NSPRA’s Communication Audit Report

Prepared for

Omaha Public Schools
Omaha, Nebraska

April 2013
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Introduction

Goal of the communication audit

Omaha Public Schools (OPS) is dedicated to providing quality education and a variety of programs to serve the needs of a very diverse community. Parents and citizens appreciate the caring and committed teachers and staff as well as the opportunities and choices available to students. Interim Superintendent Virginia Moon, Ed.D., and the Board of Education recognize that a proactive communication effort is key to building and sustaining public support for the schools and are committed to improving and expanding communication efforts across the district.

This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the Board of Education and Interim Superintendent and it demonstrates their willingness to address communication challenges facing OPS as well as public education in Nebraska. OPS leaders clearly recognize that effective communication plays a critical role in improving educational opportunities for students, demonstrating accountability to stakeholders, and building support for schools.

The challenges of maintaining public confidence in an era of shrinking budgets, meeting the educational needs of a diverse constituency, reaching stakeholder consensus on an instructional program that serves all students, and communicating effectively on emerging issues with all segments of the population affect not only OPS, but the community it serves as well. Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of parents, community members and district employees, it was obvious to the auditors that people care about the schools and are invested in ensuring a successful educational experience for all students.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to assess current communication efforts and offer recommendations to improve the planning and management of public relations, expand branding/marketing efforts, and enhance two-way communication and engagement strategies with all OPS stakeholders.

The findings and recommendations included in this Communication Audit Report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of District Communications or any other department, they are intended to improve communication in a school system that is committed to excellence and offering highly-performing schools capable of meeting the challenges of educating students in a global environment.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of OPS provides an important foundation for developing a strategic communication plan for the district. The audit informs district leaders about community attitudes and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and offers recommendations to expand and enhance the communication program with an eye to increasing efficiency as well.
The communication audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

**Scope and nature of the study**

The *Communication Audit Report* presents the findings and recommendations from a series of 19 focus groups, representing a variety of OPS’ internal and external publics, as well as some additional interviews with OPS leaders and staff involved in communication. Participants in the focus groups were invited by administrators to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The sessions were approximately one hour in length, and were held December 10-13, 2012 with the following groups:

- Parents (2 groups)
- Parents (conducted in Spanish)
- Magnet Parents
- Migrant/Refugee/Native Parents (with interpreters)
- Business Partners/Civic Leaders
- News Media Representatives
- Student Leaders
- Teachers (2 groups – elementary and secondary)
- School Secretaries
- Support Staff Representatives
- TAC Secretaries
- Principals (3 groups – elementary and secondary)
- Directors/Managers/Supervisors
- Superintendent’s Cabinet
- Board of Education Members
Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communications from an “outside” perspective. The consultants for this communication audit were Karen H. Kleinz, APR, NSPRA associate director, and Joseph Ortiz, NSPRA consultant. Their vitae are included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in the NSPRA communication audit process occurred when District Communications submitted samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., publications, video links, marketing materials, etc.) with various audiences. The auditors also reviewed the district and school websites. These materials and websites were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability and content, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditors reviewed a variety of information provided by the district, such as Board policies relating to communications, demographic data, news clippings, etc.

The core of the communication audit is the on-site focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the school system’s internal and external audiences. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. The auditors took notes in each of the focus group sessions. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and not be directly attributed to them. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of OPS’ current communications program;
- Solicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns, and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of the communication effort; and
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and improving the management of public relations, communications, marketing, and public engagement activities for OPS.

Following the review of materials and focus group discussions, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this Communication Audit Report. The recommendations focus on strategies OPS can use to organize and prioritize its communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve and enhance overall communication practices. NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, carefully reviewed this final report.

Guiding Definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, state and national education organizations and agencies to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication and engagement practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:
Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization.

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

Assumptions

It is assumed that school leaders undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving the overall public relations/communication program. It is also assumed that they wish to understand how stakeholders – both internal and external – perceive the school system and its work, and recognize that the input gathered reflects the subjective opinions of participants at that particular point in time.

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

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist OPS leaders in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, the Communication Audit Report contains recommendations for improving communication with OPS’ internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around North America.

Copies to participants

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

The auditors identified several themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews. These include the following:

- **Currently, perceptions of OPS are driven by a sense that trust with the community has been broken.** At the same time, even critics of OPS acknowledge that the school system is in transition and the potential exists to set the district on a new course that builds on its strengths. To do this, trust and credibility will first need to be restored.

- **Participants value the variety of opportunities and program choices available to students.** The Dual Language program, Career Center and special education offerings were all given high marks. All of the focus groups felt that OPS staff are extremely dedicated and truly put children first. Business and civic leaders noted the collaborative outreach and strong partnerships the district has built with business and community organizations.

- **The best sources of information cited by the focus groups were varied and include the news media, personal contacts (school employees and parents), the “rumor mill,” e-mail (and First Class for staff), and meetings.** Parents in the external focus groups also cited their principals and school newsletters, and staff members cited Curriculum & Instruction and their principals. The OPS website was mentioned rarely and not in the context of a “best source.” No single vehicle emerged as a primary source of news and information. Across all groups, email and face-to-face opportunities were cited as the best way to communicate.

- **Participants in both the external and internal focus groups find the OPS website hard to navigate and “frustrating.”** They noted that while there is a lot of information, much of it is out of date and for staff, useful tools such as Teacher Tube are blocked. This is true at the school level as well.

- **Communication strengths cited by focus group participants centered primarily on electronic delivery vehicles** – SchoolMessenger, the Parent Portal, and First Class email, but again there was a varied response. Both internal and external groups noted that communication from the schools is much better than that from the district.

**Areas noted as needing improvement include:**
- Becoming less reactive and more strategic in telling OPS’ story;
- Providing the rationale for decisions;
- Improving internal communication and engaging staff in decision-making;
- Improving communication between TAC (Teacher Administrative Center) departments;
- Communicating with immigrant/migrant populations; and
- Improving media coverage.
A critical gap is the need to “close the loop” on communications, both internally and externally, by providing the rationale behind decisions as well as the results or outcomes of surveys and other efforts to gather input. This gap contributes to negative perceptions about the district as well as staff morale issues. Employees at all levels – administrators, teachers, and support staff – feel they are functioning in an information vacuum, which leads them to feel they are under-appreciated and not supported in their work.

OPS needs to build connections with immigrant and non-English-speaking families. As the district’s demographics continue to change, focus group participants felt strongly that OPS must strive to expand communication and strengthen its relationship with non-English-speaking and immigrant families. Focus group participants representing these stakeholders expressed great appreciation and support for their schools and are ready to be engaged.

Local politics has had a major impact on OPS, which presents a significant challenge. Across the focus groups, participants cited tensions between individual Board members at meetings as well as the often strained relationship between the Board and administration as having a negative impact on the district. This, as well as OPS’ position as the largest school system in the state, has attracted the attention and involvement of influential politicians in Omaha as well as in the Nebraska State Legislature, which keeps OPS in the media spotlight.

Overall, focus group participants, both internal and external, did not feel they have real opportunities for input into decisions in OPS. Most felt opportunities are limited or non-existent and noted that Board committee meetings are held during the work day when most people cannot attend. Employees in the focus groups cited the recent superintendent search as an example of how staff input is not sought out or included for consideration by district leaders. Some also expressed concern about retribution from top district leaders if they express criticism or question decisions.

Communication challenges cited by the focus groups included:

- Rebuilding trust and credibility with the community;
- Meeting the needs of a diverse student population;
- Education funding and budgets;
- Staying current with technology and social media;
- Improving test scores and graduation rate; and
- Telling the OPS story.
Observations

The auditors found several areas creating challenges to the communication effort and also identified some communication “gaps” where OPS is not connecting as effectively with stakeholder audiences. These include:

■ Stakeholders view OPS through a dual lens.

