

Stakeholder Engagement Discovery Report and Recommendations



Prepared for:
Seattle Public Schools

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DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The following details draft recommendations for improving stakeholder engagement that Seattle Public Schools (SPS) should consider for adoption in its five-year strategic plan. These draft recommendations are organized according to the outcome and strategy they aim to fulfill. The key findings and related discoveries supporting this stakeholder engagement plan can be found in the latter portion of this report. Each of the following should be considered for implementation as SPS engages its various stakeholders moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Outcome 1: All families—but especially those who tend to be isolated from schools due to barriers associated with language, race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status—support district efforts to provide students with an excellent education.

Strategy: Work to reach families who are most often not engaged in their students' education due to barriers associated with language, race/ethnicity and economic status.

Recommendations: The following actions are recommended for SPS.

- **Staff should formalize and implement engagement protocols system-wide.** While this recommendation applies to *all* stakeholders, this is especially crucial for families of SPS students. Transparency surrounding opportunities for input into major district decisions is crucial. SPS should acknowledge when stakeholders may engage and the type of engagement—information-sharing, influence or decision-making—available to them.
- **Properly resource the proposed school-family partnership plan to ensure its implementation.** Provide training for school-based leadership teams and school personnel that are responsible for implementing school elements. Track effectiveness through accountability measures. Consider testing these measures in focus groups to ensure they reflect the needs of those they are intended to serve (teachers, families and students). Establish a meaningful communication channel between the superintendent and the school-family partnership advisory committee.
- **Commit to high-quality communications for every contact between families and key school staff,** particularly classroom teachers, instructional assistants and school support staff. Focus on cultural competence and inclusiveness for a range of students (e.g., students with disabilities).

- **Strengthen relationships with established community organizations (faith and cultural) to gain access across cultural barriers** similar to the Highline School District. Focused recruitment of families for parent/community nights and other school events should work through faith and cultural organizations to share responsibility for outcomes.
- **Adopt a standard and modern automated call system.** Families can be reached in a timely and efficient manner with this tool, including (but not limited to) notices on school closures, truancy or outreach for school events. Dedicating staff resources is essential to implementation; we recommended one full-time administrative position in the communications department dedicated to automated notifications. A system-wide focus on the importance of maintaining updated contact information for families will support the use of this tool and all family engagement activities.
- **Dedicate more resources to family engagement staff** to allow as many schools as possible to have a family involvement coordinator located on-site, starting with schools with the greatest need.
- **Develop a handbook in multiple languages with all useful and necessary information for families** about curriculum, family support, programs within the district, where to turn for support and other opportunities to engage.
- **Create television programming through the SPS station** as a way to reach and inform families who may be difficult to reach by other means. Allowing for numerous viewing times for important issues and information will enable those unable to attend community meetings to receive information at a time when they are available. Programming can also be distributed through libraries and schools. Also consider asking Comcast, the Seattle Channel, local and neighborhood newspapers to become partners in this effort.
- **Increase utilization of *The Source* with better support and training.** Ensure participation by providing technology support and training. Consider requiring all teachers to use *The Source* and expanding it to all grade levels to keep families and the district connected. Make computers available at schools for families without Internet access at home.

Outcome 2: Community leaders are well-informed about SPS and support SPS efforts to achieve its vision of preparing every student to lead a successful life.

Strategy: Develop and maintain an ongoing relationship and productive dialogue with key community leaders to ensure that they have the facts about SPS developments.

Recommendations: The following actions are recommended for SPS.

- **Build on the communication channel that was expanded during the strategic planning process to reach more key community, business**

and civic leaders. A “Connectors Group” has been established during the strategic planning process to seek feedback and input from community leaders around the strategic plan. This list now includes more than 200 and has been mailed to and contacted electronically. This list should be expanded, and contact should continue into the future.

- **Convene periodic gatherings of community, business and civic leaders,** hosted by a groups such as the Alliance for Education, The Seattle Foundation, PTSA and other organizations to talk about challenges and progress at SPS.
- **Continue use of *School Beat*, but be more strategic.** Redesign the template to allow swift replication while still maintaining strong visual appeal. Use it to clearly showcase the important components of a school community: teachers, parents, students, administrators, school board members and the superintendent.

Outcome 3: All staff—teachers and other educators, principals and school leaders, central staff and all other district professionals—are well-informed about SPS and feel heard by the district.

Strategy: Maintain regular direct contact between the superintendent and all SPS educators and professionals.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Continue efforts to treat staff as key internal stakeholders, informing them of district decisions prior to broad publication** and providing tools for streamlined communication. Articles in regular communications as well as special notices and presentations will go a long way toward building trust between the Superintendent and central- and school-based staff and toward ensuring shared commitment on district strategies and decisions. Provide talking points and other helpful tools to enable staff to act as key communicators for the district.
- **Commit to high-quality communication between and among staff,** being mindful of language used with staff that is balanced between the reality of the situation and the impact on staff morale.
- **Continue regular outreach to all employees through electronic communications** (e.g., *Classroom Connection*, *Principal Communicator*, *School Beat*). Articles should frankly acknowledge challenges as well as contributions to success from district staff. Include requests for feedback and breaking news items or previews of upcoming issues that can be shared with other staff, families, etc.
- **Conduct periodic surveys to accept feedback, acknowledging and using the input in district decision-making.** Survey principals, instructional staff and other employees and share results with the entire staff, pointing out progress and acknowledging concerns. Continue meeting

with various internal groups to share results and seek additional input. This will increase the sense of all staff working together toward a common goal: giving our community's kids the education they need to succeed.

Outcome 4: Business and civic partners provide clearly defined services to students, families, staff and district leadership that contribute significantly to the success of every student.

Strategy (A): Partner with a local education foundation—specifically, the Alliance for Education (A4E)—that can to promote the future success of our schools with the support of the Seattle community.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Collaborate more closely with the Alliance for Education**, allowing this organization to play a more central and integral role in supporting our schools. The newly re-energized Alliance is poised to become a key strategic partner with SPS in a more focused and collaborative way.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for A4E.

- **Support and facilitate ongoing dialogue within the community** and provide strategic direction for organizations seeking to support SPS.
- **Launch a far more aggressive fundraising effort** to support SPS on all fronts. A4E should review fundraising success in Portland as an example of building support from the business and civic community at a much higher level than ever before.
- **Look into establishing a non-profit organization similar to Portland's Schoolhouse Supplies.** There is nothing more important than lessening the stress teachers face on a daily basis and ensuring they have all the tools they need in the classroom or the school office. This is also a great way to have smaller donations be linked to tangible results.
- **Examine a program that would allow for endowed positions at the Central Office** similar to what is done at higher education and arts and cultural institutions. As a community, we need to look at ways to keep good leadership in positions that are now currently underpaid compared to their counterparts in private industry. The same should also be considered for those schools that are low-performing and have the greatest need for stability and leadership.
- **Investigate establishing a school-by-school equity fundraising model** that requires one third of the funds raised by individual school foundations to be set aside for schools unable to raise funds (similar to the Portland Schools Foundation Equity Fund). It is important that the lowest-performing schools receive funding to support the children with the greatest need. A4E can assist in bridging the gap between schools and communities.

Strategy (B): Develop strategic partnerships with independent organizations and businesses that contribute to making progress on the strategic plan and improve education outcomes for all students.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Map and assess current partners and focus district efforts according to strategic priorities. Consider the value of an ongoing, independent advisory group to guide implementation of the strategic plan.** Assessments made by such a group would add credibility and help improve public confidence in SPS. The group could be managed by the Alliance for Education (may also include representatives from business, PTSA, SEA, philanthropy and local government).
- **Collaborate with an organization that can provide refurbished computers to every family of a student in need of at-home technology** (with legal software). Computers could also be donated to a Schoolhouse Supplies program.
- **Solicit business and other partners for loaned staff** to help with specific projects, departments and expertise. Communications, IT and human resources would all gain value from additional staff.
- **Strengthen relationships with the Mayor and City Council.** The success of the Seattle schools hinges on making the connection that a great city can only be great if it has great public institutions. Beyond having great libraries, cultural centers and public parks, Seattle will only be a great city if its schools are also viewed as great. Our city institutions should be engaged in the challenges and successes of our schools at every level.
- **Establish a partnership with a local advertising agency, Clear Channel, newspapers and electronic media outlets.** We believe there is an opportunity to seek pro-bono support similar to what cultural organizations do (Seattle Art Museum, Washington Park Zoo and others) in an effort to “tell the SPS story” to the broader community. It is essential to educate the Seattle community on the positive aspects of SPS and the work it is doing. There is a need to go beyond traditional earned media avenues if SPS is to build support and confidence in the work it is doing.

