



NSPRA Communication Audit Report

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Communication Audit Report:

Seattle Public Schools

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

The Environmental Setting for School District Communications

Seattle Public Schools (SPS), founded nearly 170 years ago, is the largest public school district in the state of Washington and the 75th largest district in the United States. The district's 7,500 employees, including more than 3,300 teachers, provide educational and support services to more than 50,000 PK-12th grade students in 109 schools in the city of Seattle.

The district offers strong academic programs and has a highly-qualified teaching staff.

- In the 2021-22 school year (the last year of data reported by the state), SPS students exceeded state averages in all three categories of statewide assessments. In English language arts, 62.7 percent of SPS students were rated proficient compared to the state average of 50.7 percent. In math, 51.6 percent of SPS students were rated proficient compared to the state average of 37.7 percent. In science, 48.5 percent of SPS students were rated proficient compared to the state average of 42.7.
- 93 percent of teachers have three or more years of experience, and 100 percent of teachers are certified. More SPS teachers (65.6 percent) hold a master's degree than the state average (60.6 percent).

While the two school rating systems used most by Realtors—GreatSchools.org and Niche.com—have elements of subjectivity to them, state data is a key component in determining ratings. GreatSchools indicates that 81 percent of SPS schools are rated at or above the state average, and 86 percent of SPS schools have students who are making as much or more progress than their peers at other schools in the state. Niche gives SPS an overall rating of A- with the highest ratings being given for teachers, diversity and college prep.

SPS is racially and ethnically diverse, and the

district has a longstanding commitment to racial equity and educational justice. This is articulated in [Seattle Excellence](#), the district's 2019-2024 strategic plan: "Seattle Excellence focuses on four priorities to eliminate opportunity gaps and to ensure every student will receive a high-quality, world-class education."

Although nearly 79 percent of students speak only English at home, the district serves students from 162 language backgrounds. The top five non-English languages are Amharic, Cantonese, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese. On its ["about" webpage](#), SPS reports that students identify as 45.9 percent white, 14.3 percent Black, 13.9 percent Hispanic or Latino, 12.8 percent multiracial, 12.2 percent Asian, 0.5 percent Pacific Island, and 0.4 percent Native American. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), 9 percent of families in the SPS community have incomes below the poverty line and about 12 percent receive Food Stamp/SNAP benefits.

Similar to many large, urban school districts, the size, diversity and wide geographic area of SPS present natural obstacles to ensuring that tens of thousands of stakeholders—students, parents, instructional and support staff, volunteers, taxpayers, community and business leaders, etc.—feel engaged in their schools, valued by the district and represented in the important decisions that affect them.

SPS has a high profile nationally, and many of its challenges have been covered by national media. For example, the Supreme Court ruled against SPS in a notable 2007 case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, which prohibited the district from assigning students to schools to achieve racial integration. Today, all students are assigned to a neighborhood school based on their residence and also have the opportunity to apply to [15 "option schools"](#) that provide a variety of programs with alternative curricula and educational styles such as language immersion, STEM, hands-on learning or services designed to meet individual student needs.

More recently, the fall 2022 teachers' strike was covered by national news outlets. Just a

few months later, coverage of a shooting at an area high school was covered by national and international news outlets. Prominent events such as these provide important context for the perceptions shared in the [Key Findings](#) of this report, and the situations were alluded to during multiple focus group conversations. Additionally, during the writing of this communication audit report, SPS filed a lawsuit against social media companies that quickly made national headlines, alleging the companies intentionally market, design and operate their platforms to maximize engagement from young users for profit.

At the helm of SPS is Superintendent Dr. Brent Jones, appointed in March of 2022 after serving as interim superintendent since May of 2021, who has deep roots in the community. He grew up in Seattle and was educated in SPS schools before graduating from the University of Washington. His mother was a teacher in the district, and his children attend district schools. He previously served as chief equity, partnerships and engagement officer, a role in which he developed the district's strategy for eliminating opportunity gaps.

In SPS, two divisions help ensure that stakeholders have the information they need and opportunities to engage with their school system and to provide input on important issues and decisions. First, the **Office of Public Affairs** leads the district's strategic communications, media relations, social media, crisis communication and content creation efforts. The department's stated goal is "to ensure families, staff, community members and the media receive accurate and timely information." Second, the **Center for Engagement** oversees engagement functions involving two-way communication, including strategic initiative engagement, student and family engagement, and community partnerships, aimed at creating and maintaining a positive climate and favorable conditions in schools. **Both of these departments can play critical roles in determining the flow and effectiveness of communication in SPS, and ultimately, in helping to establish and maintain relationships between the district and its publics.**

About the NSPRA Communication Audit Process

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

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

SPS selected NSPRA to conduct a communication audit after the district's Audit and Finance Committee approved a three-year risk-based Internal Audit Work Plan to assess various functions within the district. The audit was conducted in conformance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing. Commissioning this audit demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Board of Directors and Dr. Jones, to address communication challenges—a laudable step that will strengthen the district's relationship with key stakeholders.

NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual. While it examines procedures and controls for communication and outreach, it also goes beyond those mechanics of communicating to consider how stakeholders engage with district information and to evaluate the impact of communications on key stakeholders. Another distinguishing feature of NSPRA's process is that it evaluates the impact that many departments and employees have on the overall flow of information throughout a district, not only that of formal communications staff, which in the case of SPS is the Office of Public Affairs.

This is done by considering questions such as:

- What is the strategy behind and effectiveness of current communication practices?
- Is the district engaging in effective two-way communication?
- How are stakeholders given opportunities to express their viewpoints on key decisions affecting them?
- Are stakeholder perceptions aligned with the views held by district leaders?
- What is the impact of communication on perceptions about student learning and well being?
- Are there communication activities that need to be eliminated or added?

The goals of an NSPRA Communication Audit are always to:

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

In assessing SPS communication, the auditors drew upon NSPRA's work with districts of all sizes, and especially urban districts of a similar and larger size than SPS. This report aims to provide practical recommendations for communication that will help move the district toward its mission of eliminating opportunity gaps, ensuring access and providing excellence in education for every student.

In a district the size of SPS, multiple departments often contribute to the flow of information and how stakeholders engage with it. During the course of conducting this audit, it later became clear that in addition to the Office of Public Affairs, the Center for Engagement holds significant responsibility for maintaining stakeholder relationships.

Stakeholder engagement is a key area for reflection when NSPRA is conducting a communication audit, and in many districts, NSPRA has found this work is directed by or done in collaboration with a communications department. Although in-depth interviews with the Center for Engagement team were not a part of this communication audit, **the [Key Findings](#) and [Recommendations](#) reflect [Observations](#) about engagement that cannot be separated from an assessment of overall district communications.** Notably, some of the report recommendations will require substantial collaboration between these two divisions.

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

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

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

The [Observations](#) and [Recommendations](#) in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Office of Public Affairs, the Center for Engagement or any other department or individual school, they are intended to help SPS improve the effectiveness of current public relations, communications, marketing and engagement efforts, and to support its commitment to continuous improvement.

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

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

Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of SPS enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultants for this communication audit were Naomi Hunter, APR, and Frank Kwan, APR. Their vitae are included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the NSPRA communication audit involved the Office of Public Affairs submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences such as the *SPS School Beat*, project communication plans, staff announcements, information on school incidents, etc. The auditors conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery,

readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditors' review of websites and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content. In addition, the auditors reviewed the district's demographic data, strategic plan, news clips and digital communication analytics.

SCoPE Survey

As part of this communication audit, School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys were conducted to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (both instructional and support staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey was conducted for SPS on November 15-December 2, 2022. It included questions regarding the following:

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

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

Responses to the SCoPE Survey resulted in attaining the following confidence intervals for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the district and using the industry standard equation for reliability:

- Faculty/Staff Survey:
 - 736 surveys completed
 - ± 3.5 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)

- Parent Survey:
 - 2771 surveys completed
 - ± 1.8 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Community Survey:
 - 24 surveys completed
 - ± 20.4 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met)
 - Due to low participation, no significant findings are included in this report based on SCoPE Survey responses by community members.
- Student Survey:
 - 440 surveys completed
 - ± 4.7 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)

This same survey has been administered to school districts across the United States, and the SPS final survey report compares the local responses to national benchmark averages (see [SCoPE Scorecard](#)) as well as to six districts of a similar or larger size nationwide. The auditors reviewed the data and open-ended comment results for each survey group in detail.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the virtual focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditors met with 14 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent and communications staff on November 29 - December 1. An additional focus group with community members was held on December 13. For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Each group met for an hour and was guided through a similar set of [discussion questions](#) on a variety of communication issues. Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to individuals if used in the report.

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

- Parents (five groups, including special education and Cantonese)
- Teachers
- School support staff
- Cabinet/leadership
- Extended cabinet, non-cabinet managers
- Customer affairs team
- SPS-TV team
- Web services team
- Public affairs team
- Community partners
- Communications manager
- Interim chief of staff
- Superintendent
- Board of Directors

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments, interview feedback and review of the SCoPE Survey results, the auditors identified [Key Findings](#) and prepared recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected within NSPRA's [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking publication.

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by Associate Director [Mellissa Braham, APR](#), and Communication Audit Coordinator [Susan Downing, APR](#).

Assumptions

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

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed.

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. **Whether or not they are accurate, perceptions reflect beliefs held by focus group and survey participants, and they provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.** It is also a “snapshot” or view of the district at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued. In the case of SPS, the audit was conducted during a particularly difficult time, just following a teacher’s strike that delayed the start of the school year and a shooting at one of the district’s high schools.

Many employees whose roles are not specifically related to communication nevertheless affect the quality and effectiveness of communication. This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Office of Public Affairs by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. But while formal communications staff may establish systems, protocols and communication norms that drive messaging, ultimately every employee is an ambassador of the district.

The recommendations provided in this report are designed to address gaps and assist SPS leaders’ efforts to communicate consistently

and effectively. The recommendations will address areas that rest squarely within the Office of Public Affairs and also areas of improvement that are outside of the scope of work conducted by that department.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

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

Some recommendations in this report may take months, if not years, to fully implement. However, there are some action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort and still pay quick dividends. These are noted with the icon shown to the right. In



In addition to these “quick wins,” there also are action steps that may offer opportunities to “rethink” a task that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders’ feedback and auditors’ analysis. These opportunities are noted with the rethink icon shown to the left.



Transparency with Focus Group Participants and Other Stakeholders

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and the

importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that SPS share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward.

SPS should also consider sharing this information with key stakeholders such as employees and parents/families. This kind of transparency will demonstrate that district leaders prioritize two-way communications with stakeholders.

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, interviews, SCoPE Survey and review of district materials.

Feedback shared across the focus groups and in the SCoPE Survey was strikingly consistent in this audit. Comments from focus group participants and on the SCoPE Survey reflected similar perceptions about the district's communication strengths and challenges.

The auditors' thoughts on what these key findings suggest are summarized later in the section on [Observations](#).

District Image/Strengths

Communications, stakeholder engagement and the image of a district are inextricably connected. Communications from and engagement experiences with a district influence how it is perceived by stakeholders, while the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications that is necessary for a district to achieve its goals. For these reasons, this report includes key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district's image and overall climate.

The communication audit process revealed numerous strengths in the areas of district image and perception that serve to support student achievement, including:

- **One of the district's key strengths is an authentic commitment to equity, especially in the area of racial justice.**

Numerous focus groups participants from all stakeholder categories commented that the district is sincerely trying to correct inequities from the past and to find new ways to ensure all students learn and thrive. An employee articulated this theme when describing the impact the district's racial equity training had on his communication with families as follows: "We really focus our work through that lens [of racial equity] and that's been successful

from my perspective because it's certainly influenced my relationships with our families, how I interact, how I'm perceived and how the district is perceived." This comment regarding the focus on equity is reflective of other focus group participants.

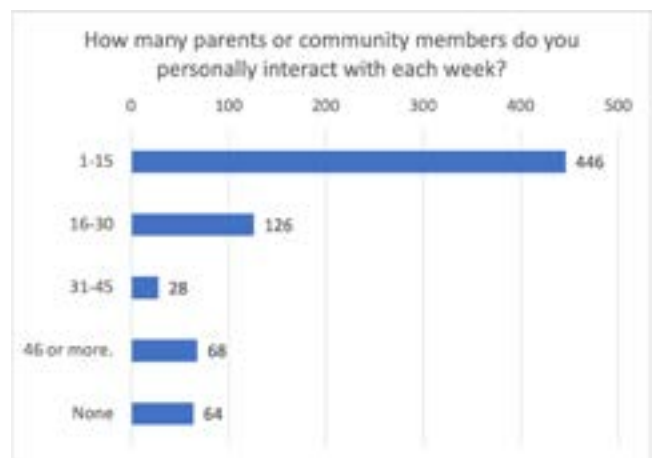
Even when making critical observations about equity work that is still needed to eliminate opportunity gaps, the auditors heard consensus around the district's sincere intention to do so. A staff focus group participant expressed it this way when describing the effort to be more inclusive of students of color and recruiting teachers of color: "I think they stand on that and they actually believe it and work towards it. I think they mean what they say when they [try to be inclusive]. It might not always be successful, but I believe it." An employee who is a person of color noted, "We're leaders for modeling equitable practices, whether [that is doing] really intentional work or [making] intentional effort into reaching out to level the playing field [for students of color.] And it's in our strategic plan that we're putting in extra supports and resources to meet kids that are the furthest away from educational justice. This district really unapologetically is leading that work forward." Another employee, also a person of color, commented, "I really appreciate that in the last few years in particular, most of our upper leadership now are educators of color and I think that having educators of color leading our system is a real strength and a powerful voice for change in our system."

- **Leadership and staff changes are seen as leading to positive change.** Some focus group participants noted that some leadership and staff changes are positive. In the words of one community member, "Every time we bring new staff on there's a reason they were hired, there's something that they're bringing, and we often see a positive change in whatever their area of interest may be." One example shared was

recent improvements in efforts to make documents accessible, both to non-English speakers and people with a disability that requires accommodation.

- **The perception of many focus group participants, especially those from staff groups, is that the quality of education offered in the district is excellent in most locations.** As is the case in many large urban districts, the perception is that some neighborhood schools have better reputations than others. The divide between the perception of the quality of individual schools and perception of the overall quality of the district is wide.
- **SPS offers an array of program options,** giving parents the option of sending their child to a neighborhood school or an “option school” featuring a special program focus such as language immersion or STEM.
- **The Seattle community is supportive of public schools.** In February 2022, voters overwhelmingly approved two replacement levies, with more than 78 percent voting yes for the Educational Programs and Operations levy (EP&O) and nearly 80 percent voting yes for the Buildings, Technology, and Academics/Athletics Capital Levy (BTA). Previously, voters passed levies in 2019, 2016 and 2013. Support is also given through the fundraising and advocating for students through organizations such as the Alliance for Education and the Seattle Council PTSA.
- **Multiple focus groups mentioned SPS’ dedicated corps of teachers and employees as a strength.** Even critics of the district acknowledge that SPS staff are trying to do their best. Parent participants in the focus groups often expressed satisfaction with their child’s school, even when they were critical of the district.
 - One parent, for example, who was dissatisfied with the district on many levels said, “I think one of their strengths is a lot of very, very caring and committed staff who really want to do the best for kids.”
 - Another parent commented that it is common to see parents wearing sweatshirts of their child’s school at parks or around town and believed this to be a sign of pride in their school.
 - In employee focus groups, auditors saw evidence of the level of care cited by parents and community members. A staff member said, “We’re first a community and I take that very, very, very, very, very much to heart. One of our primary strengths is that we’re coming from a place of wanting to help and wanting to make this difference, understanding what [needs to be changed] and then moving forward with the tools we have to do that.”
- **On the SCoPE Survey, employees were asked how many parents or community members they personally interact with each week,** and the total was more than 10,000 interactions weekly just for the 772 staff members who participated in the survey, an average of 14.5 interactions per staff member per week. Extrapolated across the total number of employees in the district, approximately more than 100,000 interactions with parents and community members are occurring each week.

Staff Interactions with the Community



- **To help inform the district’s work, SPS has a Parent Advisory Committee, a Student Advisory Board, an Equity and Race Advisory Committee, and a (Native American) Indian Parent Advisory Committee.**
- **“Good” and “trying” were two positive words that emerged** when parents were asked on the SCoPE Survey to name two words that best describe the district.

District Image/Areas for Improvement

When stakeholders were asked their general perception of SPS in focus groups, two themes related to district image emerged that may be creating barriers to supporting positive student outcomes.

- SPS is perceived as big and bureaucratic, with a corresponding belief that size is at the root of many of the district’s challenges.
- SPS is perceived as authentically committed to equity and inclusion, although it is seen as struggling to execute that value consistently.

On the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their overall perception of the district on a scale of 1 to 5 (see response options beneath the chart below). SPS was rated as average by community members but below average by staff and parents. Both the staff and parent groups rated SPS lower than the national average across all SCoPE Surveys and lower than the survey averages for six similarly-sized districts.

Overall Perception of the District

Overall Perception of the District	SPS	Districts of Similar Size	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	2.6	3.4	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	2.8	3.7	3.8	2.8	4.2
Community	3.3	3.2	3.3	2.2	4.2
Students	2.6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

5=Excellent 4=Very Good 3=Average 2=Below Average 1=Poor

Further context for these findings is found in the rest of the key findings as well as the report observations and SWOT analysis.

