

## Summary of Peer Review – Communications

*Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

*The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for academic achievement.*

### The Subject

#### Communications

Seattle Public Schools communicates with many different groups of people:

- 45,000 students and their families
- Teachers, principals, counselors, and other school and district staff
- Elected school board members
- The media, including local radio and TV stations, local and neighborhood newspapers and bloggers
- Community members, including elected officials, neighbors, business people, and school supporters and funders

These communications must be clear, accurate and understandable to everyone who needs information from SPS.

But it is also important that families and community members can communicate back. They must have opportunities to share their thoughts, concerns and ideas with district staff. And they must be able to trust that their opinions will be taken seriously and acted on with respect.

This peer review study evaluated how the SPS public affairs/communications office and other staff at the district communicate, how they engage the public and how they respond to feedback from community members. This study was conducted during August and September 2007.

### The Reviewer

The Communications study was conducted by Christopher Horan, the chief communications officer for the **Boston Public Schools**. Mr. Horan previously served as chief of staff for the Boston Public Schools. In 2005, he led an effort to strengthen the Boston School District's communications, with the goal of improving public involvement in Boston's education reform efforts.

## Summary

After studying SPS communications efforts, the reviewer made a number of recommendations for the future. Key recommendations included:

- **Develop a clear set of messages that capture SPS priorities** to help community members understand the district's history, strengths and plans for the future.
- **Share positive stories with the media** to counteract negative impressions and to get the word out about progress at Seattle schools.
- **Develop communications and public engagement plans** to ensure that the district is strategic in how it communicates, and community members have the opportunity to comment on district plans.
- **Emphasize customer service**, so people who interact with the district have a positive experience.
- **Reach out to the district's many different audiences**, and develop better ways to communicate with low-income families and those who do not speak English at home.

## Study Methods

The reviewer **interviewed** several dozen SPS staff and school board members and **reviewed** SPS publications and media coverage about district activities.

## Findings and Recommendations

The reviewer found there was great opportunity to improve SPS communications: Seattle has a relatively new superintendent, who has won community goodwill as she begins her work; and she has been able to begin that work by focusing on curriculum and instruction, as the financial problems of past years have been resolved. However, many challenges remain, and the reviewer made a number of recommendations to help SPS communicate more effectively:

**Develop a clear set of messages.** The reviewer noted that SPS must take the lead in communicating its strengths to the community. He suggested that this be done in a consistent way, with clear messages that will help community members understand the district's history, strengths and plans for the future.

As part of that effort, the reviewer recommended that SPS **adopt a single tagline**. He expressed concern about the district's numerous slogans. He suggested that having different slogans for different purposes could be confusing and recommended that the district select a single tagline that describes its vision for the future. This tagline should then be used on all materials.

**Share positive stories.** The reviewer noted that during his evaluation many people shared negative stories or impressions about the district, many of these focusing on the district's budget problems from several years ago. He recommended that SPS share a new, positive story with the community about the present and its goals for the future.

In particular, the reviewer recommended that SPS staff work with local reporters to **publicize good news** at Seattle's schools. He suggested that SPS staff should not just respond to stories already in the media but should also "pitch" five to seven positive stories each week. These positive stories could help change impressions of SPS by giving community members the opportunity to learn about progress, awards and achievements at different schools.

**Develop communications and public engagement plans.** As part of the strategic planning process, the district has begun work on developing a plan for communications and public engagement. In terms of **communications**, the reviewer noted it is important that SPS have a clear vision for what type of information it should share, how it should share this information and how it will judge the success of its communications efforts.

In terms of **public engagement**, the reviewer cautioned that decisions cannot be made solely on the basis of public comment. However, he noted that families and other community members must have a clear way to participate in district decision-making. They must understand how they can share comments, concerns and opinions and must know how their contributions will be used.

**Emphasize customer service.** The reviewer noted that it is crucial that families and community members have a more positive experience in schools and in district offices. He recommended that improving customer service be a key part of a communications plan—to add a "brand experience" to the "brand promise" that the district would share through its slogans and positive news stories.

As part of this effort, the reviewer recommended that **internal communications within SPS must be strengthened**. All SPS staff—not just those in communications/public affairs—must become well-educated about the district's priorities and plans. Staff members throughout the district, particularly those at enrollment centers and in the facilities department who work regularly with the public, must understand SPS priorities and must be able to communicate them clearly to families and other community members.

**Reach out to the district's many different audiences.** The reviewer noted that SPS' rich diversity, with families and staff of many races, ethnicities, languages and socioeconomic backgrounds, is a real strength. However, he recommended that the district must develop strategies to communicate with these many different groups. In particular, the district must find better ways to communicate with low-income families and those who do not speak English at home. The reviewer recommended

that the district develop ongoing contact with churches and neighborhood groups and use a variety of languages and tools to communicate its messages.

In addition to these key recommendations, the reviewer suggested the district pursue a number of specific actions to improve its ability to communicate clearly. These include:

- Develop an emergency/crisis response protocol to respond quickly and clearly during an emergency.
- Invest in a web- or phone-based message system to be able to reach families and staff quickly in an emergency.
- Expand programming on the district's TV station as another way to share positive developments at SPS.
- Redesign the SPS website to make it easier to use.

### Next Steps

The Communications peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools' strategic planning process**. The strategic plan is being developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.