Outcome Five: The broader Seattle community knows about and appreciates the progress made by SPS via a more positive image in the media and efforts to achieve greater transparency and clarity in messaging.

Strategy (A): Develop and institute a more proactive media relations plan that focuses media attention more on the real challenges and successes of SPS and less on the crisis of the day.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Hire an additional full-time, senior-level staffer dedicated exclusively to external affairs and realign the public affairs department to ensure this position is separate from internal communication.** New position should pro-actively pitch media on important stories to elevate district successes, emerging trends, and unique school communities. This individual could also develop and execute a proactive blogger outreach strategy.
- **Implement a media plan that anticipates and best handles immediate needs and allows more time for outreach and executing a blog strategy.** Goal should be to spend at least 50 percent of the department's resources on proactive measures designed to share their message with the community and have systems in place to respond to crises. Utilize automated tools that require minimal staff effort (e.g., a del.icio.us tracking system that enables automated article tracking in real time) to improve response time for education press.
- **Continue to implement plans to train SPS staff in crisis communications.** Staff needs to be continually trained on how to handle sensitive information. Principal and senior leadership experience with the media should be a top goal.
- **Expand media roundtables to be a weekly or monthly event with key education reporters and bloggers** dedicated to blogger topics or themes surrounding major policy initiatives, school construction projects or myth-busting.
- **Provide mainstream and niche media with a menu of school developments** they can cover, such as effective teaching methods, curricula, teachers, staff and school board leadership. Target especially the numerous community weekly newspapers, including minority-oriented and other language papers.

Strategy (B): Communicate in language that is understandable and consistent. Continue to articulate the importance of successful schools for all of Seattle, not just parents with school-age kids.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Keep language simple and understandable.** When possible, have teachers, parents or other intended audiences review language prior to mass distribution to ensure that messages resonate, are more family-friendly and avoid education speak. If resources allow, the district should seriously consider a branding exercise, refreshing the district's image and getting all SPS images and language in line with the strategic plan's message following adoption. It would be advantageous to translate core messages into the district's nine major languages.
- **Determine an agreed upon tagline, mission and vision statement** and use consistently across all media. Keep it simple, avoid education speak and be inspiring. These communications tools should align with SPS's long-term goals.

- **Utilize the strategic plan as a roadmap for success.** Cast all district decision-making (e.g., student assignment plan) in the context of how it furthers the goals set out in the strategic plan.
- **Superintendent should deliver speeches that inspire, relate to real people and tell real stories.** Staff should work with the Superintendent—the most important spokesperson and leader of SPS—to prepare remarks that avoid education jargon (e.g., VAX, instructional staff) at all costs. These speeches may also be backed up by annual reports that increase district transparency and accountability.
- **Provide senior management, school board members and principals tools** needed to communicate the core messages of the strategic plan and be ambassadors for SPS.
- **Adopt a system-wide culture of strong communications and engagement skills.** Every SPS staff member must be able to properly engage the community and family and respond to inquiries with a customer-service orientation. Continuing professional development and training programs hosted by the public affairs and family engagement offices can aid in this effort.
- **Create a message platform** that can be used across departments and schools to ensure that key messages, facts and data are being delivered accurately and consistently.
- **Develop a simple but informative printed piece** that clearly “tells the SPS story” in terms that are engaging and informative and done with strong graphics and as few words as possible. There is a real need for people to clearly understand SPS today, its goals, vision for the future and how the community can support this great community asset.

Strategy (C): Utilize the SPS website as the central source of information on SPS via a “customer service” orientation that is clear and concise and includes messages for all target audiences.

Recommendations: The following action steps are recommended for SPS.

- **Overhaul the look and feel of the SPS website and dedicate a content and technical manager to ongoing maintenance.** Simplify navigation and include messages and tools for all target audiences. This is a major effort that offers the potential for partnerships with any of the high-tech companies in the Seattle region.
- **Use the website as the primary vehicle for sharing SPS performance data** with staff and families.

DISCOVERY FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

In the context of developing and rolling out a new strategic plan, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) retained Pyramid Communications to research stakeholder engagement strategies employed by other school districts during their strategic planning processes. Initially, the districts to be researched were the New York City Department of Education, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (North Carolina), Portland Public Schools (Oregon) and Oakland Unified School District (California). Two more districts, Spokane Public Schools (Washington) and Boston Public Schools (Massachusetts), were added to the research at the request of SPS.

During the discovery phase of this research, SPS also asked Pyramid to develop the stakeholder engagement portion of the SPS strategic plan. So the focus of the research shifted to cover both stakeholder engagement in the strategic planning process and the stakeholder engagement aspect of the school district's strategic plan.

In order to gather useful information on both topics, it was also necessary to research what SPS, allied organizations and the community are already doing to connect schools and community members.

Several challenges emerged during the course of the work:

- The shift in focus from rollout of the strategic plan to longer-term stakeholder engagement meant that not all the school districts were asked the same set of questions.
- The school districts in the research group have some similarities but many differences in size, structure, policies, politics and challenges. As a result, we have focused on promising ideas that could be implemented in Seattle rather than attempting to formulate a set of best practices.
- The staff we needed to talk to in the six school districts are in high-demand positions, so many of them have moved on to other positions.

As a result, the findings in this report should be viewed as a snapshot of current and recent practices rather than an exhaustive survey. We researched and developed a set of findings that we believe will be valuable to SPS as it moves forward in the implementation of its strategic plan.

GOALS/SCOPE OF WORK

The goal of the discovery phase was to learn from other school districts that had navigated their own strategic planning processes and are currently working on

stakeholder engagement. Combined with research into SPS stakeholder engagement activities and feedback from the community, these findings form the basis for recommendations for stakeholder engagement during the strategic planning process and in the strategic plan itself.

METHODOLOGY

The following is the methodology the Pyramid team utilized to inform our discovery work:

1. Researched stakeholder engagement practices at six school districts outside of Seattle: For each district, we reviewed the website in depth, interviewed communications/engagement staff by phone, and reviewed strategic plans and other materials we were able to obtain. Districts reviewed include:

- Boston Public Schools (BPS), Massachusetts
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), North Carolina
- New York City Department of Education (NYC), New York
- Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), California
- Portland Public Schools (PPS), Oregon
- Spokane Public Schools (Spokane), Washington

2. Examined current SPS communications and engagement activities: We reviewed the SPS website, met with relevant senior staff to hear about current and past efforts, and reviewed all print and electronic communications materials that have been used over the past year.

3. Initiated outreach and conversations with community leaders: Pyramid staff met with and interviewed 14 community and civic leaders to gauge how well SPS communicates with external stakeholders who have a primary focus and interest in education and community issues.

4. Conducted a media audit of all SPS media coverage and media-related activities: The Pyramid media relations team conducted an audit of media coverage in 2006 and 2007, reviewing more than 300 news stories about the Seattle School District that had been published in *The Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Pyramid also reviewed SPS' internal media relations operations.

5. Collaborated with SPS to conduct an online survey of all instructional staff to get feedback on issues of concern and potential strategic initiatives: 28 percent (1,385) of the instructional staff participated in the survey. Specific questions around preferred communications methods and other engagement topics were included.

6. Reviewed Broad Communications audit and McKinsey research and conducted additional research. We reviewed the work done by McKinsey and participated in their work sessions with staff and the school board. We also reviewed additional research documents such as the Broad Report, CACIEE Report and other SPS studies related to stakeholder engagement and community outreach.

7. Utilized Pyramid's knowledge of more than 10 years of experience in the education field for a wide variety of education clients, including Partnership for Learning, Yakima School District, Portland Schools Foundation, Chalkboard Project and others.

KEY FINDINGS

Key findings are those we consider most relevant and appropriate to informing both the SPS strategic plan and the introduction of that plan to stakeholders.