When SCoPE Survey participants were asked to provide two words that best describe the district, the words “bureaucratic” and “large” were the most frequently used words by staff, family and community members. “Confusing” was the word most frequently used by students.

- **The district is perceived as a big, impersonal bureaucracy**, and a number of focus group participants and SCoPE Survey participants expressed a belief that the district is top heavy with too much money spent on administration.
 - Parents expressed this theme on the SCoPE Survey as follows:
 - “As a family we are sympathetic that the district is large, but communication from the district level often just reflects this large bureaucracy. Even when made more personal by using the superintendent as the communicator, the subjects often feel removed from our experience.”
 - “Individuals working for SPS and my neighborhood schools are loving and caring people. However, their best intentions are ineffectual within the bureaucracy of the district.”
 - An example staff member commented, “I get the sense that people think Dr. Jones is approachable, but the system as a whole is not. I want to say the district is too big, but then you go to places like L.A. and they have ten times more schools than we do, but it just doesn’t seem like this district functions as a district.”
- **Comments made in focus groups and interviews suggest a lack of relational connection between the district and its**

stakeholders. Following are statements made that reflect this theme.

- A parent focus group participant noted, “It’s not about crafting the exact right language. It’s just about being available, you know. And I don’t have any sense that they’re available or interested.”
- Another parent participant told of “stumbling upon” a public information session held by a board member at a local library and being surprised by how accessible and honest the board member was.
- A staff member commented in the SCoPE Survey, “District leadership used to have an ‘we are in this together’ vibe. However over the last few years, it feels very much like an ‘us against you’ situation. The Super used to come to our school regularly and would interact with us. I couldn’t even tell you who the Super is at this point. Email communications to staff often feel passive aggressive and dismissive.”

- **Focus group comments and the SCoPE Survey data suggest that trust in the district is low, even compared to districts of a similar size.** Multiple parents and staff said they do not believe some of the information they receive and expressed the belief that messaging is self-serving and focused on the district’s interests, not the recipients’ interests. This theme was expressed by a staff member who said, “The way we communicate often is communicating for the district. It’s not putting students and families first and making things accessible to them in the way that they would consume information.”

Parents expressed a feeling of being “gaslighted.” While comments made it clear that some of this perception is an outcome of the recent teachers strike and school shooting, auditors also heard that distrust goes back a long way in the district, before

the current administration, and perhaps for decades. They felt that in the past reality didn’t match the messaging going out to the community. As an example, one focus group participant noted that a video posted on the website of the superintendent discussing safety was not updated after the recent shooting incident, and that created a perception of insincerity or being out of touch with events.

On the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I trust the information I receive from the district” on a scale from 1 to 5 (see response options beneath the following chart). Average ratings from staff and students indicated disagreement with the statement, while parents and the community were neutral on it. Both the staff and parent groups rated SPS lower than the national average and lower than six similarly-sized districts that have participated in the SCoPE Survey.

Trustworthiness of Communication from the District

Trustworthiness of Communication from the District	SPS	Districts of Similar Size	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	2.9	3.5	3.7	2.7	4.3
Parents/Families	3.1	3.7	3.9	3.1	4.4
Community	3.7	3.3	3.4	2.2	4.3
Students	2.9	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral

2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree

- **Focus group and SCoPE Survey comments indicate that trust in the district has been further eroded by recent communications about the teacher strike.** Parents, staff and community members said they noticed that information was promised at a certain time but not sent. Some cited inconsistencies

between statements put out by the district and what was being reported in the local newspaper, leaving the impression that someone was not telling the truth.

- **Focus group participants expressed a clear differentiation between their perception of the district versus of schools and teachers.** Following are statements made that reflect this theme.
 - “Different schools have different strengths, but the district is widely disliked,” shared a parent.
 - Another parent said, “I think it’s important to differentiate between district staff, administrative staff and school staff. I haven’t been dissatisfied with the schools, but I have had distinct frustration with the district staff.”
 - Auditors read similar comments on the SCoPE Survey such as the example, “We love our school but are not happy with SPS.”
- **Some focus group participants expressed frustration over a feeling that the quality of education at schools is higher than how it is perceived by community members who do not have children enrolled.** Several participants who are pleased with the quality of education their children are receiving noted with some frustration that many of their friends choose to send their children to private schools and question their decision to send their children to SPS schools. Other focus group participants, including high level staff, expressed frustration that many positive stories are not shared.

The auditors’ review of recent news coverage suggests this is a valid concern. During the 2022-23 school year, fall media coverage focused largely on stories related to the strike or shooting, while the only positive story auditors found was a piece about a new Filipino American History class. School districts have no control over

what news media covers, but the latest trends in media coverage do help to explain why community members may have a more negative perception of the district than it may deserve.

- **Internal staff told auditors that positive news and uplifting stories abound throughout the district,** but these stories are not getting told as effectively as possible.
- **Despite the district’s strong commitment to equity, some focus group participants noted a gap between stated ideals and actual practice, especially in the area of communication.** However, auditors noted that even when this was brought up in focus groups, it was not stated as if this was hypocrisy on the part of the district, but rather as an acknowledgment of the complexity related to ensuring access for all in a large and diverse district.

Comments made on the anonymous SCoPE Survey were more critical and blunt. Following is an example of these comments: “As a district I see some action that appears to be performative and more politically oriented based on political climate here in Seattle rather than oriented to really addressing underlying issues.”

Auditors also heard that there is a tension between equity and local control. Stakeholders appear to value equity and want the district to provide oversight, but they also appear to not want the district to exert too much control over local schools.

- **Many comments made on the SCoPE Survey indicated a level of frustration with, or resentment about, the district’s focus on equity.** These comments on the SCoPE Survey reflected a sentiment that was expressed repeatedly:
 - “I think in the direly needed push to truly tackle racially disproportionate outcomes in academics and discipline,

my student's school has been opaque on its policies and decision-making."

- "It's hard to keep listening, or stay engaged in a positive way, because you've repeatedly said, at the district level, and particularly at the administrative level of this school, that you are 'unapologetically centering' on a specific group of children, and the needs of my child are not of concern to you. I am completely on board with the district prioritizing the needs of children who've been historically marginalized and neglected, and still, your rhetoric last spring was so harsh, it made me feel really alienated at this school."
- **Multiple participants shared a concern that strategies for attaining equity sometimes hurt the students they are designed to help.** For example, one focus group participant expressed the belief that the district has reduced communication to affluent, white parents in the effort to make communication more equitable for all families. The participant felt that, "The district has reduced the ways that people can provide feedback without actually increasing the feedback or opportunities for the people who traditionally have been underrepresented. For example, if you talk about families who don't speak English as their first language, it's really rare that you see the district do something to prove that they're reaching out to the families."
- **In nearly every focus group, participants commented that leadership and staff turnover in recent years has created voids in institutional knowledge and best practices.** One employee explained this shared sentiment by saying, "One of our biggest hurdles is that we keep having to re-evaluate and re-adjust to accommodate the new leadership and new vision. There hasn't been the stability to allow [the district] to just make progress."

Staff participants in focus groups said that frequent leadership changes have also had an effect on the ability to learn from and correct system errors. As one employee put it, "There are so many people who want a learning curve because they haven't had time in the position or they're new to the district, and now unfortunately, they have to reinvent the same wheels over and over again. When a situation comes up you're under time pressure, so it's difficult [to go back and review the past]."

- **Across stakeholder groups, the auditors heard a persistent perception that the district is reactive.** An employee commented, "Everything we do is in reaction to some crisis or question. We can never get ahead of anything. We're always responding to something." Parents described the issue this way in comments made on the SCoPE Survey:
 - "District seems reactive, overwhelmed, disorganized, chaotic and mostly concerned with public perception."
 - "I think SPS at the district level is generally doing a good job but [...] the district is under-funded which then leads to being reactive rather than proactive."

Communication Strengths

- **The competency and diverse skill set of the Office of Public Affairs staff are a clear asset for SPS.** The auditors discerned a high level of understanding about the practices needed for effective communication during their conversations with these staff. Auditors also noted in their review of SPS materials, including letters sent, website copy and social media posts, that information is well written. The team has put in place an array of communication tools that includes recently-redesigned websites, newsletters and social media as well as automated systems for sending emails, phone calls and text messages. Auditors observed that staff responsible for communication are creative,

professional, committed to equity in communications. They are eager to improve communication and willing to apply their unique skills in new and broader ways.

Their efforts do not go unnoticed. Some district leaders expressed appreciation for their experience as well as their research and communication skills. A community member shared that, “I noticed in the meeting materials for the upcoming school board meeting, there were image descriptions for the PowerPoint slides from the Transportation Department. This is new. It’s not consistent yet in the materials that are presented. But having an image description makes things more accessible to a number of our families. So it was really fantastic to see it.”

- **Office of Public Affairs staff members expressed a desire to do the best work possible, going beyond the expected.** As an example, the staff recently adopted the use of the K12 Insights customer service tool *Let’s Talk*. While responding to the comments and questions that are submitted has increased the office’s workload, they are committed to leveraging this platform for improving customer service. They have developed an internal scoring system and, if there is a comment that receives a low rating (indicating stakeholder dissatisfaction), the staff’s response is, “Let’s revisit it. Let’s dive into it. Let’s see what the problem is and if we can fix it.”
- **SPS uses a wide variety of tools to communicate with stakeholders, and the use of these tools appears to align with how the SCoPE Survey indicated staff and parents prefer to receive information.** The following charts show how staff and families responded when asked their preferred methods of receiving various types of information.

How Staff Prefer to Receive Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
To help me perform my duties and how I can best support student learning	Email	Staff, department, districtwide meetings
About school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises	Text messages	Email
About urgent school incidents	Text messages	Email
About urgent districtwide incidents	Text messages	Email
About districtwide events, programs and calendar updates	Email	Newsletter/e-newsletter
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and other updates	Email	District website Newsletter/e-newsletter

How Families Prefer to Receive Information

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About my student’s progress and how I can best support his/her learning	Email	Meetings with teachers Student progress reports
About school closings, delayed openings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises	Text messages	Email
About urgent school incidents	Text messages	Phone calls
About urgent districtwide incidents	Text messages	Email
About school and district events, programs and calendar updates	Email	Newsletter/e-newsletter

Types of Information	First Choice	Second Choice
About school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and other updates	Email	Newsletter/ e-newsletter

- On the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their agreement with several statements about the quality of various aspects of communications on a scale from 1 to 5 with the following response options:

5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral
2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree

Staff Ratings for Quality of Communications

Staff: Quality of Communications	From the district	From school/ department
Communications are easy for me to understand	3.3	4.1
Information is accurate.	3.2	3.8
Communications are timely.	2.9	3.7
I trust the communication I receive.	2.9	3.9
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	2.6	4.0
My involvement is welcome and valued.	2.5	3.9
Communications are open and transparent.	2.5	3.6
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	2.3	3.7

Parent Ratings for Quality of Communications

Parents: Quality of Communications	From the district	From school/ department
Communications are easy for me to understand.	3.3	4.0
Information is accurate.	3.3	3.9
Communications are timely.	3.1	3.7
I trust the communication I receive.	3.1	3.9
Communications are open and transparent.	2.8	3.6
My involvement is welcome and valued.	2.5	3.7
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	2.4	3.4
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	2.4	3.7

Student Ratings for Quality of Communications

Student: Quality of Communications	From the district	From school/ department
Communications are easy for me to understand.	3.2	3.3
Information is accurate.	2.9	3.5
Communications are timely.	2.6	3.0
I trust the communication I receive.	2.6	3.4
Communications are open and transparent.	2.4	2.9
My involvement is welcome and valued.	2.3	3.2
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	2.0	2.9
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	1.8	3.0

Communication Challenges

- **SCoPE Survey data shows that SPS staff, families and community members are less satisfied with communication overall than the national average of districts who have participated in the SCoPE Survey** and also compared with six districts of a comparable size. Staff ratings for satisfaction were below average, perhaps not surprising given the timing of the survey in relation to the teachers strike in fall 2022.

Overall Satisfaction with Communication

Overall Satisfaction With Communication	SPS	Districts of Similar Size	Natl. Avg.	Natl. Low	Natl. High
Staff	2.6	3.5	3.6	2.6	4.2
Families/Parents	3.2	3.8	3.8	3.1	4.2
Community	3.2	3.2	3.2	2.0	4.2
Students	3.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

5=Excellent 4=Very Good 3=Average 2=Below Average 1=Poor

- **A strong and consistent theme heard by auditors in focus groups is that stakeholders in all categories do not feel their input is sought or heeded by the district.** Numerous parents, staff and community members expressed a belief that communication is often one-way and self-serving, an issue for consideration by the Center for Engagement as well as for the Office of Public Affairs.
 - As an example, one participant believed that “families and community are not considered to be stakeholders. They’re incidental or they come after everything else. So if there is a way to give families and community stakeholders the same level of input and engagement as, for example, the teachers union or district staff, it would go a long way. It seems like it’s an afterthought to communicate with everybody else outside of the district.”

- When asked in a focus group if their input is sought, another participant responded by saying, “Sought? Often, yes. But sometimes it feels like we have a lot of meetings that lead to nothing. And we use up a lot of parent time without a plan for how to use that time, without a recognition that this is volunteer time, and that it is costing parents to do this. [...] Sometimes it feels very performative—as if they are making a show out of listening, but not using the feedback.”

- **SCoPE survey results also showed two-way engagement to be an area of challenge at the district level.**

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements: “My input and opinion are welcomed and valued,” and “My involvement is welcome and valued” in regard to both the district and participants’ school/department.

- For the district, the average ratings by staff, parents and students all fell between “disagree” and “neutral.”
- For schools and departments, the average ratings by staff, parents and students all fell at or between “neutral” and “agree.”

Quality of Community Engagement

Quality of Community Engagement	Staff	Parents	Community	Students
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.				
District:	2.3	2.4	3.0	2.0
School/Department:	3.7	3.4	N/A	2.9
My involvement is welcome and valued.				
District:	2.5	2.5	3.3	2.3
School/Department	3.9	3.7	N/A	3.2

5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral

2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree

Having a disparity in these results is not unusual; in nearly all surveys, schools/ departments receive higher ratings than the district in this regard. However, the degree of disparity for SPS is greater than the auditors have generally seen.

- **Information overload was a theme that dominated in the SCoPE Survey**, but was not mentioned as often in focus groups. Following is a representative remark: “We get so much communication from both the school and the district. I usually just defer to the school to keep us informed of anything important. It’s further cluttered with near constant emails from the PTA. There’s just too much, too often redundant communication from multiple channels.”
- **Parents in focus groups expressed frustration that outward communication is reactive, contains mistakes and is often too late.** This perception may be a holdover from the pandemic era, but nevertheless it is a perception that lingers. The auditors heard from parents and staff that messages are not well-coordinated. A representative parent comment on the SCoPE Survey was, “Communication from the district is poor. The format is wordy, full of jargon and inaccessible. Information is not relayed in a timely fashion and is not accessible to your average parent. Communications are far too long and need formatting for ease of reading. Every time I receive any written communication from the district I am disappointed and often confused.”

When SCoPE Survey participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements regarding the timing, accuracy and ease of reading of information from the district on a scale from 1 to 5 (see response options beneath the chart below), the average ratings were as follows:

Timeliness, Accuracy and Clarity of Information

Timeliness, Accuracy and Clarity of Information	Staff	Parents	Community	Students
Information is timely.	2.9	3.1	3.3	2.6
Information is accurate.	3.2	3.3	3.8	3.2
Communications are easy for me to understand.	3.3	3.3	4.1	2.6

5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral

2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree

- **In nearly every focus group, participants commented on struggling with knowing where to find information and/or get questions answered.** Following are comments representative of what the auditors heard:
 - A community partner shared, “Parents [...] go to the website and they don’t find what they want; or they get something on Facebook, but they don’t know how to follow up on it; or a flyer comes out but it’s only in English. And so there’s an overall concern around ‘where do we get information’ and then there’s a secondary concern around who has access to information.”
 - Another community member shared, “I’m aware of multiple situations where individual families have had problems or issues or complaints that they needed to take up with district personnel. They often come across a process whereby they will approach the person or function that they believe can help them only to be told no, that’s not my job.
 - A parent commented on the SCoPE Survey, “There are about a dozen different locations to find information, and it can be challenging to understand where to go for what information. Ideally, everything would be on one site/app. Barring that, a

cheat sheet of what is district, what is school specific, and where to go to contact different departments would help me navigate the various needs as a parent.”

Data from the SCoPE Survey validated these comments. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern,” on a scale from 1 to 5 (see response options beneath the chart below), the average ratings were as follows.

How to Get Information

How to Get Information	Staff	Parents	Community	Students
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	2.6	2.4	3.1	1.8

5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral
2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree

- **The system in place to organize and respond to customer service questions is not as efficient as it could be yet.** The *Let’s Talk* platform provides a way for stakeholders to share thoughts and ask questions. In many districts that use this platform, each question/comment is auto-routed to the department most capable of responding to it, and those staff are provided with guidelines so they respond directly and promptly, based on pre-established protocols. For SPS’ *Let’s Talk*, currently all questions/comments are sent to the Office of Public Affairs for developing and communicating the response. Since the public affairs staff are not subject matter experts for all questions, they must reach out to others for answers, and this is where the breakdown takes place. There are no protocols for receiving responses from other departments and,

according to the Office of Public Affairs staff, these questions/comments often get bounced from one department to another. With no stated expectation to other SPS departments’ staff for how quickly a question gets a response, and no communication with families about what they should expect, frustration is created and some questions simply fall through the cracks.