OPS is generally perceived as being large, diverse and urban, which is to be expected, given the district’s location and demographics. But when we probed deeper, a more complex view of the district emerged which was both positive and negative. Recent issues related to previous superintendents, combined with intense media scrutiny and a difficult political climate – surrounding the Board of Education as well as public education in Omaha and in the state of Nebraska – have contributed to the breakdown of trust and credibility. Focus group participants view OPS has being very reactive, unfocused and confused, and are not confident that district leaders have a vision to get the district back on track, though many felt that it is now in a period of “transition.”

In spite of this skepticism about the ability of OPS leaders to “right the ship,” focus group participants across the groups believe strongly that the school system offers an immense array of opportunities for all students. They cited the variety of programs offered, the caring, dedicated staff, and strong, collaborative partnerships with the community as strengths that make OPS unique. It was clear to the auditors that in spite of the problems and challenges that exist, the community values the schools and wants OPS students to succeed.

■ A clear vision for the future must be articulated.

A consistent theme across the focus groups is the need for OPS leaders to articulate a clear vision for the future and direction of the school system. Stakeholders want to know what the goals are and how the district plans to achieve them. They also want OPS leaders to be visible in the schools and community and to have access to face-to-face opportunities to hear first-hand about plans and challenges. In addition, there is not a well-defined vision for the communication effort to ensure that it is strategic and on track in supporting OPS goals. There is a need to align the communication effort with the strategic plan as it is developed and set expectations for all staff related to their communication role.

■ Internal communication must become a priority.

As is the case in most large school systems, internal communication in OPS is a weak area that needs improvement. There currently is no consistent system or strong infrastructure for keeping employees at all levels informed in a timely manner about key initiatives and important information. Many employee groups, including administrative-level staff, feel they are “out of the loop.”

Opportunities for real dialogue and two-way communication are limited or not occurring among some staff groups. Ensuring that information and key messages cascade effectively in a
manageable way throughout all employee groups will strengthen communication at all levels and with all stakeholder groups.

Another area impacting internal communication relates to how TAC departments interact with each other. While focus groups noted collaboration as a district strength, they also noted that TAC operates very much in “silos” that do not communicate well with each other. Opening interdepartmental lines of communication and mitigating perceived “turf battles” will better facilitate collegiality and a team sensibility, and support employees’ roles as ambassadors for the schools.

- **External communication must become more targeted.**

At this time, the biggest communication gap is that there is no recognized vehicle to push information out to stakeholders across OPS. While current announcements and news stories are posted on the website each week, there is limited impact because people are not going to the site for that purpose. There is a need to develop a communication vehicle that better meets the information needs of OPS stakeholders. There is considerable interest among external audiences in expanding communication to include social media such as Twitter and Facebook. This is an area OPS will need to pursue in order to stay current with today’s young parents.

- **Make open and transparent communication a key component of decision-making.**

In order to begin the process of rebuilding trust and credibility with the community, OPS leaders must commit to an open and transparent style of communicating with stakeholders, both internal and external. Focus group participants across the groups did not feel they have a real voice in decisions that impact them and the schools. There appears to be a lack of understanding among district administrators and the Board about the real nature of public engagement and dialogue, and this may be part of the problem.

- **Address relationships between OPS and the news media.**

Another common theme across the focus groups and in our conversations with individuals was the contentious relationship that OPS has with the news media, in particular the *Omaha World Herald*. While this is not uncommon in large urban school systems, focus group participants in both internal and external groups shared a belief that the *Omaha World Herald* unfairly attacks OPS and is unwilling to print anything positive about the school district. This belief permeated the focus groups and was notable to the auditors. However, our conversations with representatives from the newspaper indicate that in fact the *Omaha World Herald* is interested and willing to address concerns and improve working relationships. This is an area that warrants attention and needs to be addressed as a new superintendent and Board join the district.

From the auditors’ perspective, there is a lot of communication going on in OPS, but a comprehensive communication plan is needed to keep strategic goals in focus, ensure message consistency across the district, delineate responsibilities, and prioritize the workload. OPS needs to develop a strategic communication plan as well as a set of communication protocols and
processes so that it can clearly articulate its vision, mission and direction. A well-planned, strategic communication program can help build a stronger foundation of support for OPS throughout the community. In this very challenging economic time, effective communication is more important than ever to building public trust and confidence in district leaders as good stewards of citizens’ investment in their schools and the future of their children.
Recommendations

The challenges facing OPS are those facing most urban school systems today: managing the impact of tightening budgets on programs and facilities; finding and keeping talented teachers, support staff, and administrators; improving student achievement levels while meeting state and national mandates; anticipating and meeting the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse and multilingual population; and connecting with parents as well as Omaha citizens and business leaders who have a vested interest in the success of the schools.

In response to the findings from the communication audit, this Communication Audit Report contains recommendations designed to enhance and improve communication with OPS’ internal and external stakeholders. Many of the recommendations address ways to fine-tune and expand the communications program so that it becomes more strategic in supporting the mission and goals of the district and sharing OPS’ successes. The recommendations are derived from strategies and techniques that have proven effective in school systems similar to OPS and are designed to build on the existing communication program, maximize available resources and take advantage of available technology.

It is difficult to measure public relations. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program – including a public relations/communication program – is to determine whether it is helping the school system make progress toward its stated mission. Ultimately, successful school systems in today’s rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for building understanding and engaging stakeholders in supporting student achievement. With effective communication, staff members better understand their value to the district and community members understand how they can support the educational program in ways that ensure success for all students.

The recommendations in this Communication Audit Report are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather are designed to serve as a road map and compendium of best practices for improving communication, engagement, and branding/marketing strategies, developing a strategic communication program, and expanding stakeholder support. We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs and strategies designed to be incorporated into OPS’ overall strategic planning efforts, and it would be unrealistic to expect the District Communications staff and administrative team to take on all of these recommendations immediately.

We advise OPS leaders to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations can be reasonably implemented given the current staff and resources available and which should be incorporated into long-range plans. We suggest district leaders consider concentrating initial efforts on areas that can be addressed immediately in order to enhance and further develop the core communication infrastructure that will serve as a foundation on which to build the program in the future.
Recommendation 1: Develop a strategic communication plan aligned with the OPS mission and goals.

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective communication plan nor does it guarantee improved information flow. A strategic communication plan will help keep efforts on track and maximize the value of OPS’ communication dollar. As district leaders begin to develop a new strategic plan for OPS, a communication component should be incorporated into each goal that is addressed in the communication plan.

A strategic communication plan should clearly define how the overall communication program supports OPS’ mission and goals and include specific action steps, target audiences, key messages, timelines, responsible staff, desired outcomes, and specific evaluation criteria for each goal of the district plan. Charting the course for current communication needs, along with being responsive to the future direction of the district, will ensure that OPS is communicating effectively with target audiences and building support for the schools.

Preparing a written plan will assist District Communications in assessing ongoing communication efforts to determine areas that need to be strengthened as well as where strategic abandonment of projects and programs might best be employed. It is often difficult to release work that is familiar and for which we feel ownership, but may no longer be effective. A strategic communication plan can provide a measure of the value of all projects and programs under District Communications’ purview.

A strategic communication plan also will help ensure the development and dissemination of key messages critical to the OPS’ mission and goals. One significant finding of this communication audit was that although information was shared regularly among top leadership, there was often a breakdown in communication as the information works its way through all levels of the school system. A written communication plan will help clarify that it is incumbent upon administrators at all levels to “close the loop” on communication and ensure that key information is shared throughout OPS.