ENGAGING FAMILIES

- **There is no single or easy answer to provide information to all families.** While websites, meetings, mailings and television are all important, messages need to be consistent and frequent in order to have an impact. Given the diversity of the families SPS serves, many different communications formats will be needed.
- **SPS lacks comprehensive information for families, facing similar challenges as other districts** struggling to make engagement opportunities readily apparent.
- **SPS' School-Family Partnership Plan is an important family engagement tool that is based in best practices, but it is not focused on implementation.** On paper, the plan is comprehensive and could be a focus of future outreach efforts by SPS and the Alliance for Education. However, it must be strengthened with the addition of a plan to execute the strategy and measure its results.
- **SPS currently does not evaluate whether or not current engagement practices are effective.** Whether through website hits, the annual family survey or other outreach activities, SPS lacks year-to-year benchmarks and ways to evaluate progress in many areas.
- **Automated call systems are an efficient way to reach families** for both proactive outreach and in the event of emergencies. Several schools within SPS and around the region use these tools and dedicate staff to ensure proper execution. SPS has purchased and is currently implementing a standard system for the entire district.
- **Employing school- or district-based outreach staff** is essential to successful engagement, particularly to address the needs and interests of a diverse range of families. SPS appears to be under-resourced in this area.

- **Television has been used successfully as an engagement tool to reach key audiences in other districts.** The use of television to air shows numerous times per week makes information more accessible to families, teachers and others who don't have the time to attend a single meeting. Offering these shows in other formats (e.g., DVDs) that could allow for translation could also be effective for reaching out to multilingual communities.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGING COMMUNITY LEADERS

- **SPS community engagement efforts have been diligent during the current strategic plan process,** but these efforts need to be sustained over the long term to improve relationships with key community leaders.
- **Print and email newsletters are common methods used to reach various audiences in most districts.** However, measurement tools are rarely used, which means effectiveness is difficult to evaluate.

ENGAGING STAFF

- **Successful communication is enhanced if internal staff is informed and engaged prior to the general public and there have been clear efforts to do so, beginning with the first peer review commissioned by the CAO and continuing throughout the SPS strategic planning process.** Staff members, particularly educators, are typically the most trusted messengers among families and in the community and therefore should be a key part of any engagement effort.
- **SPS has a solid suite of electronic communication materials.** While communications are sent to all staff on a fairly regular basis, the e-newsletter targeted to instructional staff is new and will need time to be perceived as reliable and effective.
- **Opinion surveys are the most frequently used method to gather information in other school districts, but SPS's use is currently limited.** The district can improve the data they gather and how it shares and uses this information. Transparency around the findings is important to build trust and confidence.

PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESSES

- **Portland Schools Foundation and Oakland's East Bay Foundation represent good examples of strong and positive partnerships with school districts** and should be looked at for effectively engaging the business and civic community.

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND AWARENESS

- **The communications staff at SPS is understaffed and frequently overwhelmed** by emergent internal communications demands and outside requests, limiting the amount of proactive outreach to pitch positive stories about the district. This is often the case in other school districts as well.
- **Public affairs staff has taken important steps in the last year to initiate media outreach and coordinate internal communications on sensitive information.** These efforts are equal to, and in some cases better than, other comparable districts. This has resulted in a dramatic shift in media coverage over the past year. That said, there is clear opportunity for improvement.
- **There is confusion over multiple taglines, missions and visions.** Other districts have been successful by using universal messaging. A major branding effort for the district would be useful for streamlining communication and limiting confusion.
- **A number of school districts have used their strategic plan as a prominent roadmap** for everything they do. This is viewed as a contributing factor in building confidence among key audiences.
- **Good communications and engagement skills cannot be housed only in the public affairs and family engagement departments.** Increasing public confidence requires a system-wide approach and must be the responsibility of everyone in the district. Professional development and training opportunities provided by the SPS public affairs and family engagement departments are solid programs to ensure a systemic approach.
- **The SPS website needs major functional improvements to become more user-friendly** and “customer service”-oriented. Updating the navigation channels and the look and feel of the website is a major effort that will require substantive additional resource to execute. To date, budget cuts have prevented a dedicated content manager in the public affairs department.
- **Transparency around surveys, expenditures and test scores** helps in building goodwill among key audiences.
- **Strong media departments plan ahead** and use tools that allow staff to focus time where a “human touch” is necessary.
- **Clear and consistent measurements** build confidence with the community that progress is being measured and accountability monitored.

DISCOVERY FINDINGS

Findings from the research are organized below under three major topic areas. Each topic is broken into two sections: first, a summary of our research of practices of other districts and, second, our findings on SPS' work and progress in each topic area.

The three topics include:

1. **Family and Community Engagement**
2. **Stakeholders and Partnerships**
3. **Tools for Increased Engagement**
 - District website
 - Newsletters/publications
 - Television
 - Surveys
 - Call-systems
 - Student-tracking
 - Multilingual options
 - Media
 - Engagement protocol
 - Strategic plan rollout
 - Measurement of progress
 - Transparency of resources

1. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engagement with families generally focuses on providing answers to families' common questions and increasing family engagement with their children's schools.

Findings from Other Districts about Family and Community Engagement:

Some districts employ family outreach staff located centrally or at individual schools.

- Each NYC school has a paid parent coordinator whose job it is to communicate with parents. The district sends materials to coordinators, which are then taken home by students to parents and guardians.
- Boston Public Schools has three full-service family resource centers and two satellite centers that offer a variety of services for families, including advice on school choices, policies, registration and information about the schools translated into various languages.

Others have adopted proactive engagement strategies to bring families into the governance of their children's schools.

- NYC has a chancellor’s parent advisory council that receives regular reports from the chancellor and provides input to the district.
- CMS has adopted the Comer Process developed at Yale by Dr. James P. Comer to involve staff, parents and the community in each school’s decision-making process. Parents are invited to join the School Leadership Team or Comer Parent Team through the Family Services Department. The teams each have distinct responsibilities that all contribute to setting and achieving goals, desirable social conditions and relationships, and developing activities through which parents can support the effort.

OUSD created a Family and Community Office to establish and oversee community involvement.

- The district’s engagement unit promotes “meaningful student, family and community participation in OUSD schools.”
- The chief of community accountability has the responsibility of meaningfully engaging and involving the community.
- The community played a lead role in developing COMPASS, the conceptual framework for community engagement used by the district.
- Engagement efforts include surveys and performance scorecards to gauge public satisfaction with school performance and overall reform efforts.

Oakland appears to be the only district speaking directly to students, with a website which has a youth-oriented look and feel and offers a wide range of resources:

- Links to high-quality sites for help with English, math, science and other subjects
- NetTrekker, which provides age-appropriate education and library resources
- Holla’ Back where students can provide feedback, apply for internships, find youth events and fill out a stakeholder survey
- A student showcase with poetry and electronic music composition contests

Findings from Seattle Public Schools about Family and Community Engagement:

SPS’s family engagement infrastructure has a solid foundation but needs additional resources and transparency. (Please see Family Engagement Memo in the Appendix for a more detailed analysis.)

- The School-Family Partnership Plan (SFP Plan) is based on best practices from across the country, including the “Six Types of Involvement” framework developed by Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. (Please see The School-Family Partnership Plan in the Appendix.)

- The SFP Plan does a fairly good job of directing attention and resources to family engagement infrastructure:
 - Four outreach coordinators at the district level that do outreach in targeted languages/communities (Latino, Southeast Asian, East African and African American). The SFP Plan recommends part-time employees in every school but at a minimum, additional district-level staff for the Pacific Islander and African-American communities would be helpful.
 - Many—though not all—schools have School-Family Partnership teams, but there is no monitoring or measures to identify the authenticity of engagement and influence of the teams.
 - District parent/family advisory committee has 22 of 25 desired members and recently underwent a reorganization.
 - Most schools have either Building Leadership Teams or Site Councils, and family or community representatives are often included in this group.
 - Print materials and online resources are available, but there is no comprehensive information on effectiveness or participation levels.
- Not all recommendations, however, are being fulfilled (e.g., district-wide outreach positions rather than school-based outreach workers).
- The roles seem under-resourced and lack a transparent accountability structure (e.g., a school may have a team, but there is no comprehensive tracking of the meetings and associated outcomes for the school-based effort).
- The objective of the SFP Plan is based on best practices, yet transparency in communication about the plan’s intent and status are lacking.

The framework that guides SPS’s family engagement activities has positive intent but is overly focused on planning rather than implementation and periodic check-ins. (Please see FCE Six Types of Involvement Framework in the Appendix.)