- **In multiple focus groups, participants commented that communication at SPS seems fearful.** Some employee participants commented that fear of saying the wrong thing becomes a barrier to getting information out in a timely and accurate manner. One district leader expressed the feeling that when they tell the truth, they are sharply criticized by the community. Caution therefore interferes with creating communication that leads to understanding, and it also leads to communication that is sometimes dull, boring and institutional. A staff member explained that messages become obfuscated because messengers fear getting in trouble, rocking the boat or getting verbally attacked by the community for sharing honest information in good faith. Fear of being perceived as insensitive or racist was also cited as a reason some leaders choose not to communicate. Typical comments in focus groups and the SCoPE Survey included:
 - “My impression is that they’re scared and just don’t want to deal with what people have to say.” (Parent)
 - “Nobody wants to be the person who signs off or is the final authority on anything.” (Staff)
 - “It’s easier to just keep it basic because that’s like the path to least resistance and those kinds of things are the most likely to be approved to be pushed out.” (Staff)
 - “Communication from the district sometimes tries so hard to be

inoffensive that it lacks any real meaning.” (Parent)

- **Existing communication assets, such as SPS TV and radio, may be underutilized.** Internal staff with communication responsibilities said that there are existing outreach channels that should be reviewed for additional opportunities. For example, one member shared, “Social media, as far as distribution of videos, we feel like it’s very underutilized. Maybe we made a three minute video, how can we pull out shorter pieces?”
The SPS TV team has done projects for other departments outside of the Office of Public Affairs, and they believe more can be done. Challenges were cited about the awareness level about the SPS TV team: “Other departments don’t realize we’re a resource.”

Recently, staff have begun plans to launch a news program for the district.

Internal Communications

- **Staff feel most well informed about how to perform their duties and support students.** On the SCoPE Survey, staff were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale from 1 to 5 (see response options beneath the chart below), with the following results:

How Informed Employees Feel in Key Areas

How Informed Employees Feel in Key Areas	Staff
About how to best perform my duties	4.0
About how I can best support student achievement	3.8
About urgent school incidents	3.3
About school events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	3.3
So that I can deliver effective customer service	3.3
About urgent district-wide incidents	3.0

How Informed Employees Feel in Key Areas	Staff
So that I feel valued as an employee	2.9
About school leader decisions	2.7
So that I can best represent the district as an ambassador	2.6
About district goals and plans	2.6
About district successes and achievements	2.6
About district events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.6
About district finances	1.8

5=Highly Informed 4=Very Informed 3=Informed
2=Somewhat Informed 1=Not Informed

- **Auditors heard in focus groups and read in the SCoPE Survey comments that communication is siloed and departments don’t know what other departments are doing.** This comment on the SCoPE Survey was typical of what auditors repeatedly heard: “Things are announced that some people know nothing about even though it directly involves or affects them. We can receive five different answers to the same question. It is very challenging to find what we need on the SPS website, even on MySPS at times, and among the many district tools. Information and resources are siloed.”
- **Staff said they are sometimes “the last” to receive information.** Following are representative comments from focus group and SCoPE Survey participants on this theme:
 - A community member who is a service provider for SPS students echoed what auditors heard from staff members. She commented that she is sometimes working with staff members and they do not have information that has already been divulged on social media.
 - A staff member shared, “Every time something happens I find out from students.”

- **SCoPE Survey comments from staff regarding their perceptions that district leaders are disconnected from rank-and-file employees were abundant.** Here are a few typical comments:

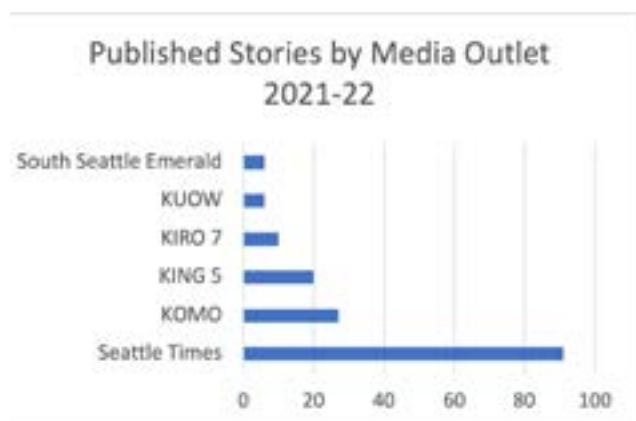
- “District leadership seems to be disconnected from the issues that face educators daily. Often, decisions made at the district level have a negative impact on staff and students. Also, the various departments do not seem to be working together, especially when major changes are being rolled out to the staff. While the individual people that make up the district leadership team may have good intentions, the system itself seems to always be struggling to work smoothly.”
- “There is zero effort to ask educators or students what they need from their educational system and every centrally-pushed plan seems very out of place and misdirected.”
- “I feel the district is very disconnected from what is really going on in the schools.”

External Communications

- **SPS is heavily covered by local media and has a communications specialist devoted to responding to media inquiries.** Metrics provided to auditors by SPS showed that SPS receives about 10 unique media inquiries every day, including email, phone and text messages, and has

approximately 15-25 media interactions each day. During the 2021-22 school years, approximately six stories appeared in local media each week.

- **Parents report hearing information from the news media before the school.** Parent focus group participants indicated that they often hear information about SPS in the news before they hear it from the district. Office of Public Affairs staff acknowledge that there are glitches in how the messaging database system works that sometimes results in parents not getting messages. A member of the team also explained that sometimes parents inadvertently opt out of receiving messages, but there is not a good system in place to ensure that parents periodically check or update their preferences.
- **External survey and focus group participants cited inequities in the release of information, which they perceive as adding to equity issues.**
 - External stakeholders described having access to different levels of information and receiving information at different times. A community focus group participant expressed it this way: “There is a gap between those who have the privilege of knowing where to access information and when to participate in the conversation, and those who don’t, and it creates a lot of tension.”
 - Regarding board packets, a participant noted that “very few people read this information even though it’s publicly available, but it is also in English.” The participant voiced the concern that if only people who speak English and can easily access this information can read and discuss it, then the audience for any discussions is automatically limited. The participant went on to say, “In decision making processes, what we typically see is the earlier you engage in the conversation, the more



sway you have, so when you create information that is in more technical or academic language and put it in a place that is accessed by only a small core of community and only in English, then those people have the opportunity to drive a conversation in ways that don't necessarily serve the needs of the broader district. The [people who] don't have access [...] may be more heavily impacted by some of these decisions and they may have critical information for our district. "

- **There is concern that community members who do not have children enrolled do not have an easy way to learn about SPS schools.** One community focus group participant explained that in the past, the district has done extensive outreach to the community, even visiting nursing homes to answer questions about a proposed levy, but that it seems to occur only when a ballot measure is coming up.

- **SCoPE Survey data reflects that community members feel most informed about district successes and achievements and about crises and serious incidents, and least informed about district facilities and finances.**

Community members were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale of 1 to 5 (see response options beneath chart). It is important to note that although survey participation was low among community members, the community members who took it are likely to be among the more informed of SPS constituents.

How Informed the Community* Feels in Key Areas

How Informed the Community* Feels in Key Areas	Community
During a crisis/serious incident	2.8
About district successes and achievements	2.8
About district goals and plans	2.7
About school events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.5
About district decisions	2.5
About school leader decisions	2.4
About district events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.3
About district facilities	1.9
About district finances	1.8

5=Highly Informed 4=Very Informed 3=Informed
2=Somewhat Informed 1=Not Informed

* Note: Due to low participation in the community survey, there is a higher-than-desired confidence interval for community results. This data is shared for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a representative sample of the entire population of community stakeholders.

- **SCoPE Survey data reflects that parents and families feel most informed about PTSA activities, school incidents and their child's progress in school, and least informed about district goals/plans and finances.** Parents were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale of 1 to 5 (see response options beneath chart). On average, families indicated that they are at least somewhat informed in every key area.

How Informed Parents/Families Feel in Key Areas

How Informed Parents/Families Feel in Key Areas	Parents/ Families
About urgent school incidents	3.5
About PTSA activities	3.5
About my student's progress in school	3.4
About school events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	3.3
About urgent district-wide incidents	3.3
About how I can support my student's learning	3.1
About homework and projects	3.1
About extra-curricular programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.)	3.0
About academic programs and offerings	2.8
About student conduct and discipline	2.8
About district successes and achievements	2.7
About school and district events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.7
About school leader decisions	2.6
About district goals and plans	2.5
About district finances	2.0

5=Highly Informed 4=Very Informed 3=Informed
2=Somewhat Informed 1=Not Informed

- **SCoPE Survey data reflects that students feel most informed about their progress in school and about homework and projects.** Students were asked to rate how informed they feel in key areas on a scale of 1 to 5 (see response options beneath chart).

How Informed Students Feel in Key Areas

How Informed Students Feel in Key Areas	Students
About my progress in school	4.0
About homework and projects	3.9
About how I can get support for my learning	3.2
About conduct and behavior rules and consequences	3.1
About extra-curricular programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.)	3.0
About class and academic programs and offerings	3.0
During a crisis/serious incident	2.9
About school safety including a healthy environment	2.8
About school and district events (meetings, competitions, arts productions, etc.)	2.4
About district successes and achievements	2.2
About leader decisions	2.1
About district goals and plans	1.9
About district finances	1.4

5=Highly Informed 4=Very Informed 3=Informed
2=Somewhat Informed 1=Not Informed

Website

- Data usage provided to the auditors by the Office of Public Affairs shows that the SPS website had more than 15 million page views during the 2021-22 school year.** About 75 percent of the views were from a desktop computer and about 25 percent were on a mobile device. The top pages viewed in 2021-22 were the student portal, the school calendar, the COVID-19 dashboard, The Source (an online communication tool that allows parents, guardians and students access to schedules, attendance, assessment scores, etc.) and the Careers page.
- Following a request for proposal (RFP) process in 2019, SPS and individual school websites underwent a complete redesign in 2020 with the goal of correcting the following problems:**
 - Significant service interruptions
 - Slow webpage load times on mobile devices
 - Out of date and inadequate content on school websites whose communities represent a higher population of students furthest from educational justice
 - Ongoing feedback that the content management system was cumbersome for website editors to manage
- The redesign process included prioritizing requirements for a new website through a series of engagement opportunities with a focus on staff and schools serving students and families furthest from educational justice.** The planning process included:
 - A website analytics review.
 - Implementing and analyzing the results of a survey that included 4,000 users.
 - Interviews and focus groups with students, families, community-based organizations and staff.
- The new SPS website was designed to address these issues and align with two strategic plan priorities—providing consistent and predictable operations and ensuring authentic family and community engagement.** This is described in the document *Consulting the Experts: Centering the Experience of Students and Families for the Seattle Public Schools Website Redesign and CMS Adoption*, which was reviewed by the auditors. The document further explains:

“The project to adopt a new website content management system (CMS) and redesign SPS websites was purposefully and unapologetically centered on the end-user experience and engagement with students and families of Color. It has been guided by the principles of Targeted Universalism.

“Our universal goal is every SPS student receives a high-quality, world-class education and graduates prepared for college, career, and community. Targeted Universalism holds that targeted and differentiated efforts are required to meet the needs of specific student populations, so every student meets the universal goal. By centering this project on how to best support students and families who face the greatest obstacles within the current system, SPS is striving to publish a website that serves all users.

“The project guiding question is ‘How do we design a web experience that centers the goals, needs, and challenges of students and families who are furthest from educational justice?’”
- The new website, designed by Domain7 and hosted by Pantheon, was launched in August 2021.**
- The auditors found the new website to have a clean, modern appearance that draws visitors in,** and with the district’s logo prominently visible at the top of the home page, the design reinforces district branding.

- **Some participants in the focus groups felt that the website is difficult to navigate, but the auditors found the site to have a well-organized structure.**

A pull down menu under a box that says *I Want to...* gives visitors quick links to popular information, and a search bar to the right of that box takes care of searches for information not included in the pull-down menu. Links to popular district apps such as student and family portals, employee email and tech support are prominently featured to the right of the large photo on the page.

- **More than 100 auto-translated language options are available at the top of the page, so that a non-English speaking visitor can translate the page with a click.**
- **The website is mobile responsive and easy to navigate for a user who is viewing it on a phone or portable device.** The main areas of the webpage are available by scrolling down, and the sections are separated with color bars and bold headlines.
- **Using a web accessibility evaluation tool, [WebAIM](#), auditors found that the website is accessible with very few errors.** A community partner who participated in a focus group shared, “I have noticed that especially with the website update, their commitment to accessibility on the website is really strong.”
- **Following are some website areas as in need of improvement, based on auditors’ observations and/or comments from focus groups or surveys:**
 - The sheer amount of information on the website is confusing. Several staff members mentioned that the new website is a significant improvement over the previous one, but some of the problems carried over. Several people made comments such as, “There are so

many things in there. You don’t even know where to start.”

- The link to the *About* section is not at the far left of the main menu, as is common with websites, and does not include a District Profile or District Overview page, which users often look for, especially those who are new to the area and not familiar with the schools.
- The *Contact Us* and *Let’s Talk* links are at the bottom of each page and not prominent when one first visits the site.
 - The purpose of *Let’s Talk* may not be obvious to a first time visitor who is trying to reach the district and used to looking for the phrase “Contact Us” at the top right corner of the page.)
 - Similarly, *Contact Someone to Resolve a Concern* is one of the options in the *I Want to...* pull-down menu at the top, but it is not immediately apparent as an option when first opening the page.
- The home page does not include a link to a *Frequently Asked Questions* page, which is often helpful for addressing common questions and dispelling rumors.
- The auditors noted the photos on the district homepage change frequently, which can help keep it appearing fresh. Some of the photos are more appealing than others, though. In general the website will be more in line with SPS’ mission, goals and branding if the photos are of students, not adults. A rotating slide show featuring students and learning activities would make the page even more inviting.
- The district homepage does not have a highly visible invitation for community members, especially those with no children enrolled, to receive news updates or emergency

communications, nor does it have easy links to get involved by attending a meeting, volunteering or joining a committee, group or event. The *I Want to...* section does include information about volunteering, but this is not highly visible.

- Auditors heard from families that the Enrollment/Register/Admissions section of the website is confusing, and the auditors themselves noted it is difficult to navigate. Finding a list of “option schools” and program descriptions is not easy, and terms are not used consistently. References are made to the “admissions department,” but Admissions is not in the list of departments on the website. Every link for Options Schools takes you to a glossary term definition, but not a list of which schools are included in the program.

Social Media

- **SPS has an active social media presence with a total of nearly 60,000 followers across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.** The Office of Public Affairs posts regularly as a strategy for keeping families more engaged by sharing information such as dates, announcements, upcoming events and good news.
- **SPS’ social media audience breaks down as follows:**
 - Facebook: 19,000 followers
 - Instagram: 10,000 followers
 - Twitter: 30,000 followers.
- **The Office of Public Affairs regularly analyzes usage data for its social media platform.** Data shared with auditors showed the communications team has a clear understanding of the best days to post on each platform, the types of post that get the most engagement, and the best frequency to post.
- **In the 2021-22 school year, across the three platforms:**
 - Facebook page and profile posts increased by 366 percent. New likes and followers were up 43 percent, the engagement rate on posts increased by 52 percent and post shares increased by 125 percent.
 - Instagram page and profile posts increased by 715 percent. Page likes increased by 339 percent, and page and profile visits increased by 917 percent.
 - SPS gained 1,034 new Twitter followers, an increase of 431 percent. Twitter posts by SPS increased by 23 percent, retweets increased by 68 percent and engagements increased by 187 percent.
- **Following what its analysis of metrics shows is optimal, the district posts several times a day on each platform.**
- **Auditors observed that SPS uses the same content for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts, but Instagram appears to get more engagement than the other two.** For example, a December 9, 2022 post of the superintendent visiting Ingraham High School with Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell and Governor Jay Inslee got 23 likes on Facebook and 6 on Twitter, but an Instagram post on the same topic got more than 600 likes.
- **In a review of a typical week of posts from January 5-12, 2023, the auditor found:**
 - On SPS Facebook, an average engagement rate of 0.06 percent, which is lower than the average engagement rate per education post in 2020 (0.15 percent) and lower than what is considered a good Facebook engagement rate overall (2.5 percent).
 - On SPS Instagram, an average engagement rate of 2.05 percent, which is lower than the average engagement rate per education post

in 2020 (2.56 percent) and lower than what is considered a good Instagram engagement rate overall (2-3 percent).

- On SPS Twitter, an average engagement rate of .01 percent, which is lower than the average engagement rate per education post in 2020 (0.06 percent) and less than what is considered a good Twitter engagement rate (0.5-1 percent).

Observations and SWOT Analysis

SPS has many strengths and many highly-rated schools, but survey results suggest an overall perception of and level of trust in the district that is lower than what might be expected among similarly-sized districts. These sentiments appear to be rooted in communication challenges that compounded over many years.