A strategic communication plan provides transparency in communication and accountability for plan implementation. It is a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability across the system through established evaluative criteria. This plan should be the guideline for the district’s communication activities; however, it is important to remember that school systems exist in an ever-changing environment, impacted by community, state, and federal influences. Creating a flexible and dynamic plan that allows for the impact of these influences will benefit OPS and the families that it serves.

Participants across the focus groups felt that OPS needs to become less reactive and more proactive in its communication effort. In order to raise the level of communication – both internally and externally – OPS must increase its outreach and balance response communication with a strategic, targeted communication effort that has specific goals in mind. Having a plan in place can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communications effort because all projects and programs are considered in terms of whether or not they support the district’s mission and goals. This will help keep communication priorities in focus so that
District Communications staff spend their time on tasks and activities directly related to key OPS goals and critical initiatives. When evaluation criteria are built into the plan, it provides a vehicle for demonstrating accountability and reporting on the progress of communication efforts. It also helps ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm large school systems. In addition, an effective plan will build understanding and staff involvement in communication efforts by providing clear direction and a foundation for telling OPS’ story in “one clear voice.”

The first step is to determine strategic communication goals that align the work of District Communications with the short- and long-range district goals and objectives determined by the superintendent and Board of Education. This is particularly important so that the vision and direction is communicated clearly and consistently. Given the variety of responsibilities that fall under the auspices of the District Communications office, a well-thought out communication plan is essential to keeping functions and activities on track and ensuring that communication efforts are effective and on target.

It is not enough to simply say communication about important district programs and initiatives will happen; it is important to define the communication strategies that will be used to help OPS achieve its goals. This does not mean that District Communications is solely responsible for implementing all communication strategies. That would be unrealistic given the size of the department and the size of OPS. All employees must assume some responsibility for the communication effort, but District Communications should be responsible for ensuring that communication is imbedded into all district goals, initiatives and programs so that employees understand their roles as key communicators and ambassadors.

The director of communications should work with administrators and other departments to assist them with the planning and implementation of communication strategies that support their efforts. This kind of solid communication planning will help OPS become more proactive in telling its story and building strong community support.

The plan should include the four-step public relations process of research, planning, communication, and evaluation and address the following questions for every major action or activity OPS undertakes:

- Who needs to know?
- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know it?
- When do they need to know it?
- 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 the outcomes of our communication efforts?
The following elements should be incorporated into the communication plan:

- **Identify an overarching communication goal that describes the desired outcome at the culmination of the communication effort.**

- **Include “SMART” objectives.** SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Ambitious but attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) objectives should be developed for each identified goal. This will allow OPS to determine whether a communication activity is successful, needs additional resources, or should be eliminated. An example of a SMART objective:

  By [date], 80% of principals will have completed media relations inservice training, feel prepared to handle media interviews related to activities or issues at their school, and can demonstrate specific skills in role-playing or actual situations.

  If the objective states only to, “Hold media relations training sessions for administrators,” it can only be evaluated in terms of “output” (whether or not the training was delivered) as opposed to “outcome” (whether the training achieved the desired result). Measurable objectives increase the accountability of the communication effort and will enable OPS to demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of funds spent on communication.

- **For primary audiences, define each group’s demographic and psychographic characteristics, attitudes, concerns and communication preferences.** District research – such as climate surveys, membership and ethnicity reports, etc. – as well as information in this Communication Audit Report can provide some of the data needed to determine communication strategies and tactics.

- **Keep key messages short, memorable and relevant to the target audience.** Aim for a maximum of three key messages for any given goal or strategy, delivered in a timely manner via multiple communication vehicles.

- **Focus communication strategies and tactics on outreach, engagement and dialogue.** Strive to expand outreach beyond the simple dissemination of information through interactive activities and opportunities.

- **Include a proactive media relations component and an updated crisis communication plan and protocols.**

- **The plan also should address diversity and inclusion strategies** for proactive outreach and communication with immigrant, migrant, refugee and native families.

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

In addition to the overall strategic communication plan, District Communications should develop specific communication plans for any major OPS projects, events or initiatives that will impact the district (i.e., the introduction of a new superintendent and the change to the configuration of the Board). This communication strategy also applies to any unexpected developments or crises that might arise.

The recommendations in this Communication Audit Report can be used as the framework for developing a comprehensive communication plan. However, it must be remembered that a plan is just that – it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in concrete. It will need to be revised and adapted as goals are accomplished and new communication challenges arise. NSPRA can provide samples on request of communication plans that can be used as a guide.

**Recommendation 2: Articulate a vision and expectations for the communication program.**

As noted in the Observations, there is a need for the OPS superintendent and Board to articulate and communicate a clear vision for the future and the specific direction of the district. This vision should drive the development of the strategic plan and be woven throughout so that it is integrated into daily operations as well as the plan. In addition, there should be a vision for the communication program.

The day-to-day communication demands alone of a large and complex school system can easily consume staff time. Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or seemingly priority request, resulting in missed opportunities for proactive communication that supports the district’s overall mission and goals. Some steps for refocusing the communication effort in OPS include:

- **Develop a vision statement for communication.** Effective communication programs are driven by a clear strategic vision that focuses on proactive communication opportunities that support the school system’s overall mission and goals. There is a need to establish a clear connection between communication and student achievement and develop an understanding among all employees, not only of the function of District Communications but also that everyone in OPS has a role and responsibility as a communicator. There will always be “urgent communication” needs in a large urban school district, but a clearly articulated vision will allow OPS to manage these as one component of the overall program instead of allowing them to drive the entire communication effort.

As part of clarifying the vision for the communications function and building understanding of the role of District Communications, OPS leaders can use this Communication Audit Report, in conjunction with district goals, surveys and research reports, and planned initiatives to determine critical communication, engagement and marketing priorities. A thorough review may also indicate areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that
need more support. Not only will this help in focusing the communications effort, it will also help to ensure that District Communications does not become a “catch all” for tasks that might better belong in other departments. Once a vision statement is created, staff can begin to develop a strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1) and identify the timelines and resources that will be needed to implement the plan.

- **Establish communication guidelines and expectations for all administrators.** A notable finding from the internal focus groups is the need to improve the communication infrastructure to ensure timely and consistent information delivery across the system. There does not appear to be a clear process for internal communications, so that instead of important information cascading throughout OPS, bottlenecks are created when administrators don’t know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. Principals indicated they are often left out of the loop on communication, which leaves them feeling unsupported and unable to be effective as communicators at the building level.

  We recommend establishing communication guidelines that:
  - Identify who is responsible for communicating with different employee groups;
  - Outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared;
  - Provide tips and strategies for effective inter-department and department to school communication; and
  - Provide forms for reporting the outcomes of meetings (see Recommendation 3).

By expanding the communication responsibilities of school and district administrators, OPS can broaden its reach and create more capacity for District Communications to focus on overarching strategic communication priorities.

In addition, continuing to provide regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans as well as new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, diversity, and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their communication role (see Recommendation 13).

We also suggest that OPS develop a set of media guidelines (see Recommendation 14) that outlines the kind of communications appropriately handled at the school or department level and clearly defines the role of District Communications in a crisis or other critical communication scenario.

- **Provide training and add a communication component to the evaluation process for principals and administrators.** To improve communication consistency, consider providing additional training for principals and administrators, and make these sessions a component of their individual professional development plans. Training sessions on all areas of communication at the building level, and common traits of effective communication for department administrators and supervisors, can help resolve some inconsistencies. Providing principals with communication toolkits will help build understanding that communication is a priority in their role as instructional leaders. Providing communication tips and reminders that do not overwhelm administrators can help them practice their skills and develop a culture of open and ongoing communication with their staff members, parents, and students.
The key to eliminating inconsistencies in communication is to tie communication to the evaluative process. If inconsistent communication is ignored, nothing changes. Providing administrators with the tools needed to fulfill all aspects of their role strengthens the school system and its image throughout the community. Since most people relate most readily to their neighborhood school, it is critical that those leaders at the building level accept and succeed in the role of “chief building communicator.”