- The responsibilities listed in each area are reflective of best practices:
 - Communication – The focus of this component is regular, consistent, two-way communication.
 - Parenting – The focus of this component is to promote and support effective parenting practices.
 - Student learning – The focus of this component is to maximize student learning and achievement.
 - Volunteering – The focus of this component is to help families feel welcome in schools and to encourage them to become involved.
 - School decision-making and advocacy – The focus of this component is involving families as full partners in decisions affecting children and families.

- Community collaboration – The focus of this component leverages community resources to strengthen student learning.
- The accountability plan is written using soft language that focuses on the early stages of creating and initiating without attention to check-ins and monitoring.
- There are no accountability measures for schools or families, and the plan lacks specifics about timing for most of the responsibilities.
- The plan establishes family responsibilities without identifying communication strategies to share these responsibilities with the families themselves.

Family engagement practices are promising based on anecdotal feedback, but SPS has no mechanism to evaluate whether or not the practices are effective.

- SPS family engagement practices mirror those of peer districts:
 - Materials in multiple languages
 - Targeted outreach efforts in communities of color
 - District and school calendars available via district and school websites
 - Revised parent and student orientations
 - Direct teacher outreach to students and families
 - Recruiting parents as student mentors, classroom helpers and content experts
 - New teacher and principal training and mentoring efforts
 - Expanded tutoring options
 - Expanded English language classes
 - Four-page family survey via mail every May that provides an opportunity for feedback
- SPS does not have an evaluation system in place to measure effectiveness.
- The family survey has the potential to offer this evaluation but was only initiated two years ago and has faced challenges due to undersampling families in the south end who are less inclined to provide feedback in this manner.

SPS has taken steps to improve communication between schools and families, but this practice must continue in order to accomplish desired outcomes.

- Members of the School-Family Partnership Advisory Committee acknowledge that there is evidence that SPS staff is trying to improve person-to-person contact with families, but the intended result of more high-quality communication is still falling short.

- For example, the Family Engagement and Public Affairs departments coordinated to develop a “Parent to Parent Marketing Kit.” SPS solicited examples of success from families at individual schools so they could share these stories throughout the system. Goals included the district acting as a conduit for sharing success stories throughout the district, offering tips and guidance to family group efforts to limit reinvention of the wheel in ongoing communications efforts, and providing an opportunity for collaborative and interactive communication with families.

2. STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The districts in this review use partnerships with independent organizations and businesses to accomplish a range of functions, including fundraising, educating parents and providing opportunities for students outside the classroom.

Findings from Other Districts about Stakeholders and Partnerships:

NYC engages directly with key community and internal leaders, while Oakland has a well-defined structure to reach out to the broader community.

- NYC uses a variety of means to stay in touch with the community:
 - Representatives from the teachers’ union, community members, parents and principals serve on committees that play a lead role in implementing NYC reform efforts.
 - NYC Public Schools sends a weekly blast email to 500 community leaders summarizing the events of the past week.
 - The district also sends out a monthly e-newsletter to about 3,500 community members who have self-subscribed via the website.

OUSD has several important partnerships with organizations committed to helping its strategic plan succeed.

- The East Bay Community Foundation manages numerous foundation and private grants that support Expect Success.
- East Bay Community Foundation “has engaged a network of community-based organizations (CBOs) to offer pressure and support for future reform efforts to improve the workings of OUSD.” These partners are conducting community meetings to learn and give OUSD feedback regarding the impact of “Expect Success.”
- The Marcus A. Foster Educational Institute offers a variety of resources to Oakland Public School stakeholders, including classes at its parenting university, principal for a day, refurbished computers for families, college scholarships, mini-grants for students, and grants for teachers and principals.

OUSD appears to be the one district that offers meaningful family engagement opportunities through partner organizations.

- Among its parent links is Parenting Resources, which includes a source for free refurbished computers for families; a family education resources site; and a parenting university offering free classes, meals and materials for parents. Highlights from the program include:
 - A free refurbished computer with legal software is provided to families if the student and one parent attend a three-hour training session offered in English, Spanish, Chinese or Vietnamese.
 - DSL Internet access is offered for \$10 per month.
 - Since 1999, the Oakland Technology Exchange-West (a project of the Marcus A. Foster Educational Institute) has put more than 10,000 refurbished computers in students' homes and another 10,000 in classrooms.

NYC Public Schools is supported in part by the Fund for Public Schools, an independent nonprofit organization that raises money for schools. The chancellor is on the board of the fund, and its activities are closely aligned with the school district's efforts.

Boston Public Schools has several partnership initiatives:

- The School to Career Initiative brings together multiple partners in a network of programs, courses and activities that provide students with job and internship programs, career-related field trips, classroom speakers, and community service projects and activities. In addition, these partners support local school improvement measures resulting in improved curriculum development. Business and higher education partnerships also provide students with greater access to colleges and universities.
- The Boston Compact brings together business and community leaders to support Boston Public Schools graduates with access to higher education and employment.
- The Boston ProTech program, a collaborative program of BPS and the Boston Private Industry Council, was a model for the national School to Work Opportunities Act.

The Portland Schools Foundation (PSF) focuses on providing targeted funding to schools and engaging the community in its schools.

- Because not all schools can raise significant private money, the Portland School Board requires one-third of the funds raised by local school foundations to be set aside in an equity fund administered by PSF. Equity fund deposits are given to schools and family engagement programs in the district through grants.

- The equity fund grants are distributed through a competitive application process to encourage that efforts are data-driven, focused on results and supported by the full school community:
 - New Vision Grant: Up to \$40,000 per school, or collaboration between schools, to align and strengthen the curriculum and support and improve teachers' practice and their understanding of the ongoing, continuous assessment of student work. All schools have an achievement gap, so all schools are eligible to apply.
 - Parent, Family and Community Involvement Grants: Up to \$40,000 to strengthen parent, family and community engagement and leadership to help students achieve at higher levels and improve school performance. Targeted to schools with high percentages of students of color, children from low-income families, and second-language learners.
- PSF sponsors a number of projects that directly impact and improve Portland Public Schools, such as Classroom Music Project, Learning Gardens and Schoolhouse Supplies.
 - Schoolhouse Supplies is an excellent example of collaborative funding that makes a tangible and measurable difference in students' and teachers' lives.
 - Schoolhouse Supplies currently serves all 3,000 Portland Public School teachers, each of whom is available to shop in their free store up to six times per year.
 - Schoolhouse Supplies is funded through generous donations by individuals, corporate and private foundations, and fundraisers. Many of the items used to stock the free store are from area businesses, such as Corporate Express, Staples and Fred Meyer. Smaller businesses often donate excess office supplies that are no longer useful for their purposes but will work in a classroom setting. (See Schoolhouse Supplies FAQ for more details.)

Many districts develop and emphasize a partnership between the superintendent and the mayor of the city, adding to a sense of unified leadership with a common goal and purpose.

- New York City's Chancellor Joel Klein emphasizes his partnership with the mayor in many public speeches, noting that mayoral authority does not guarantee success but is a prerequisite for it.
- Miami's superintendent emphasizes the newly strengthened relationship between the board and the superintendent as a way to "lift the schools and thus lift the city."
- In 2008, the mayor of Portland, OR, relocated to a local high school for a week to hold parent and community meetings. Events were advertised as joint conversations between the mayor and the Portland Public Schools superintendent.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Stakeholders and Partnerships:

SPS is resource constrained and has limited monetary and personnel capacity in key functions despite vast community resources.

- McKinsey identified this resource gap and noted the opportunity to gain additional resources from the community, given that Seattle is in the first quartile for wealth among SPS's comparable districts.
- Major strategies identified in other parts of the plan (e.g., replacing the VAX platform) could be fulfilled with the assistance of key business partners in the city (e.g., Microsoft).

Historical relationship between SPS and the Alliance for Education has not been overly strategic, but that appears to be changing.

- Historically, Alliance funders tended to identify and/or create projects to which they wanted to donate rather than looking to the district for leadership and funding accordingly.
- Alliance had a very large (60-plus individuals), predominately corporate board of directors that was largely focused on fundraising with less attention spent on community engagement and resources not well-aligned to SPS strategic goals.
- Alliance President and CEO Patrick D'Amelio released a "Report to the Community" in March 2008 reporting that the board has been reduced to 40, staff levels were decreased, and two new task forces with members from the community and the board are being created to tackle new goals.
- New strategic direction has the Alliance funding in line with SPS' strategic initiatives and aims to support the district through coordinating engagement efforts of the many community organizations that support SPS.