The lack of trust is hindering the district in its mission to provide excellence in education for every student, and therefore many of the recommendations that follow are designed to support the district's goals and board-adopted guardrails by enhancing the district's image and rebuilding trust, a process that had begun even before the audit was conducted. The auditors noted a high level of commitment to improving communication and observed specific strategies already in place, but the improvements in communication and engagement may not be evident yet to stakeholders. The timing of the audit almost certainly compounded the negative perceptions that were expressed.

District leaders will not be surprised to learn that auditors heard many comments in focus groups and on the SCoPE Survey that suggest communication during the recent strike further eroded trust in the district. As auditors heard across stakeholder groups, low trust diminishes morale and creates obstacles to executing initiatives designed to support students, especially marginalized students who may need the greatest support. For this reason, it is important to focus on overall perceptions of the district as well as specific communication strategies.

While the current district leaders were not in charge when distrust in SPS was first sowed, they have an opportunity to rebuild it by making short-term and long-term changes that will improve accuracy and flow of information and ensure a higher level of engagement by all stakeholders over time. Communication that is two-way, that both listens and explains, will

ultimately support improving achievement and eliminating opportunity gaps for all students.

Following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditors offer the following additional general observations:

- **“Big and bureaucratic” emerged as dominant descriptions of SPS in focus groups and the SCoPE Survey.** The handling of some of the district's recent challenges—a pandemic, a teachers' strike and an act of violence at a high school—was often cited as symptomatic of this big bureaucracy. However, such a perception is not inevitable, even for a district that serves more than 50,000 students.

NSPRA knows from its work with other districts of similar size that it is possible to forge strong connections with a community and build the trust needed to operate relatively smoothly, with time to focus on student achievement and not division and controversy. In the case of SPS, a number of factors outside of the control of current leadership have contributed to the perception that the district is a nameless, dysfunctional system, even as many parents and community members think highly of individual SPS schools. These factors include the following:

- SPS leadership has changed frequently in recent years, weakening the connection between district leaders and stakeholders that makes a school district not just part of a city but part of a community. A deliberate outreach campaign that puts district leaders in the community, interacting with stakeholders, will both humanize them and broaden their understanding of stakeholder concerns.

- Frequent changes in leadership have also limited the opportunity to reinforce the values, positive identity and branding that result from consistent messaging and communication over long periods of time. A stabilization of policy and procedures around communication will help the district reinforce its value system even as that communication is refined through greater input from stakeholders.
- SPS is geographically and operationally decentralized. SPS offers such a rich array of program options and strong neighborhood schools that the culture or personality of individual schools and programs may eclipse that of the district as a whole. Providing parents and staff with opportunities to connect with stakeholders from other school communities and offering compelling districtwide content that connects the achievements of local schools with broader district strategies can lead to greater support for and less resistance to changes aimed at lifting students in schools not attended by one's own student.
- **The need to build a culture of two-way communications districtwide—sending and receiving information—was one of the most significant findings of the audit.** Employees, families and community members all expressed the feeling that their input is not sought or welcomed often enough, and even when it is, they doubt it has an impact. Making it easier for all stakeholders to provide feedback in ways that are compatible with their availability, habits and culture will go a long way toward building trust. This will require asking for feedback from many people in multiple ways. Many people are longing for in-person interactions three years after COVID-19 hastened virtual communication. Others have become comfortable with virtual meetings that create new opportunities for engagement.

Some parents, especially those whose voices have been marginalized in the past, may need extra attention and encouragement to participate. However, building a mindset of listening, analyzing and responding that is embraced by the entire district is as important as holding a meeting or sending out a survey. Those actions may be meant to engage, but there is no engagement without there being resulting feedback and change.

- **SPS' steadfast commitment to equity is one of its greatest strengths, but also an area of challenge.** SPS is frequently lauded for its commitment to equity and willingness to identify and correct systems that are harming students of color and students with special needs. For some, these changes are uncomfortable and challenge “the way things have always been done.” For others, the district is not moving quickly enough. There is more consensus around the commitment to equity and educational justice in SPS than in many communities, but despite good intentions, confusion and disagreement about how to achieve it, and fear of making a mistake or causing offense, appears to be getting in the way of progress.

Strategies directed at elevating the voices of traditionally marginalized communities sometimes meet resistance from stakeholders who already had the access they needed to information and feedback channels. Auditors heard great sympathy and admiration for the district's strong commitment to equity but also noted a troubling perception, mostly emerging in comments on the SCoPE Survey, that the district is elevating marginalized voices by diminishing other voices or improving conditions for some students at the expense of others. When reading the survey comments, SPS leaders should reflect deeply on how to nurture greater understanding.

- Creating space for communications staff to reflect, plan and collaborate with the Center for Engagement will improve district efficiency and increase proactive strategies.** The auditors heard in focus groups and observed during the audit planning and preparation stages that district leaders and staff in the Office of Public Affairs seem to spend a significant portion of their time managing crisis after crisis, leaving little time for reflection, debriefing or long-range communication planning. In the view of the auditors, the inability to plan and prepare creates stress that gets in the way of staff moving forward as well as unnecessary strife in the community when a pending decision or issue is not proactively introduced and contextualized for stakeholders. As an illustration, when commenting on a board packet that addressed the possibility of changing bell schedules, a community member pointed out that only small numbers of people may read it and be aware, but they can be the most vocal: “So [they are] going to get pretty wound up about that, share that out on social media, and then people are going to start talking about what’s going to happen, but without specific information from district to community. There’s going to be misinformation. There’s going to be confusion. There’s going to be stress. And that’s completely not necessary.”
- Defining communication expectations and protocols for all staff and increasing training around communication—including for those outside of the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement—will ensure greater accuracy and timeliness.** Conversations with staff at all levels left auditors with the impression of a workforce that is genuinely committed to the district and its students. However, many individual staff members seem frustrated by hurdles related to receiving and sending information that make it difficult for them to perform their work at

the highest level. Some described siloed departments that make it challenging to get information when it is needed and a lack of clarity around expectations related to communication or who “owns” information. Others spoke of resistance to change and, as noted in the Key Findings, a fear of saying anything that might “rock the boat.” Given all this, it is imperative for the district to examine and refine its communications protocols and infrastructure. Providing communications staff with professional development opportunities will also help with this.

SPS is fortunate to have two divisions, the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement, that could and should collaborate to address these factors and change these perceptions.

SWOT Analysis

The auditors have identified the items shown on the following page as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) affecting the ability of SPS to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

SWOT Analysis

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current Board of Directors and superintendent are committed to improving communication, as evidenced by soliciting this audit. As a lifetime resident and alum of SPS, the superintendent has a deep knowledge of and a strong personal connection to the community and its schools. The district has a talented and experienced team of professional communicators who collectively have a diverse set of skills. The Office of Public Affairs is committed to equitable communication strategies that will reach all stakeholders, with awareness and understanding of how to achieve that. In addition to the Office of Public Affairs, SPS has a division, the Center for Engagement, devoted to increasing engagement. Economic, racial and cultural diversity brings a rich array of perspectives. The district has a strong commitment to educational justice and dismantling systems that harm students of color. The district has many positive stories to share about student and school successes across all neighborhoods and grade levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The size of the district and the large geographic area it covers creates challenges for enabling personal interactions with district leaders. Budget challenges may limit the amount of resources available to provide a robust communications infrastructure. The teachers' strike in the fall of 2022 created strife and distrust that will take time to overcome. The Office of Public Affairs is challenged to write about and promote positive stories because of the amount of time spent on crisis communications. The Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement are separate divisions, creating obstacles for coordinating and integrating these two critical activity areas. The number of languages and cultures represented by district families creates barriers to offering custom translations, interpretation and the personal outreach necessary to achieve equitable communication. Correcting a system that did not serve students of different races equally in the past is complex and liable to meet resistance from parts of the community that haven't experienced injustice first hand.
	Opportunities	Threats
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Seattle community has been financially supportive of public education in the past which may provide a good foundation for future support. Partners such as the Alliance for Education and Seattle Council PTSA provide advocacy and raise money for local schools. Seattle is a desirable city, attracting businesses that provide employment opportunities and new families who can bring new energy and resources to the district. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Varying levels of understanding about how to provide equity and achieve educational justice sometimes slows or even works against progress. There are urban problems, such as gun violence and homelessness, that are beyond the scope of the district to address. Nevertheless, these challenges affect district families and the schools. The community views the board as a "check" on the district and expects the board to have an adversarial relationship with the district. Due to leader turnover in recent years, the wider community does not know district leaders and has less understanding of district successes and challenges.

Recommendations

For a school system, effective communication and engagement with stakeholders are vital to improving student outcomes and having support from stakeholders. This link has been shown in research studies, surveys and the award-winning results of district campaigns. Yet, the importance of connecting communication and engagement is frequently overlooked.

Communication efforts are more effective when informed by the act of listening to, or engaging stakeholders, and engagement efforts are more effective at attracting the interest of stakeholders when they use clear and targeted messaging strategies. When systems seek to change long-standing practices or to adopt bold, new visions, it is even more important to prevent misunderstanding by ensuring that the district is communicating and engaging consistently, effectively and accurately.

Because these functions are so intricately linked, communication and engagement are considered in many districts—and in this audit report—to be integrated functions that cannot be considered in isolation. While the requested scope of work for this audit led to more extensive contact between the auditors and the Office of Public Affairs, the need for enhanced two-way communications and increased engagement was a key finding of the report.

As a whole, the recommendations that follow will require the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement to work closely together. However, understanding that the functions of these departments are currently separate and SPS may wish to delineate between the two when determining responsibility, action steps are labeled with one or both of these acronyms:

- OPA for Office of Public Affairs
- CFE for Center for Engagement

For clarity, the breakdown of current responsibilities for these two separate divisions is understood by the auditors to be as follows:

- The Office of Public Affairs is overseen by the assistant superintendent of public affairs and includes four departments:
 - Communications
 - Customer Service (including the Office of Ombudsperson)
 - SPS TV and Electronic Professional Development
 - Web Services

The Office of Public Affairs helps to:

- Share information about SPS schools and students through multiple forms of media and in many languages.
 - Build capacity for school and central staff to share information through newsletters, websites, social media, phone messages and community gatherings.
 - Provide clear and timely crisis communications during inclement weather, natural disasters or other emergencies.
- The Center for Engagement is directed by the assistant superintendent of strategy and climate, and it includes three departments:
 - Strategic Initiative Engagement
 - Student and Families Engagement
 - Community Partnerships

The Center for Engagement works with school leaders, educators, students and families to create and maintain highly favorable conditions in schools.

During the NSPRA Communication Audit process, the then-assistant superintendent of public affairs was appointed interim chief of staff and began serving in both roles. Previously, the assistant superintendent of public affairs reported to the interim chief of staff and was not a member of the superintendent's cabinet.

The complexity of the structure of communication responsibilities at SPS

sometimes creates confusion. As several focus group and district leaders observed in the [Key Findings](#), it is sometimes difficult to know “who owns” information.

School districts of all sizes struggle with the perception that a communications department is primarily responsible for all communication in the district. When stakeholders express dissatisfaction with communication, it is often assumed that the professional communicators are responsible for both the dissatisfaction and for fixing the problems. This is a mistaken and potentially harmful assumption.

In reality, every employee in the district—whether a school office manager, a department director in the district office, a teacher, a school principal, a receptionist or the superintendent—communicates with fellow employees, parents, students and the community every day.

On the SCoPE Survey, employees were asked how many parents or community members they personally interact with each week, and the total was more than 10,000 interactions weekly just for the 772 staff members who participated in the survey. Extrapolated across the total number of employees in the district, approximately more than 100,000 interactions with parents and community members are occurring each week, and that doesn’t count interactions with other employees. When any of those interactions cause disappointment, as they inevitably will, the problem is often

thought of as a communication failure, but the solution may lie well beyond the ability of any single department to solve.

The Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement do play fundamental roles in ensuring the smooth outflow of accurate information as well as establishing systems for obtaining feedback and information from stakeholders. However, all other departments and staff members can play a role in ensuring SPS communicates and builds strong relationships with its stakeholders. Accordingly, while many of the auditors’ recommendations focus on ways the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement can build and improve on the existing communications infrastructure, other recommendations are broad, districtwide recommendations that involve other departments and employees in the responsibility for building trust through effective communication.

The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but SPS may choose to implement different recommendations and action steps at different times. Some of the recommendations and action steps may be feasible to implement right away, as noted with the Quick Win icon. However, many will need to be addressed over time as budget, resources and staff capacity allow. **Consider undertaking only two or three major recommendations a year while continuing to maintain existing programs, services and responsibilities.**

Summary of Recommendations

1. [Formalize collaboration between communication and engagement functions, and create shared support structures.](#)
2. [Build trust by nurturing a culture of two-way communication throughout the district.](#)
3. [Increase information access and transparency around decision-making processes.](#)
4. [Provide regular time for team building, situation debriefs, team reflection, project planning and professional development within the Office of Public Affairs, and in partnership with the Center for Engagement.](#)
5. [Streamline and clarify the communication infrastructure.](#)
6. [Elevate marginalized voices through a plan to close the gap between values and perception.](#)
7. [Expand opportunities to share the SPS story.](#)

Recommendation 1:

Formalize collaboration between communication and engagement functions, and create shared support structures.

SPS is fortunate to have two divisions devoted to communicating and engaging with the public, the Office of Public Affairs (OPA) and the Center for Engagement (CFE), but the auditors noted that these divisions do not appear to collaborate closely on overall planning and strategizing. As noted in the [Recommendations](#) introduction, communication and engagement go hand in hand, and it will be important to integrate the work of these two divisions so that both can function as effectively as possible.

Action Step 1.1 (OPA/CFE)

Create a formal alignment between the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement or consider merging these divisions.

Large districts are particularly vulnerable to working in silos, and auditors' conversations with staff in general suggest that silos have become a barrier to efficiency and progress in SPS. It is beyond the scope of this audit to address the issues of siloing more broadly. However, it is apparent that greater coordination and collaboration between the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement are necessary for SPS to ensure that communications are two way, key messages are targeted to reach the appropriate audiences, and communication and engagement strategies are comprehensive and highly effective. Ultimately, this alignment will help improve the climate for all stakeholders, elevate the SPS image, increase trust and help the district achieve its goals.

This increased level of collaboration could be achieved in one of two ways: by creating formal



structures for how the two divisions will work together or by merging the two divisions. Ideas for each approach are offered in the bulleted items below for further consideration.

- Shorter Term: Create a formalized structure for how the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement work together.** The auditors did not have the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with the assistant superintendent of strategy and climate or to do a detailed exploration of the structure of the departments that the position directs. Therefore, it is not reasonable at this time to make specific suggestions for how staff members in the two divisions might better collaborate. However, the leaders of these divisions are encouraged to make it a top priority to outline the functions of each staff member in both divisions, to share that information with their counterparts and to establish defined partnerships and regular meetings between partnering staff members. The partnership structure should include mutually-established goals overall as well as for key projects.
- Longer Term: Consider consolidating the divisions into one, cohesive communications and community engagement department.** This unity would help ensure that all district communication efforts are planned strategically and collaboratively for maximum effectiveness in terms of staffing and impact among stakeholders. As budgets and staffing opportunities allow, consider creating a chief communications and community engagement officer position that serves on the executive staff and provides ongoing, high-level strategic counsel to the superintendent and executive leadership team. This chief position should oversee all staff and functions pertaining to public information, public relations, marketing, media services, communications equity and community engagement.

Action Step 1.2 (OPA/CFE)

Develop a strategic communication and engagement plan that follows the four-step strategic public relations planning process.

Auditors are aware that the Office of Public Affairs does draft strategic communication plans for individual projects, such as the redesign of the website in 2020 and 2021, but no overall strategic communication plan exists. The auditors recommend that the Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement work together to create a comprehensive strategic communication and community engagement plan. This plan will serve as a map that provides direction to communications and engagement staff so that they are moving forward in alignment toward common goals. It also signals priorities and clarifies roles to the rest of the organization, which can help reduce outside requests for help with non-critical, lower priority tasks.

Such a plan should:

- Be grounded in research that helps define communication priorities and overarching goals.
- Set measurable objectives to help achieve those goals.
- Identify strategies, action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines and the staff members responsible for accomplishing tasks.
- Set the evaluation criteria that will be used to measure success.

Without such a guiding document, day-to-day tasks can easily supersede the ultimate purpose of the SPS communications and engagement divisions: to help the district promote high-quality instructions and learning as articulated in the goals and guardrails adopted by the SPS School Board.

A quick Google search will yield a variety of styles of communication plans, but the most effective ones adhere to the four-step

#1

Formalize collaboration between communication and engagement functions, and create shared support structures.

strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement, evaluate). This planning model is foundational to strategic communications and an essential knowledge area for those professionals seeking to earn their accreditation in public relations. SPS communications and engagement staff should work together to create a comprehensive strategic communication and engagement plan. An initial outline could be created as part of the review of this audit report during a team retreat ([Action Step 4.1](#)).

Following are the core components of a strategic communication plan.

Research

Research and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit will be an excellent starting point on that research, with its data on the communication preferences of internal and external stakeholders. Following are some additional data worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report

cards, school ratings by local news media, specialized websites, etc.

- Local community demographics: National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts>) and local county/city/town websites
- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>)
- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>)

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

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

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

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

Plan

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

- **Develop Objectives.** In the planning phase, SPS will begin by articulating clear, long-term goals and shorter-term measurable objectives for communication and engagement based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Measurable objectives build trust by establishing accountability.