- **Explain and communicate the role and responsibilities of District Communications.** District Communications strives to be responsive by assisting with communication needs, managing media requests, garnering positive news coverage, and supporting the schools and departments in crisis communication. However, providing the level of service desired by the schools and other department leaders is difficult at times. As the need for timely, effective communication has grown with the increased use of technology to deliver key messages and information, strategic efforts may be superseded by “just in time” requests from administrative team leaders for communications assistance.

A comprehensive communication plan will help to provide a clear framework, delineation of responsibilities, and a means of prioritizing the workload. Given the large size of OPS, developing specific processes and systems for managing the work flow will help ensure that District Communications operates as efficiently and effectively as possible while maintaining a service orientation. Some suggestions include:

- **Add information to the District Communications web page** that highlights and explains key communication functions and describes the services and support offered. At present, the page features current news, announcements and videos, but does not include an overview of the department’s functions and responsibilities or address communication support provided beyond news and media-related services. Clearly defining the entire spectrum of communication services will build understanding of how communication is integrated into all aspects of OPS operations. Some good examples of communication department web pages are:

  - [Guilford County Schools Communications Office](http://www.gcsnc.net/education/school/school.php?sectionid=36301&)
  - [Aurora Public Schools Communications Office](http://communication.aurorak12.org/)
  - [Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/aboutus/departments/corporate_communications/index.aspx)
  - [Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board](http://www.smcdsb.on.ca/OurBoard/departments/communications_and_public_affairs/)

- **Include a component of orientation and inservice training** for principals, administrators, and school and department secretaries at the start of the year that provides information about how to take advantage of District Communications services.
Recommendation 3: Improve message consistency and frame issues for clarity and transparency.

A key trait of school systems with strong communication programs is a consistency of message that is evident throughout all levels of operation and across all internal and external stakeholder groups. Maintaining a high level of awareness and information-sharing becomes more challenging as a district becomes more diverse, issues become more complex, and the economy forces reductions and cuts to programs and staff. A commitment to and expectation of ongoing, transparent communication with stakeholders must be expressed from top leadership on down.

Proactive communication can be fostered by implementing an issues-framing process that breaks down the communication elements to provide a clear framework for articulating and targeting key messages. This involves:

- Identifying issues and challenges the district and schools are facing;
- Determining what stakeholders need and want to know, as well as the best vehicles for delivering information;
- Framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and
- Engaging stakeholders in helping to realize positive outcomes.

Some strategies for developing an issues-framing process include:

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

  - **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
  - **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how to outline the issue or problem from the district’s perspective, and how to present it to stakeholders.
  - **How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing OPS and the community.
  - **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the internal and external stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue.
What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue? Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key statements or “talking points.”

How will this issue be communicated? Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.

What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue? Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.

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

What “talking points” need to be shared with OPS employees? Identify critical information items that all staff should have in order to speak in “one clear voice” and be positive ambassadors for the school system.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute printed copies of the questions for use in the discussion. If used regularly, these questions will become routine and an integrated part of OPS’ communication process.

- Add a “how this [issue/decision/information, etc.] will be communicated” section to agendas for cabinet, administrative team, principal and advisory committee meetings as well as Board of Education meetings. This suggestion is simple, but can help to create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. Such a reminder on agendas will stimulate discussions about decisions and issues, and will lead to better and more timely communication with key stakeholder groups.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Item</th>
<th>Action Taken</th>
<th>Who Is Responsible for the Next Step</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
Consider creating a communications advisory council or an ad hoc issues team to help frame messages. Educators often frame issues very differently from the public, and in order to connect with and engage stakeholders, OPS needs to understand the public’s perspective and present messages in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences. A communications advisory council or issues team composed of parent, community and staff representatives could provide assistance in assessing and framing messages around specific issues impacting OPS (i.e., program changes, budget cuts, development of new strategic goals, etc.) as well as issues that impact the greater community, such as safety and changing population demographics. This could be particularly helpful in identifying ways to communicate effectively with non-English-speaking or immigrant families.

OPS also may be able to tap the expertise of business and community leaders who are interested and willing to assist the district with its strategic communication efforts. These individuals could become strong allies and advocates for OPS if they are kept informed about issues impacting the schools. We recommend, however, that the “wordsmithing” of messages be the responsibility of the District Communications rather than committee members.

Develop key messages or talking points on important topics and critical issues. To ensure that district leaders and staff speak in “one clear voice” on breaking news and important issues, it is helpful to develop talking points that target the messages OPS wants to deliver. For example, should the Nebraska Legislature approve proposed changes to sex education requirements, talking points can be provided on how OPS will respond. In the event of a crisis, provide basic response statements and messages to district and school front office personnel and teachers because they will be fielding questions from parents and the public.

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

Board members and administrators should work with the superintendent and the director of communications prior to making public statements to ensure the accurate and consistent delivery of key messages.

In addition to talking points related to a specific issue or topic, whenever Board members or administrators are asked to provide a general overview of the district at meetings of parent or community groups, they should have a list of programs and initiatives that highlight OPS’ goals as well as information on progress toward those goals. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that school system leaders appreciate having it in order to feel confident that they are truly voicing the district’s position and message.
■ **Prepare quick-reference fact sheets to outline issues.** Key fact reference guides are another helpful tool that can be posted on the website, linked in e-newsletters, shared with all employees, and emailed directly to opinion leaders. Printed copies can be placed in schools and at TAC. They should be updated as changes are made or specific components are completed, but fact sheets of this type can become a “go-to” resource on key issues for all school staff, community and parent leaders, and other involved stakeholders. OPS also may want to consider creating a fact sheet template to simplify the process and make it easy for stakeholders to quickly scan information.

The information on the website about OPS’ Green Schools Initiative is an excellent example of how to prepare key facts that provide a clear explanation and call for action. Unfortunately, it is buried so deep in the site (under the Buildings and Grounds page) that it is unlikely someone visiting the website would find it unless they are specifically seeking the information. Important and useful information like this should be featured on the home page and accessible with one click.

An example of a quick fact sheet outline is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue at a Glance</th>
<th>School Building Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Aging facilities and changing population demographics continue to require updates and adjustments to school facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work to Date</strong></td>
<td>Explain studies and planning completed to date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers to Progress</strong></td>
<td>List of items such as budget, time, approvals, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What's Next</strong></td>
<td>Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. Next meeting/public forum dates listed, if appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Involvement</strong></td>
<td>You can help our schools with this issue by…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Messages/Talking Points</strong></td>
<td>– OPS is addressing the issue in the following ways… (include specifics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Priority consideration is to improve educational options and minimize the impact on students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For More Information</strong></td>
<td>List contacts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

■ **Create internal “toolkits” for introducing new policies or initiatives.** When a new policy, program, or initiative is introduced, each school should not have to “reinvent the wheel” in order to explain and roll them out. Provide a toolkit with resources such as the following:

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

This type of toolkit would ideally be located in the staff intranet portal where resources can be added as they are developed, and staff from different locations can upload examples of what they are doing, discuss issues they are facing, share ideas, etc. By being proactive in getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the front lines of communication, OPS can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the gap, thus co-opting the district’s ability to manage its message and communicate effectively.

Strive for message consistency in parent/staff communication and in school procedures.