SPS has in the past initiated regular contact with key community leaders but has only renewed targeted efforts during this strategic planning process.

- In approximately 2004, SPS developed a "key communicators" network of about 150 individuals – opinion leaders from across the community as well as family leaders. Communicators were invited to several district briefing events and received periodic update emails. In turn, communicators informed public affairs staff of feedback and rumors in the community. Occasional emails are still sent to this group, and all receive the School Beat e-newsletter.
- During the strategic planning process, Pyramid collaborated with SPS to develop a new "community connectors" list of more than 200 individuals and mailed and emailed targeted messages to this group (four touches by plan adoption).

Meeting one-on-one with community leaders to build a relationship is a practice that was used by the Alliance for Education (A4E) over the past year.

- Over the past year, A4E has met with more than 200 community members, asking them for honest feedback about the organization in an effort to make improvements. With this guidance and support, A4E has been able to make major changes that are transforming the structure and strategic focus of the Alliance.
- SPS has a number of advisory groups and a community advisory group board policy that guides selection of members. Committees include Career and Technical Education, Nutrition Advisory, PE Advisory, Building Excellence Advisory, and others.

3. TOOLS FOR INCREASED ENGAGEMENT

DISTRICT WEBSITE

Findings from Other Districts' Use of District Websites:

Websites are extensively used by all of the reviewed districts to provide a wide variety of information to families that have Internet access.

- Districts clearly try to anticipate and respond to the information needs families are likely to have. Generally, they do a good job, but the variety of information can make organizing and navigating the websites difficult.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg, for example, has two links for parents on the homepage and another under Resources:
 - Information for Parents provides links for a variety of pages from Lunch Menu to Character Education and PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support).
 - Parent Resources on the Resources page provides a range of links, including parent-teacher conference tips, a kindergarten handbook, and tips for parents to help their child (beginning at age 2) learn to read and write.
- Boston features a Family Resources link throughout its site that provides a Guide to the BPS for Parents and Students and links to Problem Solving, Choosing a School and Family Involvement.
 - Some information directed at families is filed in other parts of the website. Information about state standard testing, including multilingual flyers, can be found in Teaching & Learning rather than in Family Resources.
- Nearly all content on Spokane's homepage is geared toward community engagement and outreach highlights, including:

- Timely information about district resources, such as videos, publications and planning efforts
- Ongoing work, such as the status of construction projects, legislative priorities and district news
- Opportunities to participate in surveys and provide feedback to the district
- The NYC district website is designed to be parent-friendly. It uses language geared toward parents and is laid out to be easy to navigate and intuitive for parents.

Families often seek information about particular schools for their children.

All the districts provide for that need in various ways on their websites.

- Spokane leads visitors to schools through a Visit Our Schools portal that provides district information and links to key information, such as boundary maps, registration dates, and individual schools sorted into elementary, middle and high school pages.
- CMS provides links to each school’s website through which families can access individual school’s profiles as well as a wealth of information:
 - Test scores
 - School demographics
 - Descriptions of excused and unexcused absences
 - Results of annual parent surveys
- Similar to CMS, OUSD provides School Accountability Report Cards for each school, though its format is difficult to navigate.

While district websites offer extensive information, meaningful parent and family engagement opportunities are not always apparent.

- Several sites lead families to a family involvement area that provides basic information about meals, calendars and hours along with rhetoric about the importance of collaboration between home and school. Policies and site councils are described, and sometimes links to volunteer programs are shown.
- CMS features a Parent Assistant that allows families to track their child’s attendance, grades, assignments and more through a password-protected portal. But CMS doesn’t make obvious many other opportunities for engagement except an annual survey.
- NYC describes formal engagement opportunities, including parent advisory councils, parent associations and parent-teacher associations.

- PPS offers a pro forma paragraph encouraging parent and community involvement along with a phone number for businesses that want to get involved.

Some district websites point to community engagement opportunities but sometimes lack clarity.

- On its Family Resources page, BPS provides a link to Boston Partners in Education, which provides training for volunteer mentors and others who want to help in the schools.
- Portland seems to have several community engagement opportunities, but finding them and relating them to each other is difficult.
- PPS is reconfiguring its school boundaries, but access to the information about a “community conversation” is somewhat obscured behind an ad-like button titled Strong and Stable Schools Reconfiguration.
- Navigation is further confused at PPS by ad-like buttons called Enrollment and Transfer School Choice and RESHAPE SCHOOLS, which feature surveys and community meetings (out of date) about facilities and asset management. They also present questions about programs offered and personalized attention as well as the condition and location of the school building. This is probably the key community engagement location on the site, but it’s confusing.
- Yet another ad-like navigation button on the PPS site is labeled Strategic Plan and takes the viewer to a two-page 2005–2010 plan that doesn’t seem to relate to the other current efforts.

School districts use meetings, email and websites to inform internal stakeholders of progress and issues. Some do a better job than others of informing internal stakeholders (principals, teachers and other instructional staff, central staff, facilities, IT and other employees).

Most district websites feature clear navigation to resources for teachers, often including human resources and teacher association information.

- NYC uses its website as the primary communications tools with teachers; it has a prominent link for employees from which a number of human resource pages are available through a question-and-answer algorithm.
- PPS displays two ad-like links of interest to teachers and staff: The Office of Teaching and Learning provides some core information and contacts, while Labor Relations provides extensive information on human resources, contracts and negotiations.
- Boston’s Teaching & Learning offers clear navigation to the district’s reform plan, learning standards, technology, lessons and activities, the Massachusetts assessment system and professional development.
- Spokane’s Teacher/Staff Resources provides links to a wide array of clearly named pages.

- Oakland's Teaching and School Resources provides (rather subtly) tabs on a wide variety of subjects while featuring a recruitment link, the strategic plan and a link to DonorsChoose.org.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Use of District Website:

The SPS website presents a great deal of content in a consistent, uncluttered manner. (See Appendix I for a detailed analysis of the website.)

- SPS maintains a fairly consistent look and feel throughout its website.
- The prominent display of language options other than English on the SPS homepage is welcoming.
- Website hosts a significant amount of valuable information for parents and the community regarding SPS.

However, critical information is buried, the website feels out of date and is often not user-friendly. (See Appendix I for a detailed analysis of the website.)

- There is no sense of currency or mission on the home page: Who is Seattle Public Schools? What does it stand for? What is new and going on?
- Homepage navigation does not mirror the interior navigation, meaning that users can only access certain pages from the homepage.
- Content can sometimes be located too deep in the website (e.g., *School Beat* newsletter, which showcases positive stories about the district, takes five steps to open), making it challenging to find. When the search function is used, there is no indication of where you are in the site.
- Overall writing is too academic and filled with educational jargon, making it less accessible for many parents, students and teachers.
- While there are buttons "for families" and "for students" on the homepage, there is no "for teachers" button. However, Seattle Public Schools has an extensive intranet site that is used for communications with principals, provision of reference information, forms availability, links to time reporting and sign-ups for professional development and more.

The quality of the website has suffered greatly due to budget cuts and the resulting lack of support.

- A content manager dedicated to public affairs was hired, and then the position was cut during a budget crisis.
- There is not sufficient dedicated staffing within the information technology services department to update and maintain functionality of the website.
- Tools, such as tracking user input and web use statistics, are not available.

NEWSLETTERS / PUBLICATIONS

Findings from Other Districts on Use of Newsletters/Publications:

Print and email newsletters are common methods used to reach families of students.

- CMS and NYC home pages, for example, feature sign-ups for a variety of newsletters, news bulletins and emergency information emails.
- The district and many individual schools in CMS send print newsletters to families.

BPS and other districts provide a guidebook or handbook with all necessary information about the district and its schools as well as where to turn for more information or support.

- Guides are given to families new to the district and are available from the district website as well.

Newsletters and email are widely used to keep principals, teachers and staff updated.

- Principals receive weekly communications, while teachers and others receive monthly e-newsletters.
- Some districts also send monthly newsletters to all internal and external stakeholders.

Informing staff of decisions prior to these decisions being reported in the media goes a long way toward building a stronger relationship between the central office and schools.