When developing objectives, make sure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). An example of a measurable objective might be “By the end of the 2023-24 school year, at least 50% of staff and parents will indicate in a survey that they believe there are ample opportunities to share their opinions and views with SPS leadership.”

- **Determine Strategies.** Strategies describe how you will reach your objectives, and tactics describe the specific elements (e.g., tools, activities, timing) that will be done to implement the strategy. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier for staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For the example objective in the prior bullet, following is an example strategy:
 - Strategy: “Develop a superintendent listening campaign for the 2023-24 school year.”
- **Create Key Messages.** For each target audience, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the

communications and use that information to build targeted key messages. People's attention span and time is limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategy in the prior bullet, following is an example key message:

- Key Message: We want to know what is on the minds of our parents, staff and community members, and we are committed to creating easy ways for you to share your views.

- **Identify Stakeholder Groups.**

Stakeholder groups, or target audiences, are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district and its initiatives. A strategic communication plan often has a unique set of strategies, tactics and key messages for each stakeholder group. Following are some common stakeholders for schools:

- Parents broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and secondary) or by another identifier (e.g., "active/involved," "non-English-speaking," etc.)
- Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals
- Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents
- Elected officials
- Non-parents, including empty nesters, seniors and other community members without children in SPS
- High school students
- Local media representatives

- **Identify strategies for engaging with each stakeholder group.** This will be a key area for the Center of Engagement to contribute to the effort. The best messages in the world are not effective if they do not reach and are not understood by the intended audiences.

- **Establish Tactics and Tools.** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. Consider also any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:
 - Equipment/software
 - Materials and supplies
 - Printing and duplicating
 - Advertising (digital, print, broadcast)
 - Professional development
 - Staff travel
 - Subscriptions
 - Professional dues/fees
- **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of the implementation process, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to determine if the plan requires modification.
- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic under a strategy, determine who will be responsible for its deployment. This is an especially important step for SPS because the work is being handled by two departments.

As SPS works through the planning process, staff should reflect on the following questions for each objective and allow the answers to guide the selection of communication strategies and tactics:

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know?
- When do they need to know?

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

Implement

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

Evaluate

When creating the strategic communication plan, identify evaluative measures to be used later to determine the success in achieving the stated goals and objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. This data may also become the basis of research findings to inform future updates to the strategic communication plan.

NSPRA offers a number of resources that will help SPS develop a strategic communication plan. First, watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on “Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan” available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at <https://www.nsprapro.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans>. The webpage also contains communication plan templates.

Then review these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:

- [Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program](#), Pattonville School District, Saint Ann, Mo. (about 6,000 students)

- [Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan](#), Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools (about 16,000 students)

Additionally, review the [Strategic Communications and Engagement Plan](#) developed by the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, Canada, following a 2017 NSPRA Communication Audit. The plan for the district, which enrolls about 50,000 students, is available at this link: <https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/about/media/strategic-communications-and-engagement-plan/>

Action Step 1.3 (OPA)

Make a plan for crisis communications.

SPS has a comprehensive crisis management plan in place that incorporates communication elements, but no specific crisis communication plan exists. Formal crisis communication plans are a key planning element of highly effective school communication programs. The Office of Public Affairs should explore developing a crisis component for its overall strategic communication plan or developing a separate, robust crisis communication plan, as a complimentary (but division-specific) tool to the district’s crisis management plan.

A crisis communication plan should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels. Members of the Office of Public Affairs already take charge of various communication responsibilities in the event of a major district crisis. Those responsibilities should be formally designated and delineated in the crisis communication plan, along with any plans for who is expected to handle or support crisis communications at the building level.

In addition, explore these elements when developing the crisis communication plan:

- **What should be in communication staffers’ go-bags?** The list might include ensuring Wi-Fi hotspots are available, a list of administrators’ mobile numbers, login information for all communication

platforms, cell phone chargers, a list of local media and their phone numbers, and a list of public information officers for local emergency responders and their contact information.

- **What pre-drafted messages about potential crises are or could be prepared and made easily adaptable for quicker dissemination?** View one district's example of crisis messaging templates for school leaders at <https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/PR%20Resources%20Section/Samples%20and%20Resources/Principal%20Comm%20Templates%202018.pdf?ver=2mwpER09ojIKGOsVb3gc9w%3d%3d>.
- What are the likely media holding/press briefing areas for different types of crises? Key players in the crisis communications response may need to have easy access to mobile podiums and district signage for use in unexpected press briefing locations. Encourage flexibility with the pre-established procedures when responding to an incident.

Be sure communications staff can practice their plan and are included when SPS has crisis response trainings for administrators, educators and first responders.

Recommendation 2:

Build trust by nurturing a culture of two-way communication throughout the district.

A frequent theme in the focus groups and SCoPE Survey comments was a strong perception that the district communication is self-serving, and a related perception, that the district is not interested in feedback from its stakeholders. Meanwhile, in conversations with auditors, district leaders made it clear that they do care very much about listening to staff, parents and the community. The disconnect appears to arise at least in part because leaders have not articulated their commitment to two-way communication or created a specific communication plan for sharing this commitment with stakeholders.

As noted earlier in the report, engagement plays a critical role in determining how receptive stakeholders are to communication being sent by the district, and while many of the action steps below may fall more heavily on the engagement team than the public affairs team, this is another area where it is critical for the two divisions to work together.

SPS has a [Research and Evaluation Department](#) that has the stated goal of “collaborating with educators, students, families, and university partners—listening to and uplifting the stories of our communities.” Yet, despite this commitment to formal processes of gathering information for data-driven decision making, the system as a whole is not conveying this value to the community or giving them enough opportunities to feel heard.

Listening to stakeholders and truly honoring all voices builds trust and leads to consensus; whereas the perception that the district is not genuinely interested in the views of its constituents creates a lack of trust and leads to higher levels of controversy and reactivity.

[Edelman](#) is a global communications firm that partners with businesses and organizations to

evolve, promote and protect their brands and reputations. One of their tools is the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), an annual global survey of more than 32,000 respondents in 28 countries that covers a range of timely and important societal indicators of trust among business, media, government and NGOs. According to Edelman, “If you go into a crisis as a distrusted company [or organization], it takes only 1-2 negative stories for a person to believe negative news. If you go in as a trusted company, it takes only 1-2 positive stories for you to achieve belief. Trust is a protective agent, a facilitator of action.”

Nurturing a culture of two-way communication is an example of an initiative that cannot be accomplished by the Office of Public Affairs alone. It requires permeating the entire district with the idea that listening and responding are an expected part of the SPS culture. Following are action steps aimed at expanding opportunities for two-way communication within the SPS community.

Action Step 2.1 (OPA/CFE)

Be transparent about the outcome of the communication audit process with focus group participants as well as the board, staff, families and the community.

In SPS, focus group participants in particular will be interested in the outcome of this audit process and the district’s plans for moving forward. Staff focus group participants felt they could provide key information to help administrators understand the implications of rolling out a new program or communicating a decision. Parents suggested that asking for input would make them feel heard and appreciated. Closing the communication loop with individuals who offer feedback, like these, is an important step in building trust and credibility.



Develop a plan to clearly outline how the audit results will be communicated. In the plan, include methods for telling stakeholders why the district conducted the audit, how it is taking the findings to heart and what the district's next steps will be in response to those findings. Be sure to include strategies that will allow stakeholders to be a part of the improvement processes through ongoing feedback. This kind of transparency will demonstrate that SPS leaders prioritize two-way communications and engagement with stakeholders.

The Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Engagement should collaborate in developing the plan for sharing the results of this audit, which might include tactics such as sending emails to staff and focus group participants, posting information on the website and issuing news releases. Also consider the following:

- Sharing and discussing the results at department and school staff meetings.
- Sharing and discussing the results during parent meetings.
- Sharing and discussing the results with non-English speaking parents during meetings hosted by district interpreters.
- Using a crowd-sourcing feedback tool such as ThoughtExchange so that feedback can be categorized and shared.
- Using the existing Let's Talk customer service platform to capture and direct questions and feedback related to communications.

Find examples of how other districts have shared their communication audit results at these links:

- Reynolds School District, Fairview, Ore.—<https://www.reynolds.k12.or.us/communications/2022-communications-audit>
- Bellevue (Wash.) School District—<https://bsd405.org/2021/03/bellevue-school-district-taking-steps-to-improve-overall-communications-engagement-with-families-staff/>

#2

Build trust by nurturing a culture of two-way communication throughout the district.

Action Step 2.2 (OPA/CFE)

Review and update school board policies related to communications.

Although some school board [policies related to communications](#) were updated in 2018 and 2022 (4070sp, 4205sp, and 4218sp), many of them have not been updated recently. A thorough review of and update to existing policies related to communication, particularly in light of this audit report, would provide the board with an opportunity to demonstrate the district's commitment to providing accurate, transparent and timely information to its stakeholders as well as its desire to engage in constructive engagement on topics of importance to the community. Even if the policies are not changed significantly, doing such a review gives the board and the public an opportunity to take input from stakeholders and reconsider what the standards should be.

The board should also give consideration to developing an overarching policy on communication. This will give SPS an opportunity to succinctly state its philosophy and expectations regarding communications and will serve as a foundation for all other policies related to specific facets of communication.

The following is a sample of the beginning of a school board policy establishing communication as a priority, in alignment with the SPS mission:

The Seattle Public Schools Board of Directors believes that planned, two-way communication is the foundation of a strong relationship between the district and the

community. It is the responsibility of each board member and each SPS employee to actively build positive long-term relationships with community members to support the personal and intellectual success of every student every day.

Such a general statement could be followed by a list of specific expectations:

We will engage the community in the mission of our schools by:

- 1. Providing accurate, timely information.*
- 2. Requesting feedback on important issues.*
- 3. Involving affected stakeholder groups in the problem-solving/decision-making process whenever possible.*
- 4. Listening to the ideas and viewpoints of citizens.*
- 5. Adhering to a practice of open, honest communication with our citizens and news media.*

The Washington State School Directors' Association may be able to provide [model policies](#) to consider. As another example, check out [Policy KB: Public Information Program](#) from Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools.

For additional inspiration, check out the new “Communication Standards” recently developed by the Communications and Community Engagement team for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board in Ontario, Canada, at <https://www.hwdsb.on.ca/about/media/communication-standards/>.

Action Step 2.3 (OPA)

Make the assistant superintendent of public affairs a member of the Superintendent's Cabinet.

The superintendent can directly supervise only a limited number of staff. However, it should be noted that school districts with the most effective communications and those

recognized for strong two-way engagement processes have a reporting structure in which the top public relations/communications position reports directly to the superintendent and oversees both communication and engagement. As noted in Action Step 1.1, a change in reporting structure may also include reimagining the position as a chief communications and community engagement officer.

The top communications officer for any school district might be thought of as “chief listener.” In order to hear and respond to the community, it is critical for the superintendent to have easy access to the professional serving in the communications role and vice versa. This critical relationship should be one where the superintendent values and trusts the advice and counsel of the assistant superintendent of public affairs. Similarly the assistant superintendent of public affairs should know the superintendent well enough to anticipate leader reactions to various situations. The more layers that exist between a superintendent and the position overseeing communication, the more likely it is that an opportunity to convey a key message will be missed or that an emerging issue will not be addressed in a timely and effective manner.

The position responsible for communication should serve as the right-hand of the superintendent, scanning the landscape, monitoring feedback from stakeholders, anticipating situations, suggesting strategies when questions arise and ensuring that the organizational structure supports efficient, timely and accurate communication. In many districts, the person in the lead communications role attends community functions with the superintendent and becomes a recognized ambassador. This provides a helpful back-up for the superintendent and adds depth to the community's understanding of the district, which in turns results in more targeted and effective messaging.

Action Step 2.4 (CFE)

Continue to develop and implement listening campaigns.

Topic-specific listening campaigns can be useful for gaining feedback on particular issues and initiatives. They can also be developed as a plan for general, ongoing means of encouraging two-way communication between SPS and its many stakeholders. This promotes greater engagement in local schools by all members of the community.

Following are suggested topics for potential listening campaigns:

- **Develop a listening campaign to dive deeper into the issues identified in this communication audit.** Throughout the remainder of this school year and the next, take the opportunity to continue the conversations started in the focus groups. Promote the campaign with a slogan such as “People First” that identifies the “listeners” (the superintendent, board of directors, department leaders, principals, etc.) and the “voices” (employees, parents, students, etc.) Use these opportunities to increase the district’s understanding of concerns brought forth through this audit, while demonstrating the district’s commitment to responding to those concerns.
 - **Schedule a listening tour for the superintendent to meet with external stakeholders.** On a regular basis, provide the superintendent with opportunities to meet with diverse groups of constituents. Besides schools, these meetings might take place in public libraries, community centers or even local coffee shops so stakeholders can meet with the superintendent off the district’s “turf.”
 - Provide a structure for the conversations and increase the appeal for potential attendees by designating specific topics; few people are willing to take time out of their busy schedules for a meeting with no clear purpose.
- For example, one session might focus on safety issues, another might focus on the district’s stance regarding social media.
- Make it clear that the purpose of these listening opportunities is to hear from stakeholders, not to make decisions; honor the school district’s chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.
 - The assistant superintendent of public affairs, or a substitute communications staff member if not available, should attend as a way to increase environmental scanning for potential communication issues, to be able to act as a strategic communication adviser, and to ensure the listening opportunities are well-promoted—before and after—via the district’s communication channels.
- **Schedule listening opportunities for the superintendent at school and department staff meetings.** An example from the similarly-sized district Salem-Keizer Public Schools in Oregon may be helpful to consider. Its superintendent began offering “Live with Christy” virtual events that were very popular with employees. Similar “Live with Dr. Jones” events could focus on a particular topic and give employees the opportunity to interact with the superintendent. It is vital for staff stakeholders to have an opportunity to meet him in person or in a small-group virtual setting. The live capabilities of SPS TV could be utilized for this. The format could include taking 5-10 minutes to provide a brief update on district issues and then using the remaining time to solicit staff comments and concerns. There might be a specific topic to focus on, but it is also useful to ask for comments on issues or topics that are top-of-mind for stakeholders. Gathering input in this manner can inform decisions, clarify rumors and put a human

face to an organization that is perceived as a bureaucracy.

Action Step 2.5 (OPA)

Develop an infographic to help employees understand and remember the importance of two-way communication.

Consider developing a simple infographic to share with employees that explains the difference between two-way and one-way communication. This might be done initially as a digital or print flier shared with all staff, though ideally it would be provided in a setting that allows for discussion such as a training session. A more complex graphic might be posted as a colorful poster in employee break rooms, but a simpler graphic could be worked into fun collateral such as magnets.



Boston (Mass.) Public Schools developed a “A Model for One-Way and Two-Way Communication” handout to share with staff as a reminder to both listen and explain. View it at this link: <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/112/model%20for%20one-way%20and%20two-way%20communication.pdf>

This tactic emphasizes and reinforces the principle that every staff person has a responsibility to communicate on behalf of the district.

Action Step 2.6 (CFE)

Offer more opportunities for dialogue between the Board of Directors and the public.

When the public and the school board gather for conversations, it can build trust in elected officials and lead to long-term support for education initiatives. While directors hold Community Meetings, auditors heard from some stakeholders that they were not aware of how to connect with board directors.

- **Publicize regularly scheduled Community Meetings.** Although these meetings are being held already, not all stakeholders are hearing about them. Consider additional channels to spread the word.
- **Hold Topical Community Meetings.** Offer opportunities for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversations about the school system with school board members and administrators on designated topics such as raising academic performance, student health and wellness issues, state legislation affecting schools, operational budgets, upcoming bond proposals, etc. Position the meetings as informal opportunities to gather opinions and listen to public concerns about specific issues; be clear that it is not a venue for formal decision-making. Board members could rotate attendance so that a quorum is not called.
- **Adopt Schools.** Have each school board member “adopt” one or more school campuses to pay closer attention to and be seen there on a more regular basis. The district size makes it impractical for all school campuses to be adopted each year, but rotating campuses annually can give board members a broader, firsthand experience with their district.
- **Promote How to Write the Board.** The auditors easily found individual email addresses for board members on the district website as well as the online form for sending questions and comments to the entire board. Nevertheless, the auditors heard from some community members that they don’t know how to reach out to the board. Periodically, SPS should let the community know through its various communication channels how to provide feedback to the board. This may not increase the amount of input the board receives, but it will be a reminder to the community that their input is valued.

Action Step 2.7 (OPA/CFE)

Increase methods for stakeholders to communicate with district leaders and raise awareness about how to use these resources effectively.

Although SPS has a cloud-based feedback tool, *Let's Talk*, that is designed to centralize and streamline community feedback and response to questions and concerns, it is not clear to auditors that stakeholders are fully aware of it or understand how to use it effectively.

Additionally, numerous stakeholders complained of not knowing how to email or reach staff members at the district level. The auditors noted that while every department's web page has some kind of "contact us" button, clicking on it usually takes the user to a forms box, which feels more like how one communicates with an impersonal corporation rather than a community-based school district.