One of the communication challenges inherent in a large school system is the need to ensure consistency in messaging and communication processes across the district. Given the size of OPS, it would be helpful to establish basic standards and procedures that all principals are expected to follow (see Recommendation 2) so that critical information reaches all stakeholders within a specific timeframe. This also helps to reduce confusion for parents who have children at different grade levels and schools and for staff who have responsibilities at multiple campuses.

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

Recommendation 4: Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.

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

This also extends to any committees, site councils and advisory groups. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that group members don’t think their time has been wasted or their input wasn’t valued. Communication follow-through is critical to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way.
One simple tactic the Board of Education can employ to ensure the communication loop is complete is to incorporate regular updates into meeting agendas. By reporting on the status of decision-making processes and the implementation of actual decisions as the district moves forward on each step is a more effective communication strategy than waiting to announce the final outcomes. It also allows stakeholders to ask questions and offer input throughout the process, rather than just at the beginning and end, leading to more buy-in and a better-informed public.

**Recommendation 5: Expand communication through a multi-layered communication effort.**

In today’s 24/7, instant-access information environment, public school patrons have become much more sophisticated about the type and quality of communication they desire. And they are demanding “just in time” answers and updates on issues and actions that touch their child, their school, or their wallet, along with a voice in decision-making. Today’s successful communication programs, be they for school systems or corporations, emphasize direct communication with stakeholders and seek to engage them in two-way communication targeted to their needs.

A systematic, planned public relations program within OPS requires an effective infrastructure to support multi-layered two-way communication throughout the district. OPS strives to provide important news and information about the schools and district available to stakeholders on a regular, timely basis. Much of this communication takes place in an electronic environment, and parents and staff appreciate the district’s use of communication technology such as SchoolMessenger and the Infinite Campus Parent Portal. OPS also relies heavily on local media coverage to disseminate information.

No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community. The challenge is in making sure interesting and important information is regularly available in a variety of convenient formats, ensuring people know where to find it, and creating opportunities for positive interaction. The focus groups with parents and community members indicated that they get their information primarily from the *Omaha World Herald* and other local news media, personal contacts and the “rumor mill,” email, and meetings. Although the OPS website offers a great deal of information for target audiences, focus group participants did not cite it as primary resource that they use for finding information about the district and schools. This suggests that OPS must not only expand its outreach to external audiences, but also become more strategic and take a multi-layered approach to delivering information and key messages.

Technology has dramatically changed how people access news and information. A distinct advantage this offers school districts is the ability to “push” information directly to stakeholders, without having to rely on the news media or the postal service. Misinformation and inaccurate facts can be immediately corrected with website postings and email/voice mail alerts. This provides an opportunity to maximize available communication technology. As noted however, OPS must mount a multi-layered communication effort, because some families are still...
without computers or Internet access and there are others in the community who still prefer more traditional news vehicles.

It is also important to not make assumptions about whether families are using communication technology because they may have access via smartphones, relatives, or other resources. OPS may want to conduct a survey of families to determine what information vehicles they do have access to, and of those, which is their preferred source. You can mail surveys home or distribute them at parent-teacher conferences and open houses, or include questions with student enrollment paperwork.

While you cannot communicate with all OPS stakeholders electronically, their lack of access should not inhibit using technology to communicate. It is important to recognize that high-tech, high-touch, mobile communication is how the majority of today’s young parents communicate, so OPS must stay current in this area. Recent research also indicates that smartphones are often used by parents who do not have Internet access in their homes, so more districts are adding smartphone applications to their portfolio of communications tools to reach parents and others.

To deliver information to parents and community members more proactively, it is important to balance print and electronic communication and address publications from a reader perspective as well as with an eye to dual use for marketing efforts. We encourage OPS to consider not only how information can be “pushed” to parents and community members more proactively, but how the school system can more effectively “pull” stakeholders in by becoming the go-to source for “what they want, when they want it.”

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

The following suggestions offer strategies for addressing external communication efforts:

- **Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.** Part of the transition from information-delivery to strategic communication is increasing OPS’ ability to tell its own story well. As news media outlets, particularly newspapers, find the business climate increasingly challenging and difficult to sustain, their ability to cover education in-depth has significantly diminished. As a result, it is more important than ever that OPS establish direct lines of communication with stakeholders.

This does not eliminate the need for OPS to be responsive to media needs. It is important to maintain a solid working relationship with reporters and editors. However, OPS needs to balance this focus with effective direct communication efforts. A strategic communication program should focus on developing and maintaining transparent, two-way communication designed to reach stakeholders directly in a myriad of ways. By continuing to build strong relationships with key stakeholders, OPS will be more successful in delivering its message and communicating in “one clear voice.”
Create an OPS e-news bulletin to deliver updates, key messages, and information about important initiatives and programs. The majority of focus group participants said that the best way to communicate with them is through email. Participants across the external focus groups expressed interest in receiving regular electronic news updates from the school system. This would deliver the district’s key messages to people wherever they are – through their computers at home or work, or through their smartphones and other mobile devices.

The most effective use of an e-news bulletin is to “push” relevant news, updates, and important key messages to stakeholders in a brief, reader-friendly format. It should serve as the dynamic news feed for the community and maintain an immediate and future-focused perspective by addressing current and emerging issues facing OPS.

Topic-specific issues based on reader-surveys can also be included. While important news and information can be repurposed for use in various formats, the e-news bulletin should not be solely a repeat of what has already been distributed via other vehicles and it must be timely or readers will not continue to open it. Allow parents and community members to subscribe via links on the district and school websites (heavily publicize this in district and school print publications and through Parent Portal notices) and add a subscription box to enrollment forms. All employees (with email access) should automatically receive the bulletin and hard copies should be printed out and posted for staff that don’t have computer access.

Another option is to place an ad in the newspaper or print postcards to leave in various community venues to promote the e-news bulletin and encourage citizens to subscribe online. Adding an e-news bulletin to the communication mix also could allow OPS in the future to target communications to different audiences, depending on their specific interests. Information developed for this communication tool can be repurposed for use on the district’s Facebook page, Twitter feed, and school and district websites.

It is also imperative to keep the e-news bulletin short – not more than 1½ to 2 pages. We recommend limiting copy to a single paragraph per topic, with links to more detailed information on the website. Stakeholders want important information but they tend to want it in “small bites” that they can quickly scan for critical points. To be most effective, an e-news update should be published often enough that it is not seen as “old news” (as are today’s print publications). Consider publishing at least every other week, and supplement with special “alerts” as needed for breaking news or short deadlines.

Graphically, producing the e-news bulletin in an html format would be most effective. When readers click on the email, it should open in the bulletin format giving them immediate access. Create a recognizable banner and style for consistency and to create familiarity for quick reading. Today’s tech users want to be able to access information in the fewest clicks possible, so to reach and keep readers the format must be highly accessible and user-friendly. E-news updates can be generated easily and quickly for major initiatives and sent to key opinion leaders to inform them of specific emerging issues. Since it is not possible to communicate one-on-one with all key opinion leaders when an issue arises, look at this as an opportunity to keep the right people in the loop at the right time.
■ **Coordinate the e-news bulletin with *OPS News***. Most employees in the internal focus groups said that they read the *OPS News* staff newsletter. However, they also noted that the information it contains is better targeted to parents and community than staff. All employees should also receive the e-news bulletin for the general public, so the information in *OPS News* should focus on items that are directly relevant to employees in their jobs, with a minimum amount of overlap with the e-news bulletin. Conduct a readership survey to identify additional information that employees are interested in receiving via *OPS News*.