- Notifying instructional staff of important developments before they are reported in the media demonstrates respect. .
- The tone of communication pieces should be honest and straightforward; staff sometimes feels the district leadership “talks down” to them.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Use of Newsletters/Publications:

SPS sends an e-newsletter to staff and the community twice a month, and it has taken different forms over the years.

- *School Beat*, sent to all staff (approximately 8,000) and some community members (approximately 1,000), began in 2004. Sent biweekly on Thursdays, the newsletter’s goal is to inform staff, families, and community members of district trends, provide examples of excellence in learning and teaching, and highlight student, staff and school successes. A copy of *School Beat* is also sent to reporters.

- *Financial Recovery Update*, the predecessor of the current *School Beat*, was a largely internal e-newsletter sent by the district, aimed at calming concern about the district's financial status and articulating what was being done to address the issue.
- *Classroom Connection* was initiated in early 2008 to provide regular, consistent communication to all instructional staff. It is sent on a monthly basis. This e-newsletter replaced group emails and other, less targeted communications.
- *Principal Communicator* was also recently initiated to provide similar targeted and consistent communication with principals and other school leaders as well as senior leadership at SPS. It is sent on a weekly basis.

A myriad of hardcopy materials for the community have been available but have been inconsistent and varied in effectiveness over the past six to seven years largely due to strains on staff time and resources.

- McKinsey reports that stakeholders believe SPS communication methods are overly focused on traditional channels (e.g., articles, websites, town halls) and are not sufficient to reach all audiences. (See McKinsey Final Report.)
- The district calendar/family handbook is currently sent at the beginning of the school year to all district families, staff and key community leaders.
- A levy/bond information brochure is produced every three years to explain what is included in the operating and capital levies.
- A Report to the Community was produced in fall 2006 that outlined progress towards implementing the Building, Technology & Athletics (BTAII) levy. It was sent to all families, staff and key leaders but was sent only once.
- A facilities newsletter informed "interested folks" on needs for buildings but was considered low-quality and was discontinued last summer.
- The *Celebrations Publication* highlighted student accomplishments and awards but was not produced last year due to capacity constraints.
- *Major Accomplishments* reported on test scores and other district accomplishments but hasn't been sent since September 2005. It used to accompany the superintendent's "state of the district" report.
- Staff plan to produce new collateral to serve as an introduction piece on the district. This piece would summarize key district facts and statistics and include the elements of the strategic plan following plan adoption.

TELEVISION

Findings from Other Districts on Use of Television:

Most school districts have a cable TV station and/or access to other community TV stations. Use of this tool varies widely among districts.

- The Spokane Public School District produces three programs that routinely air on cable and public television. The programs are aimed at the broader community and focus on policy issues and issues specific to Spokane schools. A live television program airs four times a year and follows a question-and-answer format in which school board members respond to questions from the community. All the shows are approximately 15 to 30 minutes in length and, with the exception of the live format, run two times a month, multiple times a day. The videos are also posted on the district website.
 - School Talk features the superintendent and special guests discussing issues that affect education.
 - Education Update offers the latest news and information about Spokane schools.
 - Educating Spokane provides the opportunity for viewers to call in four times a year with questions for the Spokane Public Schools' board of directors.
- CMS-TV-3 provides CMS news, live broadcasts of board of education meetings and education information.
- As part of improved efforts to engage families and the community in the Boston Public Schools, the district launched BPS-TV, a series of cable television programs about education reform in the city schools.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Use of Television:

- **SPS TV STATION could be utilized more as a proactive communications tool for the district.**
 - SPS has all of the equipment necessary to produce TV programming, as all equipment is located in-house, though a high-quality production would require hiring a professional camera crew with their own camera.
 - The SPS TV staff is underutilized for production, though all filming and editing crews are contracted.
 - The production schedule reflects the fact that the channel seems to be used more as an educational channel rather than a source of communication for the district to parents, families and the general public. (Please see TV Memo for more details.)
- Broad Foundation points to the SPS television station as a valuable tool to convey district messages and strengthen the image of the district. The audit notes that it would require an influx of staff and resources but claims it would be well worth it given recent positive response to several videos/DVDs that were viewed as innovative tools for communication.
- TV programming also presents an opportunity to engage the business community through financial sponsorships. Partnership for Learning did so successfully with Washington Mutual in 2001.

SURVEYS

Findings from Other Districts on Use of Surveys:

The primary mechanism to get feedback from external audiences appears to be opinion surveys.

- Clearly, methods such as school board meetings, community meetings, listening tours, advisory councils and others are used occasionally, but opinion surveys are regularly used by some school districts to solicit input.
- NYC offers an online survey every year through which parents can rate the learning environment of their child's school. This rating factors into each school's performance grade for the year.
 - In 2007, NYC received more than 600,000 responses out of 1.5 million parents, students and teachers representing the largest number of constituent views on the effectiveness of an American school system ever collected at one time.
 - NYC uses the survey as a customer service tool as well, and in 2008 ensured that every school identified a "survey coordinator" to work with the principal and the school's parent coordinator to ensure an even higher completion rate.
- Spokane displays opportunities to participate in surveys and provide feedback on the district website homepage.
- While some districts have recognized the importance of using opinion research surveys to measure perceptions of the schools from various audiences, several would do well to make results more transparent.
 - Spokane's strategic plan calls for community perception surveys as a measurement of progress, but there are no recent survey results displayed.

School districts tend to rely on opinion surveys to gain feedback from staff as well.

- Surveying staff and posting results online seems common, but the results are often buried and difficult to find.
 - Spokane's strategic plan also calls for staff perception surveys, but no recent survey results are displayed.
- CMS conducts extensive annual surveys of families, students and teachers. Unfortunately, results are somewhat buried in the assessment department.
- The OUSD homepage also has a "Use Your Voice Survey" item that collects input from all OUSD employees annually with results displayed for the past two years.

Seattle Public Schools Finding on Use of Surveys:

The annual family survey conducted by SPS could be used as a key opportunity for establishing and maintaining consistent measurements about family engagement. (See Family Survey Memo for more details.)

- The existing survey questionnaire does not address barriers to family engagement. For example, the survey asks families if they participate in decision-making committees but does not ask if they would be more likely to participate in school-based activities if certain incentives were offered, such as transportation, translation, childcare or food.
- The survey is mailed to all families with option to respond via self-addressed envelope. Yet survey respondents tend to be disproportionately white.
 - Because this information is not representative of all SPS families, it cannot be generalized to that population. This severely limits the survey's usefulness. By weighting the data, the survey responses would more accurately reflect the characteristics of all SPS families, allowing SPS to make inferences about that population.

Communication staff collaborated with Pyramid to conduct a successful survey of all instructional staff – dedicated resources for periodic and timely surveys would continue to provide useful information.

- 28 percent (1,385) of the instructional staff participated in the survey and provided more than 6,000 open-ended responses. Results were shared with all instructional staff as well as principals, the school board and the broad public via the strategic planning website.
- Principals were also surveyed through the McKinsey work.
- Systematic surveys are in place at SPS, such as the annual climate survey for staff and students. The district can and should improve the data they gather and how the district shares and uses the information gathered. Such information provides an important opportunity for the district to be more strategic.

CALL-SYSTEMS

Findings from Other Districts on Use of Call-Systems:

Many school districts in Washington use parent notification tools.

- Puget Sound Educational Service District (ESD) is offering a parent notification tool to schools within the region known as *SchoolMessenger*. Districts implementing or expanding parent notification programs include: Bainbridge Island School District, Bethel School District, Bremerton School District, Orting School District, Peninsula School District, Puyallup School District, South Kitsap School District and Tahoma School District. Together,

they represent more than 100 schools serving approximately 70,000 students.

- In July of 2007, the Puget Sound Educational Service District (ESD), Washington's largest educational service district, partnered with *SchoolMessenger* (SchoolMessenger.com), a leading U.S. parental notification company, to enable its 35 school districts to more easily adopt communications solutions designed to notify large groups of parents in a short amount of time. The service expands the ESD's SchoolReport.org emergency communications system.
 - The system saves administrators countless hours of staff time when sending routine attendance alerts or community announcements and allows them to deliver a clear, personalized message quickly and reliably.
 - Many of these school districts dedicate a full-time staff person specifically for posting to *SchoolMessenger*.
- *SchoolMessenger* functions in conjunction with SchoolReport.org. Members log on to a secure site to create and post an emergency message. The information is instantly posted to SchoolReport.org's public website and sent directly to 30 media newsrooms and to public subscriber email lists.
 - Reports show that when notification solutions are used in schools, parents report improved peace of mind, and attendance rates increase. In addition, with school closings and delays commonplace in the Northwest due to unpredictable weather conditions, many district officials consider them vital.