Opportunities for simplifying and leveraging the use of these and other tools include the following:

- Establish protocols for processing and responding to comments received via *Let's Talk* that avoid bottlenecks in the Office of Public Affairs, as described in the [Key Findings](#). Once these protocols are in place, use a mix of communication channels and targeted messaging to let stakeholders know why and how to use it along with what to expect from its use.
- Many large, urban districts that do not want inquiries to only go to one specific person offer generic email addresses, such as calendar@, sped@, enrollment@. This is a good strategy for providing an email contact that can be easily remembered and routed to multiple staff members.
- The crowd-sourced feedback platform [ThoughtExchange](#) is used by an increasing number of school districts to solicit feedback from large groups of respondents on a particular topic so that their responses are rated by the group,

easily categorized and instantly shared. Participants can read one another's answers and see which thoughts rise to the top for priorities, which helps build community understanding.

- Flash surveys with only one question embedded in a newsletter or on social media can be used to avoid survey fatigue. Over time, you can gather a bank of data on various topics that is useful for guiding communication and decisions.

Recommendation 3:

Increase information access and transparency around decision-making processes.

Building on the need for stronger two-way communication, this recommendation focuses on the specific need to gather input when important changes or decisions are being made. NSPRA's audits of school districts large and small often show that it is impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of all groups when school system leaders must make a decision that will impact multiple stakeholder groups with diverse and varying perspectives. However, even with universal agreement with a decision being unlikely, decisions do not need to be seen as a zero-sum game.

Districts that aim for public consent around the decision-making process avoid the perception of winners and losers. In other words, the goal is that all stakeholders affected by a decision are aware that the decision-making process was fair and reasonable, even if they don't like the outcome. A comment made by a parent on the SCoPE Survey articulates what many stakeholders expressed to auditors: "What SPS should do is tell the public what big decision the district is getting ready to make. Don't bury it on a website where nobody can find it. Then they should have ways that citizens can offer their opinions."

Building public confidence in the decision-making process of a school system is not without challenges, and struggles to ensure that all voices are heard are not unique to SPS. NSPRA auditors consistently hear from parents, teachers and support staff in many districts that they feel their feedback is neither wanted nor considered during decision-making processes—even when formally collected through surveys and community meetings. In SPS, multiple focus group participants commented that "making a lot of noise" is the best way to influence a decision because they feel they are not heard otherwise. The downsides are that

noisy debates can often become unproductive, distracting, erode trust and create a time drain on staff that can interrupt other important work.

Increasing transparency around decision-making processes is one powerful way to minimize divisiveness and build consent. Once consent for the process is earned, supporters of the decision are more confident in their agreement and detractors are more willing to go along with the outcome because they understand why it was necessary, even if they don't like it.

The following action steps should be considered for making the decision-making process more intentional and transparent, while also creating capacity for stakeholder participation.

Action Step 3.1 (CFE)

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

Not all decisions require public input. When deciding how to include stakeholders in the decision-making process, keep these general tips in mind.

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

#3

Increase information access and transparency around decision-making processes.

of input simply because few people agree with it.

- If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to state mandates or budget constraints for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, the focus should be on building understanding around the situation that led to the particular decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.
- **Give public input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Asking for input and then appearing to ignore it is one of the quickest ways to cause stakeholders to disengage from a school system. Sometimes school system leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, based on their intimate knowledge of the schools or their professional expertise. But if they choose to seek input from stakeholders before finalizing the decision, and if that input favors a different solution or choice, they must truly listen to the input and consider the alternative options.
 - Respecting stakeholders and giving their input due consideration does not mean their suggestions must be followed. For example, their alternative ideas could be researched and feedback could be given regarding what those ideas would actually cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.
 - If the stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.
 - When reflecting on public input, always be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a relatively small or large portion of the community. Do not speak dismissively

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. System leaders may be gathering the input to help make a more informed decision and may be considering a much wider scope of input beyond one particular group. To avoid confusion, clearly explain why the group's input is being sought, how it will be used and who ultimately will make the final decision. Defining these positions up front will make it less likely that those providing input misunderstand and become frustrated with their roles.

Action Step 3.2 (OPA/CFE)

Develop consistent systems for communicating pending decisions, identifying stakeholders who should provide input and creating strategies for reaching them.

The process of keeping stakeholders informed begins before the decision-making process has begun and continues during and after the decision is made. If employees or staff don't know a change is being considered, they can't give input. Seeking input starts with sharing information.

Consider incorporating communication protocol questions into discussions of major

decisions. These questions can be used as a regular component of the superintendent's cabinet meetings and adapted for department, school-level and advisory council/committee meetings as well.

Ask the group to consider the following:

- **What is the issue or problem?**
Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem and the specifics that stakeholders need to know about it.
- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem and how it will be presented to stakeholders.
- **How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district.
- **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue. They are the ones directly (or perceived to be directly) affected by it.
- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.
- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.
- **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.

- **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson with news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

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

Action Step 3.3 (CFE)

Elicit staff input for major decisions through "rounding" conversations.

The practice of "rounding" is not evaluative like a survey would be, but it is a quick way to gather input from staff while building familiarity with issues and demonstrating that administrators care about staff members and their input. Rounding conversations are useful for major and potentially controversial decisions, but can also be used successfully for smaller issues that may only affect a single department.

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

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

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

By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, SPS leaders will expand

the ownership of change and contribute positively to employees' feelings of being valued team members.

Action Step 3.4 (CFE)

Seek input from a variety of staff voices and perspectives.

One of the challenges of effective engagement is to broaden the voices that are included in any engagement process. It is tempting to go back to the same people who always respond when a request for input is made rather than to seek new and different voices from people that are otherwise less likely to get involved. However, with the goal of honoring all voices, it is important for SPS to be intentional about who is invited to participate in its decision-making processes.

It is also important to engage all types of employees and parents. With employees, that may be remembering to seek input from classified support staff. While support staff may not have input to share on certain curricular topics, there are many other topics where they can participate and provide depth and breadth in the type of input that is collected. With parents, it may mean placing phone calls to non-English speaking parents to invite their participation and ask them how participation can be made convenient for them.

When engaging in a decision-making process, consider which stakeholders may be directly affected by the decision as well as those who may perceive themselves or those they care about to be affected by it, directly or indirectly. Make sure representatives of those stakeholders groups are reflected among the voices heard during input-gathering stages. These individuals are most likely to be able to help identify the potential challenges caused by a pending decision, giving district and school leaders the opportunity to develop ideas for overcoming those challenges.

Action Step 3.5 (OPA/CFE)

Increase and enhance progress updates throughout the input-gathering phase of the decision-making process.

While the Office of Public Affairs already provides regular updates when seeking broad input on a decision, best practices from other NSPRA districts offer creative ways to expand the process. Consider creating "What We Heard" features in various school communications to highlight the status, results and next steps regarding recent public input requests. These could take the form of brief videos on websites and social media or encouraging principals, department heads and other system leaders to share "What We Heard" information with their staff during meetings.

In these updates, include information on how stakeholders are, were or can be involved in the decision-making process as well as on how their input has been or will be used. Acknowledge and thank those who participated in the public input process, remind them of the general areas in which they provided feedback, share a few notable findings, tell them where to find summary results if they are available online, and let them know what will happen next in the decision-making process. Acknowledge that not all input may be actionable, but it is still valuable in helping school system leaders understand the public's concerns.

Action Step 3.6 (OPA)

Expand the sharing of data used when announcing a change or new initiative.

Communications staff report that they regularly share the data used by leaders to make major decisions, but auditors observed that messaging around decision rationales is not getting through to stakeholders. Both internal and external perceptions can be true, and this suggests a communication gap to address.

One approach to closing this gap is expanding on how information about the data used in

decision-making processes is shared. Consider using infographics, videos and informational meetings, as well as more traditional news articles or emails for example, to explain the rationale for a decision in clear, easy-to-understand ways. Explain to stakeholders the genesis for specific actions, keep them apprised of next steps and report on outcomes to build trust and confidence in leadership.

Having the proper context for a decision may not change a stakeholder's support for it, but understanding why the decision was made can create informed consent or the grudging willingness to go along with the idea. In other words: "I might not like it, but I get why it's necessary, so I won't fight you on it."

When stakeholders see evidence of their input being valued—rather than simply being told that it is—they also will be more willing to answer future requests for input. Sharing the results of this communication audit report with all focus group participants ([Action Step 2.1](#)) is a great first step for the district to show it uses public input.

issues. The campaign involved capturing the voices of students, local business leaders and higher education leaders; surveying staff and the community; holding town hall meetings; and other strategies to engage stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Action Step 3.7 (OPA/CFE)

Continue to review and seek inspiration from award-winning communication and engagement campaigns on other districts' decision-making processes.

For more inspiration, following are two examples of school systems that created and successfully implemented a plan to build informed consent for their decision-making process and for the resulting decision:

- [Racine Unified School District](#) earned a 2018 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for a school transformation campaign that engaged stakeholders in the decision-making process through focus groups, online surveys, a Kaizen event and more.
- [Alexandria City Public Schools](#) earned a 2019 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for its campaign to address high school capacity

Recommendation 4:

Provide regular time for team building, situation debriefs, team reflection, project planning and professional development within the Office of Public Affairs, and in partnership with the Center for Engagement.

Auditors identified several factors that consistently impair effective ongoing communication in SPS:

1. A near-constant cycle of reacting to major and minor unanticipated events.
2. Fear of saying the wrong thing.
3. Lack of documented procedures for developing communications.

School districts cannot avoid the unexpected—snowstorms will happen, power outages will occur, and teachers and staff will make mistakes that are aired in public. And, in a district the size of SPS, the number of incidents to be dealt with increases exponentially. Dealing with one crisis after another is draining, emotions run high and no one wants to have a misinterpreted word splashed across local media or go viral on social media.

Following best practices to build strong, confident cohesive teams will go a long way toward reducing stress and will allow for the development of practices that will help the team prepare for and respond to incidents as they occur. It will also help to create the time and capacity for long-range, strategic planning that might otherwise remain on the back burner.

Even the most talented professionals need opportunities to learn, grow and gain confidence in their judgments. The action steps below are designed to build new practices for

the Office of Public Affairs that will build their professional skills and empower them to train others throughout the organization.

Action Step 4.1 (OPA/CFE)

Plan a retreat for staff to review the audit report and begin developing a comprehensive communication plan.

Auditors heard from Office of Public Affairs staff that one of the biggest challenges in tackling the large issue of district reputation is a lack of time for planning:

“We are always in reactive mode,” said one, “responding to some crisis or another, and then after the crisis passes, we never come together to debrief to figure out what was good, what was bad or what should be changed. We never have an opportunity to come together or the opportunity to talk about those things.”



Auditors understand and applaud that the practice of an Office of Public Affairs team retreat will be resumed this summer. They further suggest that at least part of the retreat includes staff from the Center for Engagement so that both groups have the time and distraction-free space needed for intensive discussion about the contents of the report as well as what SPS will specifically do in response. An off-site retreat, ideally on a date when schools are not in session, will allow communications staff to analyze and absorb the findings and recommendations in this report. The report provides a significant amount of information, and day-to-day pressures can easily become a hurdle to its careful consideration. Consider asking a local partner company or service agency to donate the use of conference room space for these discussions.

Have staff read the audit report, survey comments and any resulting corrective action plans in advance of the retreat so they are prepared to discuss findings and recommendations related to their specific areas of responsibility.

Following are items to consider including on the retreat agenda:

- Take staff through a SWOT analysis exercise, similar to the one [included in this report](#), but focused solely on the Office of Public Affairs.
- On large chart paper, have staff list current tasks for the department and then use different colored dot stickers to identify which tasks they see as high, medium and low priority or, alternatively, as items to keep, update or toss. Use this work to collaboratively identify the department's top priorities.
- From this exercise, make a list of tasks that can be eliminated. This will be challenging, but think of it like cleaning out a closet and determining what no longer fits, is worn out or is out of style. Perhaps some time-consuming tasks are no longer adding value and another task will yield more results in helping the district achieve its goals.
- Begin to sketch out the framework of a new communication and engagement plan to address the department's top priorities.

After several years of necessary reactive communications and leadership change, carving out this time will provide an opportunity for staff to bond as a team and reorganize. An off-site retreat also will provide a solid starting point for developing a strategic communication plan (see [Action Step 1.2](#)) and ensuring all staff understand their roles in the implementation of that plan. When held annually, a departmental retreat allows communication staff to regularly review, plan and brainstorm activities, events and storytelling opportunities.

#4

Provide regular time for team building, situation debriefs, team reflection, project planning and professional development within the Office of Public Affairs, and in partnership with the Center for Engagement.

Action Step 4.2 (OPA)

Continue to schedule, hold and enhance standing meetings for each department reporting to the assistant superintendent of public affairs.

Staff meetings get a bad reputation when held regularly but without purpose, leading participants to feel they are pro-forma time wasters. It's been said to never hold a meeting that could have been an email.

However, when used as a tool for collaborative thinking and employee engagement in planning departmental activities, regular staff meetings are an excellent platform for inspiring new ideas, solving challenges and building greater connections as a team.

Keep this productive focus in mind both for individual meetings within the four departments that report to the assistant superintendent of public affairs (Customer Service, Communications, SPS TV and EPD, Web Services Team) and for full division meetings. Consider meeting as individual departments at least bi-weekly and then jointly as a division at



least monthly. Enhance the meetings by using them as an opportunity to:

- Discuss the status of current projects and issues to ensure that there is no duplication of effort and that those responsible for various tasks are working in collaboration;
- Share challenges and opportunities on the horizon, including notice of a potential issue or project that may involve one or more of the departments; and
- Review current tasks in light of division and department priorities, as well as the goals of the district, to ensure progress is also being made on those fronts.

Action Step 4.3 (OPA)

Hold debrief meetings as a division after each unanticipated crisis involving communications.

Once a crisis has passed, relief sets in and it may be tempting to move on and not take the time to identify lessons learned. Failing to debrief, though, creates the possibility of repeating mistakes, or even worse, not establishing new practices based on what went well.

SPS is not alone in this challenge. NSPRA often hears from audit clients that setting aside time to meet regularly for debriefing on past events and planning ahead for future events can feel impossible in the midst of what feels like non-stop crises. However, districts that establish a solid practice of debriefing after each crisis see stress levels reduced and have greater confidence in dealing with future incidents.

Knowing what to say in a difficult situation takes practice and requires training, and these debriefs are perfect opportunities to role play how things might be said or done differently if a similar situation were to occur in the future. It also helps the group to define (or refine) protocols so there is less guesswork on what the right approach is when a similar crisis occurs.

Action Step 4.4 (OPA)

Ensure that the Office of Public Affairs team has access to professional development opportunities in their field.

Ongoing professional development is foundational in public education and a contractual requirement for most educators and administrators. School districts know well the value of regularly investing in their teaching workforce to ensure the latest and best educational practices are understood and in practice. Similarly, highly effective communication programs require highly skilled professionals who receive ongoing professional development in the latest and best communication practices.

In discussions with staff from the Office of Public Affairs, auditors learned that they have very limited opportunities for professional development. When asked whether they attend conferences or trainings, they were told that each staff member can spend up to \$500 to attend a workshop or training, but there is no established line item or budget for professional development. During performance evaluations, staff are encouraged to build training into their annual performance goals, with the caveat that they are responsible for any expenses beyond the \$500 stipend.

Auditors encourage SPS to ensure that communications employees are receiving opportunities to grow professionally and expand their skill sets. This is an investment in the district's communication function as well as a tool for increasing employees' engagement in their work, division and district. Training might be provided internally as mini-PD opportunities during monthly staff meetings or externally by bringing in outside field experts or by attending state or national training workshops and conferences. Also consider cross-training, where team members internally train another colleague on essential functions that might be required during an absence.

Only two members of the Office of Public Affairs staff are current members of NSPRA. This may leave the rest of the department missing out on members-only resources such as free monthly webinars on industry topics, on-demand training videos, sample messaging during national crisis events, archives of award-winning campaigns from other districts, resources for common school communication issues and access to an exclusive online community for sharing samples and brainstorming challenges. Washington is also home to a chapter of NSPRA, the [Washington School Public Relations Association](#), which offers local training workshops, conferences, networking opportunities, webinars, online resources and more.

Within the division, consider having discussions with staff members—individually with managers and as a group—about where they would like to grow more professionally and which resources they feel might best help them do so.

Recommendation 5:

Streamline and clarify the communication infrastructure.

The NSPRA Communication Audit process involves looking not just at how communication flows from one department but also how it flows throughout a school system, internally and externally, top to bottom and back. SPS has a complex communication infrastructure, and numerous employees commented that information is siloed and does not always flow efficiently and equitably within the system. Further, the staff responsible for official district communications report often feeling overwhelmed by frequent crises.

The governance structure for communications in SPS is framed by formal school board policies ([Action Step 2.2](#)); how responsibilities are shared across divisions, departments and roles ([Recommendation 1](#), [Action Steps 5.4-5.7](#)); and procedures within the Office of Public Affairs (see [Recommendation 4](#)). However, strengthening communications in SPS as an official task will also require a rigorous self-evaluation by OPA of how much division staff time is spent on communication tasks of varying priority levels. This will empower staff to make data-based decisions on whether some lower priority, less impactful tasks can be eliminated or altered to create more time for higher priority, more impactful tasks.

Going beyond the division, though, it is critical to establish clear lines of responsibility for how information flows from and to departments and buildings. Auditors heard many comments that suggest confusion among administrators and staff about who is responsible for releasing information and answering questions. Additionally, some departments reportedly launch their own communication tools independently of OPA and its procedures. It is important to clarify and delineate communication roles and the expected flow of information for administrative leaders and frontline staff, who serve as unofficial but vital communicators for SPS.