■ **Develop an annual editorial plan to coordinate all publications.** As noted above, OPS should incorporate the use of both print and electronic publications to serve the diverse information needs of stakeholders and balance its communication portfolio. Creating an annual editorial plan for content will allow OPS to ensure critical information is distributed to key audiences multiple times and in multiple formats and become more strategic in repurposing information to support key messaging.

■ **Maximize school newsletters and websites as key communication tools.** School newsletters and websites should be viewed as an important component of the overall communication effort and be used to help deliver key messages and operational information about OPS to parents. Including an OPS news section in school newsletters is an effective way of getting important information in front of parents. District Communications should assist principals by preparing short news updates and messaging on district initiatives that can be copied and included under an “OPS News for Parents” heading, making it easy for the school and ensuring message consistency across the district.

The “OPS News for Parents” section could include:
- Brief updates on progress toward goals;
- Decisions particularly relevant to the school (i.e., schedule or boundary changes; construction; new programs, etc.);
- Reports on student achievement and safety concerns;
- Reports on policy/curriculum decisions and Board action items;
- Budget updates; and
- Updates on other issues impacting the schools.

These updates should be short and drive readers to the OPS website for more specific details, in-depth analysis, and updated information. Once at the website, stakeholders can sign-up for the e-news bulletin (see previous bullet) to receive more timely updates and breaking news about the schools. Keeping length and readability in mind, focus on only two or three timely district updates for each newsletter issue.

■ **Provide news inserts for business/community publications.** Most organizations that publish regular newsletters are always seeking interesting information as filler. Consider preparing short news updates about the schools and OPS that businesses, civic groups and agencies can use in their employee and member newsletters or on their websites. Participants in the Business Partners/Civic Leaders focus group were very interested in receiving more information and the representative from the Police Department said that she is always seeking positive stories to send out and would be happy to help share OPS’ good news.
Involving other community leaders in sharing information is worth investigating as a way to expand community outreach.

- **Develop “pull” technologies, rather than relying solely on pushing information out.**
  Modern technology allows users to “pull” the information in which they are interested, through targeted subscriptions, RSS feeds, etc. Rather than expecting users to come to the website or Parent Portal, they should be able to subscribe to automatically receive new information of interest to them. This functionality should be customizable, so users can identify the specific information they wish to receive. User testing is required to determine how this functionality should be configured to best meet user needs.

- **Continue to build the use of video as a communication vehicle to tell the OPS story.**
  Video is an important component of communicating with new technology. It can help solidify the district’s brand in the community and should continue to be integrated into communication efforts. OPS has produced a variety of informative videos that feature schools, programs, magnet school choices, and special events, but most of what is posted on the website is quite dated, with many being several years old. We encourage District Communications to incorporate video messaging into the communication plan.

  The website homepage currently has a revolving carousel featuring photos from around the district. An excellent way to build video viewership is to feature videos in the carousel as well as photos. The homepage currently includes a single featured video, but it is located near the bottom of the page, making it easy to overlook (and at the time we checked, the link was inactive). The homepage should also include a direct link to the archived videos page. This is currently located under District Communications in the Central Offices menu, making it difficult to find.

In order to build viewership, we encourage OPS to find creative ways to use videos in addition to placing them on the website. Some additional ideas for using video that NSPRA has seen implemented in other school systems include:

- Creating marketing videos for recruiting teachers, staff and new students;
- Highlighting special projects and achievements at Board meetings (i.e., classroom activities, an employee of the month in action on the job, etc.);
- Loop videos on monitors at TAC or in school reception areas;
- Create video updates on the status of OPS goals and special initiatives for presentations at business/civic groups;
- Create information videos for non-English-speaking families;
- Develop inservice training for staff and parenting skills sessions for families; and
- Use video for interactive town hall meetings or forums.
These are just a few of the ways video is now being used in school districts. Whether posted on the website, Facebook or YouTube, or offered for check-out in school libraries, there are a myriad creative uses for video using today’s technology. We encourage OPS to revive and expand its communication efforts in this area to enhance the district’s appeal and connection with a new parent generation that views video as an information source in the way that their parents used newspapers.

■ **Create an infrastructure for communicating in urgent situations.** In a crisis situation, OPS must be able to reach all key internal and external stakeholders within a 30- to 60-minute timeframe with critical information. As OPS looks to the future of its communication program and the infrastructure needed to support it, consider the following checklist:

- Do employees, parents, reporters and community members turn to the OPS website (or Facebook page) first for current news and information about the district and the schools?

- Can parents, employees and other key constituents subscribe online to receive OPS news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts and other communications?

- When news breaks, can information be posted on the website or Facebook page within minutes?

- Does OPS have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?

- Does OPS have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, political, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups and non-profit organizations?

- Does the technology management system provide reports that show what groups and individuals the district has contacted through email and whether they access the information provided?

OPS has recently expanded the use of SchoolMessenger for reaching parents and staff. In addition, OPS should investigate how it also can reach all parents, staff, students and media via text messages in urgent or crisis situations. These emergency notification systems need to be integrated with OPS databases (so that staff and parent contact information is always as current as possible). The website also needs to be integrated into this system. In a crisis, OPS needs a technology infrastructure that enables a single updated message to be transmitted through all of the channels simultaneously, rather than requiring each system to be updated separately.

■ **Treat students as an internal audience and consider their communication needs.** The school is the main focus of the educational experience for most students, but student focus group participants indicated they also are interested in district decisions that affect them. Students should be treated as an internal audience. The communication must be targeted to
“tweens” and teens – they need to see how it is directly relevant to them. It’s important to remember that students keep their parents informed about what is happening at school and in the school system – if they feel it is relevant. Ensuring that students are informed and engaged can be a vital strategy in engaging parents. Some suggestions for communicating with students include the following:

- **Students rely on their teachers for information**, so provide key messages/talking points to teachers at middle and secondary school levels on topics relevant to students. Information about extracurricular activities, graduation requirements, courses available, scholarships, and exam schedules are of high interest to high school students.

- **Student announcements and assemblies are an effective way to reach students.** Provide schools with scripts for PA announcements. Create PowerPoint slides for the schools whose announcements are presented on TV monitors. Brief PowerPoint presentations or videos could be shown at assemblies. Leverage the student announcements by packaging them into an email update for parents.

- **School hallways provide ample space for informational posters** on topics relevant to teens.

- **Ask student councils to distribute the information.** This will be particularly effective for those councils that are using social media to communicate with students.

- **Make better use of the email system to reach students.** Students in the focus group noted that they have to set up email accounts at the beginning of the school year, but they never receive any email messages from the district, so they feel it is pointless. However, they expressed interest in receiving information from OPS, both via email and through social media. OPS could use this existing system to let students know about important deadlines for testing, graduation requirements, scholarship opportunities, specific extracurricular activities or even as a call for suggestions to engage students in solutions for problems in their own schools. We recommend that OPS conduct further focus groups with students, or survey them, on the type of information they would like to receive and how often in order to connect with them more effectively.

- **Update school websites more frequently with student use in mind.** Students in the focus group felt that most of the school websites are too outdated to be useful, though it was noted that some schools do a better job than others in this area. They would like teachers and coaches to post more updates and links that work. When asked whether they use the OPS website, most indicated they only use it to get to their school sites. They noted that most of what is posted is targeted to elementary schools and is not relevant to high school students and their parents. Several felt that OPS is missing an opportunity by not providing information on the website that supports what the high schools and students are accomplishing.

- **Consider creating a Student Advisory Group as a conduit to students.** Many districts now have Student Advisory Groups which meet regularly with a district administrator.
This is an excellent way to track student issues and enlist the help of student leaders in disseminating key messages, and may be a strategy for OPS to investigate.