Seattle Public Schools Findings for Use of Call-Systems:

Several comprehensive high schools within SPS utilize automated calling systems to reach families, but there is currently no district-wide standard.

- Ballard High School calls home if a student is absent from a class as well as to announce upcoming school events (e.g., curriculum night).
- Broad Foundation audit suggests the district adopt Connected-ED or another web-based automated telephone messaging service to have a low-cost, high-impact option that allows messages in multiple languages.
- The same audit indicates that messages within the district need to be well-coordinated, particularly direct communication with families. An additional dedicated staff person to moderate this tool might be necessary.
- SPS has purchased and is in the process of implementing School Messenger, guided by the Director of Public Affairs.

STUDENT-TRACKING

Findings from Other Districts on Use of Student-Tracking:

CMS has an online tool that allows parents to check on their students' classroom and school activities.

- Parent Assistant links to an FAQ about a tool that allows parents to check on their child's attendance, assignments, grades and other important information.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Use of Student-Tracking:

***The Source* is an easy way for families and teachers to stay connected with the achievement of students, and this tool can be improved and expanded.**

- SPS offers *The Source*, an online tool for teachers to enter assignments, grades and attendance so that those students and families with Internet access can easily access classroom information.
- However, teachers are not required to participate in *The Source*, sometimes making it unclear if information is current and/or complete.
- Participants in the instructional staff survey suggested SPS encourage families with Internet access to use *The Source* as a method to improve family engagement.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is some resistance to the use of this tool due to lack of familiarity and low level of comfort with the technology.
- Such tools will be increasingly expected with the expanding use of technology.

MULTILINGUAL OPTIONS

Findings from Other Districts on Multilingual Options:

Districts are clearly trying to respond to some families' needs to have materials and information in languages other than English.

- BPS offers its *Guide to the Boston Public Schools* and school choice materials in English, Cape Verdean, Chinese, Haitian, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese, but the website is in English only.
- NYC offers a number of language options to users on its homepage: Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Bengali, Haitian Creole, Russian and Urdu.
- Oakland features an Español button on every page that takes the viewer to a Spanish language version of the website.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Multilingual Options:

SPS seems to recognize the need to use culturally competent methods to reach its many diverse families but falls short at the point of execution.

- SPS faces challenges in connecting with families with different languages, cultures, etc.
- SPS often (though likely unintentionally) communicates in a way that is most successful with reaching families of a particular means who have access to technology and are fluent in English.
- Broad Foundation identifies that a grassroots, community-based approach to communication seems fitting to this challenge, including contact with churches, informal neighborhood groups and other means to reach families where they live, shop and work.
- Local group Communities and Parents for Public Schools (CPPS) has identified the same disconnect within SPS's outreach to families and is attempting to hire community organizers that would most likely focus on the south end of the city.

MEDIA

Findings from Other Districts on Use of the Media:

All of the districts provide some information for media on their websites.

- The most common resources for media are press releases and news. Several (CMS, OUSD and Portland) prominently display recent news and press releases.
- NYC has news displayed less prominently, and the others don't have news on the homepage.
- Boston offers news through an About Us page.
- Spokane directs media inquiries to upcoming events in the district's schools rather than providing numerous press releases.
 - Spokane's News Tips and Achievements link takes visitors to a community relations page that features events in schools around the district.
 - District and school staff are encouraged to enter events on the page.
 - Media are invited to call community relations for assistance in covering any of the events.

The strongest media departments are proactive and plan ahead to avoid constantly being on the defensive.

- The majority of public affairs departments spend 80 percent of their resources responding to public queries because they have not adopted a media plan or lack the resources for external affairs.
- A media crisis plan is not necessarily designed for the media professionals of any given organization but rather for the people who do not work in the media department.
- The key to effective pitching is to continually develop pitches that include strong visuals, emerging trends and real people. This means creating a story inventory or database that supports the media plan and strategic plan.
 - Spokane Public Schools has a good relationship with the *Spokesman Review* due to the fact that the superintendent sits down every week with the paper to talk about issues. (See Interview Notes from Spokane.)
- School officials are pressed for time to conduct direct outreach, so many departments save time by inviting the media to the schools via reporter roundtables to discuss important issues and highlight exciting programs at selected school campuses.
- Spokane works with recruiters to ensure they are giving out information promoting their schools.

New technology has improved access to schools and the media, and bloggers expect online access to important information around the clock.

- This has also increased demands on public affairs teams to respond to those demands amid dwindling resources, requiring daily—if not more frequent—responses to these writers.
- An emerging trend in external affairs outreach is to consider hosting a conference call with key bloggers on hot topics. This is an invitation to join a conference call at a designated time and number to inform, set the record straight and/or encourage dialogue on a complicated issue.
- Newspapers are blogging more and more and inviting community leaders to blog on issues of the day. Inviting education reporters to moderate a blog session on their website about a district issue is a strategy commonly utilized in political campaigns, corporate marketing and grassroots organizing.

Seattle Public Schools Findings on Use of the Media:

There is a clear acknowledgement of the relative importance public affairs within SPS and the role of strategic communication.

- Superintendent Goodloe-Johnson has made Public Affairs a direct report position rather than its previous placement within the operations department. The Broad audit pointed to this as an example of the importance placed on strategic communications within SPS.

- Direct report gives the communications department access to high-level district information, thereby allowing strategic responses. For example, knowledge of an impending performance audit by the state of Washington allowed Public Affairs to coordinate the release of peer reviews and audits to be in a time frame that would allow public acknowledgment of district shortcomings well ahead of publication of the audit results.
- Public affairs is involved in a range of internal communications, from informing staff of the results of the reorganization to sharing the results of the peer reviews and strategic planning process in a way that limits “surprises” to staff.

The public affairs office at SPS is understaffed, resulting in an outreach approach to the media that is shifted more toward being reactive rather than one that is strategic and proactive.

- With more than 45,000 students and their families, SPS serves a student body that is comparable to the size of the University of Washington. Though their respective student population sizes are similar, their budgets and landscapes are not. The UW has five full-time staff dedicated to media outreach. The Seattle School District has one.
- The district employs three full-time staff designated to conduct public affairs, including one dedicated to media outreach, but their duties are easily swallowed up by demands for internal communications strategies, direct assistance to schools needing help with sensitive communications and public queries.
- Staff ability to proactively build relationships with the media is limited by a constant stream of inbound communication and media coverage and a small department to react.
- The district itself is consistently a hot topic for community bloggers, parents and activists responding to “frequent communicators,” and the large volume of inbound communication takes a disproportionate amount of staff time. Staff estimate that effectively responding to bloggers could take as much as half of a full-time staffer’s time. Given current demands, this would likely require additional dedicated staff.
- Beginning in 2005, the district sent an electronic publication to all media outlets entitled, “School Beat: News Tips for the Media.” This contained story ideas and an overview of celebrations and awards. SPS staff report that this was an excellent vehicle to increase coverage in community newspapers and somewhat effective with mainstream dailies and electronic media. The publication was sent weekly or bi-weekly. Resource restrictions led to elimination of the media-specific “School Beat,” which was substituted by the e-newsletter. Staff has begun to use this technique again.

Despite resource limitations, public affairs staff has taken important steps in the last year to reach out to the media and coordinate internal communications on sensitive information.

- Initial outreach (e.g., media roundtables, getting media out to schools more often) and effective responses to inquiries have laid the foundation for strong relationships with daily newspapers, editorial boards, some of the community newspapers, *The Medium* and some TV and radio stations.
- Development and implementation of the Critical Facts Communications Plan and superintendent and principal communications protocols have resulted in close coordination on sensitive issues between Public Affairs and stakeholders throughout the district (e.g., safety and security staff, school principals, superintendent, senior leadership and legal department). Recent media coverage on adult sexual misconduct was used to remind staff of the protocol on these sensitive issues. As a result, there is increasing principal and senior staff comfort with the handling such issues, and damage to the district's image in the media has been limited.

There has been clear shift in the tone of media coverage of SPS in the last year, but overall there is room for improvement.