Action Step 5.1 (OPA)

Address information overload by re-examining which channels are used for disseminating various types of news and announcements, and by providing regular reminders and training opportunities on the district's preferred communication channels.

An area of challenge that showed up more strongly in comments on the SCoPE Survey than in focus groups is the problem of over communicating. Information overload is not a problem unique to SPS, but it warrants serious attention because it can cause stakeholders to tune out and miss information.

To address this challenge, the first steps for any school system are to identify and assess the communication channels currently in use systemwide and then to select a preferred set of channels. The Office of Public Affairs reports that it has already taken these steps, which is a positive base on which to build. That list of preferred channels should now be reviewed in light of the [Key Findings](#) in this report to ensure the chosen tools align with the new data on stakeholder preferences.

The review effort also should include reflection on the answers to these questions:

- How do staff—particularly the frontline communicators such as administrators, teachers and office administrative assistants—know what communication tools to use for which situations?
- How do parents, families and students know which tools to turn to for SPS communications in which situations?
- What opportunities do staff have to be trained (or refreshed) on how, when and how often to use the preferred communication tools?
- Are the preferred tools used consistently by staff across SPS, from building to building and throughout the full K-12 experience?

When stakeholders know what communications to expect where and when, and when they feel the communications apply to them personally, they are more likely to consume the messages they receive. For a school district, that translates to more well-informed and engaged staff and families.

Following are additional steps SPS can take to provide consistency in its communication processes while reducing stakeholders' sense of communication overload:

- **Establish a common framework for communications.** The Office of Public Affairs produces a comprehensive toolkit for school leaders, administrators and staff that provides information on how SPS communicates with families, tips for communicating with the media, and tips for effective newsletter, web and social media communication. While this tool offers an excellent overview of the communication tools that are available and how to use them effectively, as far as auditors could discern, training is minimal and should be expanded. Ensure staff also know which staff communication tools are preferred for which buildings/grade levels, how frequently (or infrequently) the tools should be used, which general situations are appropriate for their use and where to turn for assistance and/or training. Osceola (Fl.) School District developed such a guide for its staff, and the guide can be viewed in the Training section of NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) for association members at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff>.
- **Send text messages to alert recipients to important emails.** A text message is more likely to be seen within a few minutes of delivery, particularly by teaching staff who may not access their email until the end of the day. Remind parents regularly how to opt in to receive text messages and how to update their mobile phone numbers with the district.

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Streamline and clarify the communication infrastructure.

The auditors heard that the reason many parents didn't receive text messages is because they were not aware they had not opted in to receive them.

Find excellent tips on which communication channels to use in various situations in the blog post "How to Choose the Right Communication Channel for Every Task" at <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/channels-of-communication/>.

Action Step 5.2 (OPA)

Consider new ways to guide the public on how to access information they are seeking.

Auditors heard feedback from numerous participants that finding information is difficult. SPS has a user-friendly *I Want to...* section on the district homepage that is designed to provide more intuitive navigation options for the average user. The Office of Public Affairs also shared that it produces a flyer for the public on how it communicates. In addition to these tactics, consider other ways to provide this type of simplified guidance for stakeholders such as printed flyers for new family/employee welcome packets and digital graphics for inclusion in school newsletters.

This information could help guide stakeholders, including staff dealing with parents' questions, to the appropriate source of communications. Interestingly, a similar idea was suggested by a parent in the SCoPE Survey: "[...] produce a 'getting started' guide for new families that explains all the different tools and what they're used for—how to register for classes, how to find your student's ID, how

to manage communication preferences and where to find information, how to get help from individual departments, like college counseling.”

Find an example of this type of guide, the How We Communicate With Families flyer, from the Lake Stevens (Wash.) School District available in the Customer Service section of NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) site for members at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Customer-Service>.

Action Step 5.3 (OPA)

Track and evaluate how much time is being spent on various communication tasks and services.

Office of Public Affairs staff need to know how much time is spent on current tasks and services in order to find time to introduce new efforts that may better support the highest priority communication goals. Tacking time may feel onerous, but the data provides useful information for increasing operational efficiency.



Today many NSPRA members on multi-person communication teams—as well as NSPRA staff themselves—report using online project management tools such as Basecamp, Trello, Asana and Monday.com to increase collaboration and work efficiency for in-person and remote staff while improving a team's ability to meet deadlines. These tools also can be useful in tracking who and how much time is devoted to each ongoing task or special project. Some even include timer integrations for generating personalized time sheets. These tools allow for a quick assessment of the status of a team's workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary.

Collecting this data and reflecting on it, perhaps quarterly, would allow the communication team to continue to evaluate their operational efficiency and determine

which tasks take valuable time away from communication priorities.

Once the time on tasks is known, consider how well each task aligns with the new strategic communication plan by having the team discuss questions such as:

- What district strategic plan goal does the task or service support?
- What division goal and objective does each task or service support?
- How critical is the program, task or service to strategic communication goals?
- If eliminated, how much staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives would be freed up?

Based on the results of that conversation, each program, task and service should be labeled as “high priority” (do first), “low priority” (do next), “eliminate” or “save for later” when staff time allows. This brainstorming conversation might happen in person, with diagrams on a white board, or virtually through digital workspaces. This would be an excellent exercise for a communications department retreat (see [Action Step 4.1](#)).

Virtually all stellar communications teams have too much to do and not enough time to do it. As you go through this evaluation, it's important to remember that eliminating a task or service is not a judgment on the abilities of those who have ownership of it. Instead, it is a strategic, thoughtful way of making room for measures that are more effective in achieving department and district goals and better serving the public.

Action Step 5.4 (OPA)

Clearly define the communication role of all SPS divisions and departments to ensure consistent, timely and equitable flow of information at all levels.

The Office of Public Affairs has a very specific role to play in planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information and messaging via the district's primary communication channels, but they alone cannot ensure that all relevant information is disseminated in a timely manner. All SPS district, department and school building leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the Office of Public Affairs.



Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at cabinet, leadership and principal meetings so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications. By clarifying communication roles and responsibilities and ensuring that messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the strategic plan and integrated at all levels, SPS can connect more directly with parents and community members, while also strengthening internal trust and engagement among employees. Clarifying roles and expectations will also provide the communications team with more time and capacity to focus on developing strategic communication initiatives for the district.

Action Step 5.5 (OPA)

Ensure administrators are aware of and follow consistent processes for sharing information with staff.

Throughout the employee focus groups, staff reported inconsistencies and confusion about who is responsible for sharing information, when and in what form. They pointed to issues in communication between the district office and the schools, and across departments. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, information bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered.

To ensure that SPS leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner, set expectations for how the district and its leaders will communicate with staff. For example, one expectation might be that staff should receive important information at least 30 minutes before parents and the community so that they can serve as front-line communicators and ambassadors for the schools. Another expectation might be that any information employees need to know is delivered in a timely manner (e.g., at least 48 hours before they need to act on it).

Maintaining effective communication requires thoughtful, well-defined guidelines and protocols to deliver clear, targeted messages. The Office of Public Affairs should work closely with the cabinet to determine what the communication protocols should be for administrators, and these should be reviewed regularly.

Following are two examples of guides for district and school administrators that set clear communication expectations:

- [Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations](#), Brenham (Texas) Independent School District
- [Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators](#), Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools

Action Step 5.6 (OPA)

Continue to offer and enhance annual communication training for district and school leaders.

At the beginning of the school year, the Office of Public Affairs offers training on how to use various communication tools. It also provides school principals with informal preparation and support when preparing for media interviews. Auditors recommend adding to those opportunities with at least annual communication skills training for all staff responsible for conveying information—both veterans and new hires—as ambassadors for the district and its schools.

Some district communication departments provide an annual “communication boot camp” for cabinet members, department managers and school administrators. They offer training, tips and practical learning experiences to help administrators, in their leadership roles, better communicate with stakeholders. This also strengthens their partnerships with communications staff, who can provide targeted insights relevant to communications at the school and department levels.

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

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build your agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review what this audit report and national research shows about what families and community members want to know from their schools and how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as on-camera mock media interviews.
- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from a SPS school or department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices in their schools or departments, challenges they have encountered and ways they might not overcome them.
- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review how the goals and objectives of the new strategic communication and engagement plan ([Recommendation 1](#)) support the district’s vision and strategic plan. Lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.
- **Schedule it for the greatest level of participation.** Offer communication boot camp during a less busy time of year such as summer vacation or pre-established staff professional development days. Make it fun with refreshments or other incentives such as district-branded door prizes.

A communication component should be included in the evaluation of cabinet members, department managers, school administrators if one is not already. Making a commitment to measure something helps ensure it gets done.

Action Step 5.7 (OPA)

Prepare topic-specific toolkits on major initiatives or situations for district and school leaders.

Many communication departments develop topic-specific toolkits for use by board members and administrators to help them communicate accurately, consistently and independently on major initiatives or decisions. Such toolkits, which may be print or digital, often include talking points, FAQs, graphics, flyers, video files, suggested social media posts, presentation templates, letter templates, and timelines for sharing information with stakeholders. Since SPS utilizes SharePoint, staff have convenient ways to share these common resources as a digital toolkit.

Such toolkits should be shared with administrators' senior support staff at the same time as the administrators. Providing timely information to front-line office employees will allow them to better support administrators in clearly articulating actions being taken, answering questions from parents and staff, preventing rumors and correcting misinformation.

As an example, explore the principal toolkit developed by Wichita (Kan.) Public Schools to ensure consistent messaging around the launch of its strategic plan. View the campaign at <https://bit.ly/3XvtbMF> and turn to page 22 for the toolkit.

Recommendation 6:

Elevate marginalized voices through a plan to close the gap between values and perception.

SPS has made a strong commitment to equity, which is made clear in its mission statement, strategic plan and in its overall approach to education. This commitment is widely known and appreciated, and was noted repeatedly in focus groups with all stakeholders. However, there was also a theme across all stakeholder groups that a gap exists between the ideal of educational equity and the reality. In multiple focus groups, the perception was shared that the district talks a lot about equity and inclusion, but that some of the district's systems, structures and services can marginalize certain stakeholders, including those with special needs.

A typical comment was one made in Spanish by a parent in the SCoPE Survey. Translated, the comment reads, "I think this is a critical time for the district to make the necessary changes in how they engage with communities (family engagement). Those who have access to express themselves are always whites who speak English and have knowledge of the Internet and how to navigate the system. Please do your best to reach out to us not just to 'check the box' but to get to know us and what our needs and dreams are for our children's future."

Other comments on the SCoPE Survey indicate a clear divide in understanding the strategies being used to achieve equity. For example, another parent on the SCoPE Survey commented, "My impression is that the district's version of equity is, 'If all can't have something, none can have it.' It feels like instead of pushing to raise the bar, it consistently gets lowered. Would love to hear more specifics about goals and a plan." Misunderstanding about equity strategies and failure to build consensus around how to "ensure access and provide excellence in education for every student," as stated in the SPS mission statement, may be causing resistance to well-intentioned policies and strategies.

SPS is very aware of the focus required to improve in this challenging area, based on the auditors' review. Staff appear to have a high level of awareness about the need to use culturally sensitive messaging. The effectiveness of communications is evaluated based on ethnic/racial demographics, too. For instance, a Communications and Public Affairs Metric analysis completed in 2021-22 showed that families of color opened the *School Beat* newsletter at about the same rate as families overall.

Given the diversity of its population—racially, culturally and economically—SPS is understandably challenged in ensuring that all families receive information at the same time and in ways that are accessible and understandable. The district is not alone in this challenge either. Nationally, approximately 40 percent of Black American households don't have high-speed, fixed broadband, and only 69 percent of Black Americans and 67 percent of Hispanic Americans have desktop or laptop computers, compared with 80 percent of White Americans, according to [recent national data](#). School leaders must think about findings such as these not just in light of instructional methods but also in terms of how different levels of technology access may affect the ability of the district or schools to communicate with families.

Auditors encourage the Office of Public Affairs to continue its efforts to communicate in ways that are accessible to all SPS stakeholders. When planning communication efforts ([Recommendation 1](#)), ensure there are objectives and strategies specific to aligning family members' experiences and perceptions of district and school communications with SPS' clear commitment to communication equity.

Beyond ensuring that SPS' outgoing communications are accessible and available to all students and families—regardless of their language or access to technology—SPS must also identify ways to engage these important stakeholders in two-way conversations. Elevating marginalized voices through increased engagement allows more stakeholders to be

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included in important decisions and discussions about their local schools. Communications staff can and should play a role in that engagement effort, whether as advisors, planners or communicators.

Some general tips include:

- Making sure that listening tours (see [Action Step 2.4](#)) include meetings with diverse groups in their most comfortable local settings.
- Extending invitations in person or by phone, with the aid of translators as needed, to diverse community members when recruiting members for committees and task forces.
- Making sure that all avenues for providing input are equally accessible and that response times do not suffer as a result of language barriers.

In short, when making plans to engage the SPS community, review those plans through the lens of how they can be enhanced to more effectively include those who now experience barriers to communication.

Following are additional steps that should be considered to meet this challenge.

Action Step 6.1 (OPA/CFE)

Increase engagement with translated, culturally sensitive communications.

Translations in SPS families' top five languages are already routine for districtwide publications, special alerts and important student information that is sent home, either from the district or school campuses. The SPS website also incorporates a Google-based translation feature that offers dozens of language options for visitors to select. In addition to these tools, various departments in SPS provide translation, interpretation, engagement and instructional support for students and families whose home language is not English.

Elevate marginalized voices through a plan to close the gap between values and perception.

The auditors commend the district for its efforts to analyze engagement with translated materials particularly on high-interest topics. For example, analytics provided to the auditors showed data on website page visits at the start of school after the strike and email open rates for the district newsletter. The visits and open rates were as high or higher for those accessing the information via non-English languages as for those doing so in English. Continue to collect and analyze data in this fashion, as a way to explore which tactics and timing might best reach and engage non-English speakers.

Beyond providing direct language translations and collecting analytics on non-English usage of digital communication tools, it is also important to examine whether the district's messages are perceived to be culturally sensitive. Doing so will likely require the district to have a native speaker review the feel and impression a message creates. This helps prevent unintentional harm, confusion and anger.

Also consider how best to reach families who may not be served as well by the district's traditional ways of communicating. For example, some cultures are more likely to turn to their native-language radio stations for news. Others may pay more attention to guests invited to speak at their church or community center than news items posted on a website. The time of day when information should be offered also varies; consider families where parents tend to work night shifts for example.

Action Step 6.2 (OPA)

Further explore stakeholder perceptions around equity and what it means for SPS students.

As noted in the [Key Findings](#) and [Observation and SWOT Analysis](#) sections of this report, open-ended comments on the SCoPE Survey revealed various levels of understanding about the district's commitment and strategies to eliminate opportunity gaps. As a complement to surveys, focus groups can better reveal stakeholder sentiment and allow facilitators to delve deeper into a topic. The focus groups for this communication audit were more broadly assessing sentiment around communications, but SPS may want to conduct its own additional focus groups to further identify nuances related to public understanding of the district's equity commitment.

SPS is fortunate to have a department devoted to research and evaluation. The Office of Public Affairs should collaborate with this group to gather additional information about how stakeholders perceive equity in SPS. Such data can be used to help communications staff refine their messaging and strategies around this important topic.

Use that research data to enhance the strategic communication plan with an objective and strategies specifically focused on increasing understanding of equity efforts in SPS. Achieving the district's vision to provide a high-quality, world-class education for all students will require greater understanding and support from all stakeholders. In a community like Seattle that is generally recognized as progressive in its support for racial equity, the need to build support and understanding may not be as obvious as in a community where resistance is expressed more openly. The number of comments made on the SCoPE survey related to equity, though, suggest that a deliberate communication strategy will help the district achieve its larger vision.

Action Step 6.3 (OPA)

Support school principals in delivering inclusive parent communications.

As the leaders in their schools, principals play a critical role in parent communications. Each school has its own culture and personality, so understanding the best methods to communicate given the specific conditions of the individual school is vitally important. The Office of Public Affairs staff can support principals in their vital communication role and promote inclusive communications at the school-building level by:

- **Establishing a common understanding across the district regarding when, how and how often communications should be translated.** This might be achieved through a one-page guidance document (reviewed annually) that sets standards for when communications must be translated. It should list common types of school communications and group them broadly by levels of urgency/priority. It also should share how much time to allow for translations before they are needed, how to go about getting those translations and who at a school should make those requests. It may be necessary to expand the district's current capacity for translations by investing in additional staffing or outside translation services.
- **Providing translated message templates and promotional materials that principals can easily customize for their schools.** In communicating, there is a distinction between the message or content (the what) and the strategies used to deliver the message (the how). There needs to be consistency in the content of SPS' key messages so there is common understanding across the district, but the means of delivering the message should be tailored, with the principal's guidance, to the unique culture of a school and the needs of its families.

- **Making Office of Public Affairs staff available as on-call consultants for principals, if they are not already.**

When principals can develop their own inclusive parent communications in close cooperation with a communications specialist, they can draw upon their knowledge of a school community to create localized and effective communications.

Action Step 6.4 (CFE)

Develop a key communicator network among non-English speakers.

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

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

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

and the schools because the information feels authentic and as if nothing is being hidden.

Following are suggested methods for establishing a key communicators network.