- **Provide district communication vehicles for students to share news about their school** with the wider OPS system and communities (i.e., student-hosted events, fundraisers, etc.). For example, a section on the OPS website could be devoted to school news submitted by student councils and other student groups.

- **Find ways to increase student-to-student communication.** High school students could share tips with eighth graders about how to prepare for the transition to high school, or information about clubs and extracurricular activities. Increase feeder school connections by inviting middle school students to watch high school sports teams, drama and music productions, etc. Provide opportunities for students to share their school pride and encourage their peers to get involved in the life of the school.

- **Make the students’ voice visible in Board decisions.** In Board reports, clearly identify student feedback. Provide more opportunities at Board meetings for students’ voices to be heard.

- **Involve students in your communication efforts.** Tying student-learning activities to real world experiences in the community offers a wonderful opportunity to take teaching and learning outside of school walls and shift the traditional dynamic of always inviting the community into the schools. We recommend that the schools seek out new ways to connect to their neighboring communities and promote positive interactions between students and community members.

**Recommendation 6: Begin adding social media communication tools.**

The most rapidly growing area of e-communication is social media. This term describes a wide array of web-based communication channels designed to promote direct person-to-person communication – blogs, podcasts, wikis, social networking, professional networks, video and photo-sharing websites, etc. As a powerful communication tool that has already garnered mainstream use, OPS should begin implementing social media strategies as a component of the communication plan.

Across the focus groups, most participants felt that social media should be a component of the communication mix if OPS is to stay current in using technology to communicate, regardless of whether they themselves use it. Strategic use of these communication tools is key if OPS wants to be recognized as an innovative leader and premier school system. There is no denying that Twitter and Facebook can be invaluable in emergency scenarios such as weather events and natural disasters (i.e., tornados, fires, hurricanes, etc.). A district Facebook page can be a helpful tool for sharing information and engaging the public. The downside is that it must be closely monitored for inappropriate postings, which can require a considerable amount of staff time.
It is also important to allow staff access to social media if the district truly wants to build followers, expand reach, and maximize the power of these tools. With appropriate policies in place and staff training on their use, social media tools can be effectively incorporated into the OPS communication toolbox.

It is helpful to post social media policies on district and school websites. One good example is IBM’s Social Computing Guidelines at [www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html](http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html). Minnetonka (Minn.) Public Schools also has developed a good set of policies available at [www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/policies/470.pdf](http://www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/policies/470.pdf). Papillion-La Vista School District in Nebraska has an active Facebook page and well-developed “Rules of Engagement” (access at [www.nspra.org/files/Papillion-La%20Vista%20Facebook%20Rules%20of%20Engagement.pdf](http://www.nspra.org/files/Papillion-La%20Vista%20Facebook%20Rules%20of%20Engagement.pdf)) and is a leader in the use of social media for school district communication.

Many districts across the country find YouTube to be a valuable social media tool. Among those using YouTube effectively are the Guilford County (N.C.) Schools, with their [GCSchoolsNC channel](http://GCSchoolsNC) and Dublin (Calif.) Public Schools. Dublin’s YouTube channel was created by [OneDublin](http://OneDublin), an independent, parent-run organization. Their “I Am Dublin” includes a segment on graduating seniors who individually name the college or university they’ll be attending, and proudly point out that “I Am Dublin” – a simple, but effective way OPS could highlight successful graduates. A number of paid and free third-party applications also can help districts add a YouTube tab to a Facebook fan page, where a real-time library of videos posted to YouTube can appear. Many of these apps, including [Involver](http://Involver), [Tabsite](http://Tabsite), and [Pagemodo](http://Pagemodo), automatically refresh the YouTube video library. Another possibility for YouTube is incorporating it into the OPS website.

It is important to recognize that young staff and parents, as well as students, who are “digital natives,” are more proficient in the use of social media, so a district presence is required to reach and connect with those audiences. The use of social media should be part of the overall strategic communication plan targeting these particular audiences since social networks, smartphones, and mobile apps are their communication standard. Links to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and other applications should be placed on the website for easy access and let people know OPS has a presence on each.

Innovations such as developing Quick Response (QR) Codes can provide additional opportunities for community members and visitors to access the OPS website or specific features such as calendars or lunch menus from their smartphones. Additionally, OPS also should consider developing its own mobile app version of the website. These technology applications are attractive to young parents and potential staff who operate from a technology-driven world view and will help to build OPS’ audience.

District Communications should monitor major social media channels in the community regularly (i.e., local media blogs, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) to identify and analyze any conversations taking place about OPS or its schools. This will help determine what messages the district needs to be pushing out to stakeholders as well as any inaccuracies that need correcting. Positive comments gleaned can also provide marketing points about the school system.
Recommendation 7: Develop a Key Communicator Network that emphasizes relationships.

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

What makes this type of group effective is that they are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents, they are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and they are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. You can use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas, a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents, and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

To implement a Key Communicator Network, we recommend the following:

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

  To organize a Key Communicator Network, ask each principal, TAC administrator and Board member to recommend two or three people – parents or community members – who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community, and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, ask those individuals who they consider to be opinion leaders in the community.

  PTA leaders play a very important communication role throughout the district and should be engaged as allies and advocates and included in the Key Communicator Network.

  OPS’ network should also include veteran and retired teachers and support staff, senior citizens, and key minority leaders in the community. In addition, add the names of elected officials from the city and county, plus local leaders of well-known civic organizations, businesses, and churches within the district. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

- **Hold an orientation meeting with invited leaders.** During this meeting, the superintendent should discuss the vision for the district and the participants’ role as important conduits for information. Review with them the district’s goals and strategic plan as well as any
pertinent studies and reports, such as this *Communication Audit Report*. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the Key Communicator Network – one at the start of the school year to discuss upcoming plans and another at the end to review accomplishments. Depending on the number of leaders identified, it may be more effective to break them into smaller groups that meet at different times. This can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.

■ **Encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about OPS or individual schools.** Key communicators should be given a “hot line” number or email (usually the communications office) to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate, and inform the Key Communicator Network of the district’s response.

■ **Develop a regular electronic update specifically for the Key Communicator Network.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information. A short, e-update sent on a regular schedule (monthly or quarterly) can serve this purpose well. In addition to disseminating information, updates can alert the group to breaking news (i.e., crisis situations) and help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about critical OPS initiatives. Key communicators should also receive any regular publications.

■ **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** It’s important to ascertain whether the Key Communicator Network is functioning effectively and meeting the district’s needs as well as those of the participants.

    Each year participants should be asked:
    ✓ How satisfied are you with the operation of the Key Communicator Network?
    ✓ Is the information OPS provides you accurate and timely?
    ✓ How frequently should we meet?
    ✓ Is the e-update serving your needs?
    ✓ Who else should be invited to join the Key Communicator Network?
    ✓ How can we improve the Key Communicator Network?

■ **Hold an appreciation event at the end of the school year.** Invite key communicators to a breakfast or luncheon at the end of the year to thank them for their support and involvement. This event should be hosted by the superintendent and attended by the Board of Education. Celebrate the year’s successes in OPS.
Recommendation 8: Improve internal communication systems and processes.

Internal communication currently is a major weakness in OPS, and it is one of the more critical components of success for every organization. Everyone wants to feel that they are a part of a team with a shared mission and a sense of purpose. An intentional communication effort is needed to inspire employee trust and loyalty. Right now, the internal communication effort in OPS appears to consist primarily of the monthly *OPS News* and First Class email, which staff indicated is difficult to manage due to the volume. The lack of a planned internal communication system also feeds the perception that TAC departments function in silos and do not communicate with each other.