- It is clear from the news coverage that the district has made an effort to proactively tell its story with a total of 29 feature stories in 2007 that showcased the district in a positive light.
- Media coverage of the school district in 2006 centered on the district's decision to close several schools. A second wave of media coverage concentrated on the search for and transition to a new superintendent and hotly contested school board elections.
- In 2007, the tone of media coverage dramatically changed to reflect the district's new leadership, both in the superintendent and school board. While overall coverage of the district dropped dramatically (87 fewer stories), the coverage was generally skewed in favor of offbeat, positive features, new school board leadership and Superintendent Goodloe-Johnson's strategic initiatives to move Seattle schools in a new direction.

ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOL

The following describes what we learned from how other districts have engaged various stakeholders when rolling out major initiatives. This also includes the methods used to keep stakeholders informed and moving forward. As SPS is currently in the strategic planning process, SPS findings have intentionally been omitted.

Strategic Plan Rollout

Findings from Other Districts on Strategic Plan Rollout:

Stakeholder input to the strategic planning process among school districts in this review covers a wide range from no involvement to extensive listening sessions and meetings.

- Oakland did not engage the community in the planning process and was criticized for lacking transparency. The district made that choice in part because it was in state receivership status to avoid bankruptcy, and the school board was reduced to advisory status. The state-appointed administrator was enacting unpopular policies, including cutting teacher salaries, leading many community members to protest the planning process.
- CMS sought input through a variety of means before developing its plan:
 - The superintendent held a large number of group and individual meetings to discuss what the district should do.
 - An email loop was set up so people could send ideas and feedback about meetings; all emails were responded to within 24 hours.
 - Opinion polls and online surveys were conducted.
 - Notes and themes from meetings were posted on the website.
- CMS executive team tested portions of the plan with key groups before going public to identify potentially controversial strategies and refine the plan as needed.

Stakeholder involvement in producing strategic plans appears to be generally minimal.

- Oakland Unified School District senior staff wrote their plan in collaboration with McKinsey, which provided a blueprint for an ideal school district.
- CMS hired a new superintendent who promised a broad-reaching listening and learning tour that began in August 2007, followed by a strategic plan in November. Senior staff produced the final plan under intense time pressure.
- Writing the strategic plan takes more time than some school districts anticipate.

Only CMS informed us of a clear short-term strategy for rolling out their plan, choosing to present the strategic plan to internal audiences before going public.

- Small group meetings were held with teacher leaders.
- Principals led faculty presentations using a PowerPoint and script provided by the district.
- Newsletters to principals and teachers featured articles about the plan.

- CMS then presented the strategic plan to the community through media briefings, community forums, small group meetings and postings on the website.
- NYC held a series of events to discuss reforms with principals.

Districts that appear to be consistently using their strategic plans to drive and map progress feature their strategic plans prominently on their websites: Boston (“Focus on Children”), CMS (“Educating Children to Compete Locally, Nationally and Regionally”) and OUSD (“Expect Success”).

- These districts show links to their strategic plans on numerous other pages.
- CMS and OUSD conduct annual surveys of families, students, staff and teachers to assess perceptions of progress.
 - Some use survey results as a portion of their annual report cards for the district and for each school within it.
- Other districts (PPS, for example) have strategic plans that are difficult to find on their websites.
- Details about the process of developing the strategic plan are difficult to find on the websites or to learn from staff who have often moved on to other jobs.

Naming the strategic plan is an important element of marketing it internally and externally.

- “Focus on Children”, “Educating Children to Compete Locally, Nationally and Regionally” and “Expect Success” state the plans’ objectives clearly.
- The CMS plan title is lengthy but it clearly expresses the district’s goal; combined with graphics of various children holding the earth in their hands, the branding is compelling.

Oakland uses outreach to engage the community in the district’s reform plan, “Expect Success.”

- “Expect Success” program staff meets regularly with community members.
- Partners are assisting with the engagement effort. The East Bay Community Foundation is working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to conduct a community engagement strategy that consists of meetings with groups of any size.
- Presentations to funders are now open to community members. Quarterly updates to foundations supporting the reform efforts used to be closed meetings but are now open to interested community organizations.

Measurement of Progress

Some public school districts use independent organizations to audit and measure progress, thereby increasing credibility as a voice outside the district speaks to progress.

Chicago Catalyst challenges and serves as a resource for the city's education community and its efforts to meet the educational needs of all children. (See Chicago Catalyst Info for more details.) **It does this in part by:**

- Identifying areas where improvement is needed
- Showing the reality of school and community life and how improvement happens or is undermined
- Reporting on examples of progress, taking care to identify the how as well as the what
- Gathering and analyzing performance, operations and financial data
- The *Chicago Catalyst* editorial board attempts to be all-inclusive by drawing nominees from the ranks of parents, teachers, principals, researchers, journalists and members of business, civic, education and community organizations.

NYC public schools, with respect to reform efforts, has formed committees that play a lead implementation role. Representatives from the teachers' union, community members, parents and principals make up the committee.

Transparency of Resources

Spokane shows expenditures per pupil at each school, which is more useful than the budget breakdown Seattle displays in its individual school annual reports. Oakland does the same but in a rather confusing way.

Oregon has a program known as *Open Book\$* that monitors the spending of school dollars for all Oregon K-12 public schools. The emphasis is on transparency of spending between the principal's office; business services and technology; teaching and student resources; central administration; and buses, buildings and food.

CONCLUSION

Through the collection of facts and information from the various districts reviewed, it has become apparent that while all districts reviewed are doing some things well, no one district is doing everything right.

SPS, too, is doing many great things, including:

- Developing a family engagement plan that is based on best practices and making efforts to improve communication with families
- Commitment to transparency with staff that has resulted in targeted communications and clear efforts to treat staff as key internal stakeholders worthy of receiving information ahead of general publication
- Suite of e-newsletters, enabling consistent communication with a number of key audiences (staff, community, etc.)
- Effort to bring back direct, periodic and strategic communication with key community, business and civic leaders
- Creation and implementation of the internal Critical Facts Communication Plan within the last year that has changed how the district communicates on a range of issues, particularly sensitive information
- Evidence of strategic thinking of how emergent issues fit into the broader context

SPS also has many opportunities to improve. Key areas for improvement include:

- Increasing outreach to and engagement opportunities for parents who speak languages other than English
- Building capacity to be able to work more proactively with the media
- Updating and expanding the district website and making it easier for parents and community members to navigate this site
- Developing regular mechanisms to communicate with SPS staff
- Developing ways to measure the success of outreach and engagement strategies

APPENDIX

1. Alliance for Education Update to the Community
2. Broad Foundation Communications Audit
3. CACIEE Report
4. Chicago Catalyst- Overview
5. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools Strategic Plan
6. Districts Reviewed- Overview
7. Instructional Staff Summary
8. Instructional Staff Topline Messages
9. Interview Findings
10. Interview Questionnaire
11. McKinsey Strategic Framework Appendices
12. McKinsey Strategic Framework
13. Meetings with community leaders
14. Media Analysis
15. Media Analysis Appendices: Media Analysis-Overview
16. Media Analysis Appendices: Original school district press release
17. Media Analysis Appendices: Revised press release by Pyramid
18. Media Analysis Appendices: Advanced pitch example
19. Media Analysis Appendices: Del.icio.us Memo SPS
20. Miami-Dade Strategic Plan
21. New York City Public Schools Survey Information
22. New York Public Schools Strategic Plan
23. Oakland Unified District Strategic Plan
24. Open Book\$ Project- Overview
25. Open Book\$ Project- FAQs
26. Portland Public Schools Strategic Plan
27. Review of discovery districts websites
28. Review of district websites- Interactive
29. Review of School- Family Partnership Plan
30. Portland's Schoolhouse Supplies- FAQ
31. Portland's Schoolhouse Supplies- Overview
32. Spokane Public Schools Interview
33. SPS Family Survey
34. SPS Key Communicators contact
35. SPS Principal Survey 2006-07
36. SPS Website Findings
37. SPS Family & Community Engagement Policy
38. SPS Family & Community Engagement Procedure
39. SPS Family & Community Engagement-Six Types of Involvement
40. SPS Plan for Success- 2005-2010
41. SPS School-Family Partnership Plan
42. Summary of SPS Instructional Staff Survey
43. SPS School-Family Partnership Plan
44. TV Program memo