- Work with the language liaisons and school principals to identify potential key communicators for English language learner families. These should be individuals who have demonstrated support and interest in the school and have connections within their non-English-speaking communities.
- Host exclusive events for potential key communicators and introduce them to the methods that the district uses to disseminate information in multiple languages.
- Provide dual-language materials and messaging to the key communicators and encourage them to share that information with families they know in their favorite local gathering spots.

Recommendation 7:

Expand opportunities to share the SPS story.

Throughout history, storytelling is how humans have connected with one another, passed on information and taught life lessons. In fact, it is a basic principle of effective communication that knowledge relayed through a story will stick with the reader or listener much longer than a dry list of facts. Anyone who has ever watched a great TEDTalk and then sat in on a much less great slides presentation full of tiny text and bullets will tell you which one they remember most: the one with the great story!

The Office of Public Affairs is full of staff who know how to tell a story, in print or digitally, via social media or video, through graphics or images. Maximize the power of those skill sets by discussing as a team how planned stories can carry key district messages. In a very positive way, think of those stories not just as telling what happened, when and with who; instead, think of each story as a (peaceful) Trojan horse that can carry inside of it a vital, mission-oriented message.

Actively seek out stories of schools, students and staff that can be told in creative, eye- or ear-catching ways to build greater stakeholder awareness of district goals, values and visions in action.

The following action steps offer more ideas to increase sharing of the SPS story.

Action Step 7.1 (OPA)

Use student voices to tell SPS stories.

Students are the district's most important internal audience. They can also be the district's best ambassadors (or greatest critics) because they talk about their school experiences at home and in the



community on an almost daily basis. By finding out what students want to know and getting information to them in a way that works for them, the Office of Public Affairs can excite and empower students to share SPS stories.

In the SCoPE Survey, SPS high school students were asked to rate how much they rely on various sources of information. Results indicate that they regularly rely on word of mouth, email and the online student portal/Google Classroom. In focus groups, students shared similar sources but also frequently mentioned their use of social media. They felt that more school-to-student communication is needed and asked for more advance notice of school events, more face time with school leaders and more open communication about mental health.

Communications staff are encouraged to meet with high school leaders to discuss ways that district information relevant to older students might be appropriately distributed to them within the school setting.

It is also advised that communications staff explore ways to have students aid in the storytelling effort, so it becomes more relatable and engaging for their peers.

In the corporate world, user-generated content is a valuable marketing tool. Student-generated content offers districts the same opportunity to tell stories through first-hand, personal accounts and provides a unique authenticity that, if reflective of district goals and messaging, serves as a valuable testimonial. Following are some methods school communications departments are using to elevate student voice in their programs:

- Organize a “student takeover” of official social media accounts for a special (and widely promoted) day or week.
- Feature student-generated content (e.g., articles, photos, graphics, videos) in district newsletters.
- Utilize district TV to spotlight “day in the life” student experiences.

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Expand opportunities to share the SPS story.

Ensuring that students' work meets district standards for publishing, school board policies and all applicable laws may require an additional investment of staff time and resources, but it also presents an opportunity to expand the district's storytelling capacity while building students' storytelling skills and experiences. Such opportunities should fall under the supervision of the applicable teacher/advisor and communications staff with appropriate guidelines to ensure that policies on privacy and permissions continue to be met.

Action Step 7.2 (OPA)

Continue to draw on SPS' video expertise to tell the SPS story, particularly on social media.

SPS' video production capabilities may have been underutilized in the past, as noted in the [Key Findings](#), but as auditors heard from district staff, video offers one of the best ways to attract and engage stakeholders. Auditors applaud the district's launch of a new SPS news video broadcast, [First Bell](#), which was under development during the writing of this report. The auditors view SPS' video capabilities as a key asset and encourage continued attention to expand video as a strategy to reach stakeholders.



Among all social media platforms, the YouTube video platform is the top site used by both U.S. adults and teens. Recent research also found that information communicated via voice more quickly leads to the desired action than information communicated in print. When developing the strategic communication and engagement plan ([Recommendation 1](#)), look to support the division's objectives through strategies and tactics that make use of video to tell the SPS story.

Examples of more opportunities for strategic use of video include the following:

- Add the district's video sharing sites ([YouTube](#), [Vimeo](#)) to the "Follow us" social media options in the footer of district and school homepages, which currently only promote Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
- Link key district messages in articles to illustrative videos that demonstrate the initiative or policy in action in the classroom, in the hallways or out in the community. The e-newsletter or school board meeting summaries could be a good launching point for brief informational videos.
- Highlight employees providing great customer service in spotlight videos. This is a great way to showcase successes coming out of the district's investment in customer service training.

Each year, be sure to look to award-winning school districts for video inspiration. NSPRA's annual National School Communication Awards includes a Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards program that recognizes [Award of Excellence winners for in-house videos](#). Check out these unity and equity-focused examples from 2022:

- #CommUNITY, Broken Arrow (Okla.) Public Schools—<https://vimeo.com/586174719>
- Black History Month, Ceres (Calif.) Unified School District—<https://youtu.be/p8K0Ld7MsxM>
- I Shine, Gwinnett County (Ga.) Public Schools—<https://vimeo.com/575456266>
- Autism Resource Team, Greater Amsterdam (N.Y.) School District—<https://youtu.be/eBE5Qz6Mv60>

In the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section of the NSPRA website, the Videos, Photography and Video Conferencing category at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Videos-Photography-and-Video-Conferencing> includes a number of resources for video communications. The following might be of specific interest:

- Let's Create a Video: Seven Secrets for School District Success handout from the NSPRA 2021 National Seminar
- Video Storytelling: Why a Picture Truly is Worth a Thousand Words handout from the NSPRA 2021 National Seminar

Action Step 7.3 (OPA/CFE)

Share district stories on the KNHC (C89.5) radio station.

The KNHC high school radio station currently has a dance music format. Give consideration to expanding the use of this platform to disseminate positive information about SPS and to engage the audience in SPS events that are open to the community. Perhaps the Office of Public Affairs might plan short SPS informational spots similar to the public service announcements on other public broadcasting outlets.

Alternatively, explore creating a regular interview segment featuring a student “host” interviewing district, department and school leaders on topics of interest to students and their families.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

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

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Branding/Marketing Communications
- Crisis Communications
- Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns

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

The following pages reflect the auditors' assessment of where SPS falls within the rubrics. The purpose of the communication audit was to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level. The recommendations throughout this report are designed to support the district in moving from "emerging" or "established" to "exemplary," as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

Benchmarking against the rubrics differs from other parts of this report in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on what the auditor heard in focus groups or discovered in district materials. Instead,

it addresses how SPS is doing compared to standards of excellence in school public relations.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the complete *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store>.

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Established

At this point in time, SPS' overall communication effort falls in the established category. As this audit report identifies, SPS needs an overall strategic communication plan focused on two-way communications that aligns with the district's strategic goals and objectives. This is a critical priority for SPS to undertake in the next 12 months because it will form the basis of a smooth communication flow that builds trust and fosters deeper engagement with the community. One of the very positive findings is that SPS is committed to improving communication and has a strong team in place.

Beyond the recommendations in this report, the following additional actions could move SPS' communication program from established to exemplary on the rubric:

- Updating board policies related to communication and reviewing policies on a biannual basis to ensure they are aligned with the goals and objectives of the district and latest research on communications.
- Creating a plan for the professional development of the Office of Public Affairs staff based on identified needs and new trends in school communications

research, implementation and evaluation.

- Consistently evaluating building and department-level communications for effectiveness.
- Developing systematic methods for regularly evaluating communication program effectiveness.

Internal Communications – Emerging

SPS' internal communications program falls into the emerging category of the rubric. As noted in this report, there are many opportunities for improvement, which will in turn support stronger communication with external audiences. As noted in the rubric, employees are the most credible sources of information about a school district and it is essential to establish methods for ensuring they remain well-informed and prepared to be ambassadors of the district.

By following the recommendations found in this report, particularly in [Recommendation 5](#), SPS could easily move to the established category of this rubric. To move to the exemplary category, consider the following:

- Instituting a new employee orientation program that includes a communication component, an overview of the school district and an emphasis on the important role all employees play in communication.
- Providing ongoing professional development to senior leaders on how to raise employee awareness, understanding and alignment with vision, mission and goals.
- Training school board members, administrators, principals, department chairs and other managers in critical listening.

Parent/Family Communications – Emerging/Established

SPS has multiple tools at hand for outreach to its parents and families, including School Messenger (used for emails and phone messages), Talking Points (used for text messaging), the e-newsletter (School Beat), a newly redesigned website and robust social media platforms. SPS has also instituted a robust tool for responding to inquiries and comments through *Let's Talk*. However, one of the key findings of the audit is the need for improved two-way communication—listening as well as pushing information out.

At this time, SPS' parent and family communications program falls between the emerging and established categories of the rubric. In addition to the auditors' recommendations in this report, SPS might also consider the following to move it squarely into the established category:

- Providing training in critical listening to school board directors, administrators, principals, department chairs, managers and teachers.
- Hosting professional development opportunities for principals and teachers on effective parent/family communication strategies.
- Including a section in your strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)) devoted to communicating district goals, plans, programs and finances.
- Creating an ongoing system of feedback and evaluation of communication related to crises and safety incidents.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging

Given the greater importance of other areas of communication emphasized in this

report, the auditors have not made a formal recommendation for SPS branding and marketing efforts. That being said, the district has solidly positioned itself—branded itself—as an organization committed to equity. This is abundantly evident through its mission statement, vision statement, strategic plans and its approach to communications and all other areas of service.

In this report, the auditors have noted some of the challenges associated with this image and offered recommendations that will hopefully help the district to refine its messaging and address some of the concerns and negative perceptions that exist with some stakeholders.

Based on the above, the auditors would place SPS in the established category of the rubric and offer the following additional suggestions for moving into the exemplary category.

- Provide ongoing training for district staff to effectively develop the district's brand position, attributes, points of pride, promises and traditions.
- Conduct further analysis to better define myths and misconceptions associated with the district brand to inform communication planning.
- Put greater emphasis on developing communications that emphasize emotional connection, not process.
- Make more effective use of video to depict brand attributes.

Crisis Communications – Emerging

SPS has a comprehensive crisis management plan in place that incorporates communication elements, but no specific crisis communication plan exists, which puts SPS in the emerging category of this rubric. To move to the established category, auditors recommend that SPS develop such a plan (see [Action Step 1.3](#)) and take the following additional steps:

- Create redundant communication systems to be used in the event of a major crisis.
- Identify at least one substitute to relieve or replace key communication staff during a crisis.
- Conduct town hall, summit or community forums on school safety or specific issues in response to and following a crisis.
- Include input from English language learner families, interpreters or translators, and community agencies that serve immigrant families in ongoing refinement of the crisis communication plan.
- Develop key crisis message templates in multiple languages and make them available to district leaders.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Exemplary

SPS' most recent experience with bond/finance elections suggest it is exemplary in this critical function area. In February 2022, voters approved an Educational Programs and Operations Levy with more than 78 percent voting yes and nearly 80 percent voting yes for a Buildings, Technology and Academics/Athletics Capital Levy.

Long-term success with future elections will depend on continuous outreach and education. Some focus group participants commented that they believe the strong support had more to do with Seattle residents supporting public education in general and was not a reflection of strong support for the district. Therefore, it will be important for the district to create plans to ensure that there is ongoing, broad understanding about district finances and needs.

Appendix

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you perceive as the school district's strengths?
 - 1a. What are the areas needing improvement?
2. What is the current image of your school district in the community?
 - 2a. How would you describe the school district to someone new to your community?
3. When school district leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
 - 3a. What makes you feel that way?
 - 3b. If not, how would you like to provide your input?
4. What does the school district do well when it comes to communicating on important issues? (For example, safety, educating funding, legislation and curriculum or operational changes?)
 - 4a. How might the school district improve on that?
 - 4b. Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?
5. What does the school district do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis?
 - 5a. How might the school district improve on that?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. How do school district communications affect your ability to be successful in your job?
 - 1a. Are there any areas where you need more communications support?
2. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community?
 - 2a. Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

Additional Questions: Administrators and Board of Directors

1. How can communications staff best support you in your leadership role?
2. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the school district?

Additional Questions: Non-English Speaking Parent Groups

1. Do you feel there is enough information in the language you prefer?
2. Are school staff able to help you in the language you prefer?
3. How much do you rely on other parents or your students to help you understand information from your school or the district?

About the SCoPE Scorecard

As part of the NSPRA Communication Review, partner organization School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) conducted online surveys to collect feedback from four stakeholder groups: employees/staff, parents/families, community members and students. The scorecard on the following page provides a summary of scores for the school district on measures that matter most in school communications, in comparison to the scores for all school districts that have participated in the SCoPE Survey.

Please note:

- The column labeled “Similarly-Sized Districts” represents the average results of six districts with student enrollment over 50,000.
- Due to low participation in the community survey, there is a higher-than-desired margin of error for community results. This data is shared for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a representative sample of the entire population of community stakeholders.
- The student survey is being piloted and no national benchmark data is available.

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

SCoPE Scorecard

		Seattle	Similarly-Sized Districts	National		
				Avg.	Low	High
Staff	Communication regarding how I can support student achievement	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.0	4.2
	Communication to keep me informed so I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador	2.6	3.2	3.2	2.5	3.8
	Communication during a crisis/serious incident	3.3	3.5	3.4	2.8	4.0
	Communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.3	3.6
	Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.4	4.5
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	2.9	3.5	3.7	2.7	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication	2.6	3.5	3.6	2.6	4.2
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	2.6	3.4	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents/Families	Communication about my child’s progress in school	3.4	3.9	3.8	3.1	4.4
	Communication about how I can support my child’s learning	3.1	3.5	3.4	2.4	4.1
	Communication about school and district events and programs	2.7	3.2	3.4	2.5	4.1
	Communication during a crisis/serious incident	N/A*	3.6	3.6	3.0	4.1
	Trustworthiness of communication from my child’s school	3.9	4.1	4.2	3.6	4.5
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.1	3.7	3.9	3.1	4.4
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.2	3.8	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	2.8	3.7	3.8	2.8	4.2
Community	Communication about academic programs and district performance	2.8	3.0	3.0	2.0	4.2
	Communication about district finances and related issues	1.8	2.5	2.5	1.7	3.6
	Communication about school safety	2.8	3.2	2.9	1.7	4.0
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.7	3.3	3.4	2.2	4.2
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.2	3.2	3.2	2.0	4.0
	Overall perception of the district based on communication	3.3	3.2	3.3	2.2	4.2

* SPS asked this question differently than the national sample. For SPS, results were:

- Communication about urgent school incidents: 3.5
- Communication about urgent districtwide incidents: 3.3

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

To join this vibrant, national association and reap the benefits of being an NSPRA member, visit <https://www.nspira.org/Membership>.

Auditors' Vitae

Naomi Hunter, APR Lead auditor

Naomi Hunter is an accredited public relations professional (APR) with 30 years of experience in strategic communications and public relations in the public, private and non-profit sectors. She joined the NSPRA staff in October 2022 as the communication audit surveys manager after working with the association as a consultant auditor for the last several years. Now, in addition to conducting audits, Naomi is managing and overseeing improvements to the SCoPE Survey tool since it was acquired by NSPRA at the end of 2022.

Prior to joining NSPRA, Naomi spent five years providing communication services to numerous school districts and public agencies in the San Francisco Bay area and Southern California, including serving the Redwood City School District (RCSd) as an advisor and facilitator on community engagement processes for school closures and school reconfigurations. She had previously served as director of communications for RCSd for more than ten years. In 2021 and 2022, she also taught an undergraduate course, Public Relations Theories and Principles, at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, Calif.

Naomi served as chair of the NSPRA Accreditation Committee from 2018 to 2022 and served on the board of the California School Public Relations Association (CalSPRA) from 2015 to 2021. She served as president of the Public Relations Society of America, San Francisco Chapter (PRSA-SF) in 2014 and as a PRSA-SF board member from 2012 to 2016.

Naomi has presented workshops at conferences for NSPRA, CalSPRA, the California School Boards Association (CSBA), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) Women in School Leadership Conference and the ACSA Classified Educational Leaders Institute.

Naomi earned her APR in 2010. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Northwestern University and a master's degree from Stanford University.

Frank Kwan, APR Co-auditor

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

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

Frank has been a communications auditor for NSPRA for school districts in Canada, Alaska, California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Oregon, Texas and Washington. He served on NSPRA's executive board and as its president in 2011-12. He is accredited in public relations (APR) by the Universal Accreditation Board.

In addition to his work with NSPRA, Frank is currently a consultant for a special education management consulting group, the Pasadena Unified School District in California, and Ideal Communications in Washington.

Frank's experience includes serving as an executive producer for news, specials and documentaries for NBC 4 Television in Los Angeles and for public radio stations in Southern California.

Frank has been a long-time volunteer, including serving on National PTA's Board of Directors and leading its diversity, strategic planning and communication committees.

Frank's work in communications has been recognized with awards from NSPRA and other professional education and public relations associations. His work in broadcasting was recognized with multiple Emmy Awards, the National Education Association's Advancement of Education Through Broadcasting awards and American Women in Radio and Television Commendation awards.

Frank is a founder of the Asian American Journalists Association and the University of Southern California Asian Pacific Alumni Association. He has been a senior lecturer at the University of Southern California and is an emeritus member of its Alumni Board of Governors.



Communication Audit Report

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