staff meetings **19** Other (please describe)

- Team Meetings (**3**)
- Personal meetings/contacts (**8**)
- Weekly Bulletin/Calendar (**5**)
- Memos (**3**)

- 5** Daily bulletin **10** Web site **24** Staff newsletter

15. Inservice training on conducting effective parent/teacher conferences is provided:

a) **31** To all teachers **16** To new teachers

- All Invited

b) **21** Prior to conferences **22** Yearly **3** Never

- Occasionally
- Information in a handbook
- Every other year

16. Before open houses and/or curriculum nights, teachers receive inservice training in making presentations, working with diverse cultures, delivering key messages about education, etc.:

30 Prior to events **19** Yearly **8** Never

- New teachers only
- On occasion, but limited

17. Teachers are encouraged to arrange special events and activities that bring parents and community members into the school. **48** Yes **5** Sometimes **0** No

18. Teachers receive information from or about the district via (check all that apply):

53 E-mail **3** Voice-mail **52** The principal

41 Web site **47** District Intranet **46** District publications

47 Memos administrators **39** Employee newsletters **28** Meetings with district

31 Cable TV channel **28** Associations/unions **2** Other (please describe)

- Team Leaders
- ACT Meetings

19. Support staff receives information from or about the district via (check all that apply):

51 E-mail **3** Voice-mail **50** The principal

40 Web site **41** District Intranet **40** District publications

45 Memos **35** Employee newsletters **21** Meetings with district administrators

28 Cable TV channel **15** Associations/unions **0** Other (please describe)

20. Do programs involving teachers and support staff emphasize the PR roles they play as ambassadors for the school system? **43** Yes **9** No **1** Sometimes
21. Would you like to offer an inservice training program in effective communication or public relations for your staff? **39** Yes **14** No
- The Community Affairs Department has provided us with numerous strategies.
22. Would you like assistance in developing a communication plan for your school?
22 Yes **31** No
23. What could your district administration do that would be most helpful to you in planning and implementing your communication efforts?
- Lead discussion – ask teacher what they need offered before school fails.
 - Assure technology needs are addressed quickly
 - Our community affairs department should continue to do the excellent job they've done. They are extremely supportive!! Debra Marlow has built a great department
 - Consistency and less duplication of efforts. Calendar for internal meetings/dates required
 - Meet with new principal to share offerings
 - Training as listed above and continue in supportive school
 - Monitor the number/content of emails – too many received – difficult to respond in timely matter. Have one calendar for district to avoid double bookings of meetings
 - Continue support of their current initiatives and programs
 - Because our district is so large and growing communications between the school level and central office can be a challenge, especially with 3 different locations for the school board office
 - Provide training module/e-learning format
 - Minimize our emails and coordinate calendars centrally for Meetings and staff
 - .Continue the good work. They fill the need
 - Continue programs for leadership of support staff
 - Not sure! Will give some thoughts to a discussion with our PR Committee
 - Give us information in a timely manner
 - Work with local stores to provide access to the internet for parents
 - Reducing on coordinating volume of emails they send to principals and staff!
 - Control emails! More from superintendent
 - Someone on staff to do nothing but PR efforts
 - Training for teachers
 - Hold a workshop for administration and office manager with consultants to explore different tactics to effectively communicate with the publics each school encompasses
 - In-service for support staff – greeting the public; telephone courtesy
 - In school training
 - Provide training
 - Help with the goals of how communication is so important to the school community
 - You do a great job!
 - Fact sheet/packet composed for teachers and instructional assistants. Quick access
 - Provide trainers or material to inform staff of CCPS training programs
 - Sharing ideas & effective/proven communication strategies

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