The Staff Links menu on the website has useful information for employees, but it is primarily a source of forms and employment-related information and tools instead of key messaging about the direction and goals of the district. While focus group participants for the most part said they read the *OPS News*, because it is a monthly publication, it doesn’t serve the need for more timely updates. When it comes to information about what is going on around the school system, staff in the focus groups said that they get much of their information from the news media and the “rumor mill.”

Improving internal communication must be a top priority of OPS’ communication planning. The aim of a strong internal communication program should be the creation of a culture of employee engagement and empowerment, which is associated with highly effective organizations.

To communicate effectively and credibly in “one clear voice,” all employees must understand that good communication and public relations is not solely the responsibility of administrators and District Communications. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of the responsibility for this role, from the Board of Education to part-time employees. They must understand the power and influence that they personally and collectively hold over public perception of, and satisfaction with, OPS schools.

Staff focus groups stated that information is not always shared effectively throughout all levels of the district and they often feel left out of the communication loop. This may be the result of busy administrators assuming that employees already know the outcomes of decisions or they may be simply forgetting to share information. It may also be caused by some administrators “gatekeeping” information as “need to know,” which hampers the ability of staff to do their jobs well and blocks efforts to be transparent with decisions. Whatever the reason, it is important that OPS leaders “close the information loop” by explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives, giving them clear direction for accomplishing critical tasks, and keeping them informed about progress and results.

Employees are frontline communicators who should receive important information before the media and public. When an issue emerges or when OPS begins to address a problem or concern, it is essential that senior leaders incorporate a “staff first” focus into strategic communication efforts. When staff members rely on the “grapevine” or the news media to get
information, it hampers OPS’ efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. Employees are well connected to parents and community members and are considered by external groups to be a trusted source of information. They can serve as ambassadors if they are aware of current issues and the rationale behind the decision-making process, and feel prepared to respond to questions.

Timeliness and message consistency are critical to developing a strong, effective internal communication program. When employees feel as though they are “the last to know” or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as the news media or parents), they do not feel they are valued members of the team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their important roles as ambassadors for the schools. By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for education and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages, and training when appropriate, OPS can exponentially expand its communication outreach in the community. Some suggestions for improving internal communications include the following:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Strategies for disseminating key messages internally include:
  - Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Communicate with staff before you disseminate messages to external audiences and the media.
  - Communicate messages to staff through meetings, First Class email updates, videos, and SchoolMessenger notifications (for critical or time-sensitive communications, crisis situations, or incidents of concern involving students).
  - Increase opportunities for face-to-face meetings that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.
  - Include messages as headings on district and school websites and publications.
  - Share key messages with employee communication groups and teacher/support staff association leaders.
  - Evaluate how Infinite Campus can be used more effectively as a staff intranet and communication tool.

- **Develop a regular e-news update for employees.** A regularly published internal e-news update (preferably weekly) designed specifically for employees is needed to better meet staff information needs. A graphically complex design is not necessary. Instead, the goal should be to provide timely information in a brief (no more than 5 or 6 current news items/event information), tightly written format and drive employees through links to the website or a staff intranet for more extensive or detailed information. Include Board action updates from
regular meetings and highlights of discussions on policy or program changes under consideration.

Keep an e-update short and reader-friendly to build its use as a key source of information. Publish special “Alert” editions as needed (i.e., on time-sensitive topics, crisis situations or incidents of concern involving students). For an e-publication to provide timely updates to staff, others in OPS will need to assist in this effort by submitting information from their schools and departments to District Communications.

It is also important that staff be aware of information that is being shared with parents and the public so that they are prepared to answer questions or clarify issues. To ensure that employees understand the importance of staying current on activities and events taking place around the district, consider providing links to news releases and other information posted on the website, or that will be distributed to parents and the public, under a special heading such as “News to Know.” This should include a short statement explaining that as frontline communicators and “ambassadors” for OPS, the district wants to make sure employees are well-informed in advance.

It is essential that the e-news update be sent directly to all employees – including those who are part-time – rather than relying on the principals to distribute it to staff. It is also important to distribute or post print copies for those employees who do not have regular access to a computer.

Though the e-news update should be sent to directly to all staff, it also should be archived under the Staff Links section of the website, along with any memos, reports, policies and other more detailed information linked to it. Use website analytics to identify which stories receive “click-throughs” – this is one method of determining which stories are of most interest to readers. Gather reader feedback through other evaluation strategies such as readership surveys or an “editorial panel” of staff members to give periodic input about the news update.

Consider some of the following content for an employee e-news update:

- New policies and procedures that impact staff and students.
- Examples of progress toward achieving OPS goals.
- Opportunities for staff input/feedback on administrative/Board decisions.
- Follow-up on how feedback was used and rationale behind decisions.
- Answers to the most frequently asked questions by parents and the public.
- Information about accountability standards and assessments.
- Updates on projects or programs.
- Governmental/legislative updates.
- Background and resolution of school incidents.
- Special events, activities and awards at school sites.
- OPS in the local news.
- Recognition of employee work and achievements.
- Celebrations of sensational customer service or good deeds.
- Communication tips on sharing information with parents and the public.
- Other information identified through the reader feedback.

Once the e-news update is established as a primary source of current news and job-related information, we recommend that a readership survey be conducted to evaluate whether OPS News should be eliminated and popular components, such as the A+ Honors column, be incorporated into the e-news update. In today’s world, a monthly print publication is out of date before it’s published, and given the limited audience (OPS employees and retirees) the production costs may be better spent on other communication vehicles that allow for repurposing of information.

- **Address issues on internal culture and implement a change management process to increase collaboration.** Many focus group participants spoke about an internal culture that is perceived as closed and not open to collaboration. Department silos at TAC and a disconnect to the schools foster distrust rather than a climate of service and collaboration. Building-level employees said the schools are “run from afar” and they don’t know who in departments is making decisions that impact them. As one focus group participant said, they only know, “It’s the ‘guy.’” The cabinet, department directors and principals need to work together to develop an internal change management process to begin to address this issue. One approach might be to introduce an employee engagement/satisfaction survey as a start.

Another way to build an internal culture of collaboration is to encourage TAC staff to visit schools whenever possible. A common comment from the internal focus groups was that they never see TAC personnel in the schools. This could be developed into a program in which every TAC staff member visits a school at least once during the year. This would help build relationships, and help TAC staff understand the realities of the school clients they serve. Ideally, staff members should visit a school or person to whom they provide direct service (i.e., payroll managers and administrative assistants would meet with school office personnel who prepare payroll reports). However, it is also a good opportunity for staff to learn about programs such as dual language, magnet programs, special education, and new curriculum that has been implemented, etc.

- **Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.** There are many ways to provide information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication. Research (including focus group feedback from this communication audit) shows that employees prefer face-to-face communication from direct supervisors to memos and newsletters. We suggest that all administrators who plan and run meetings work to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. An opportunity to dialogue and ask questions promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the schools.
Encourage principals and administrators to include support staff in staff meetings. Focus group feedback indicates that support staff members often feel left out of the loop. While it is not always easy for them to attend staff meetings due to work hours and responsibilities, making it possible for them to attend at least some meetings each year will reinforce their sense of being valued as contributing members of the school team. Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important district information at meetings. Share key messages at all staff meetings (message cards could be distributed as well), so that everyone is clear and comfortable with their communication role.

The same is true for staff at TAC. Some focus group participants cited the TAC information sessions offered this year as a positive activity. We encourage OPS leaders to continue to schedule this type of meeting on a regular basis to increase valuable face time with the superintendent and cabinet and provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions and clarify information about new initiatives and updates. In addition, when TAC departments share responsibilities or are working on joint projects, regular meetings should be held to increase face time, build personal connections, and foster collaboration.

- **Create opportunities for staff to interact with the superintendent and cabinet.** To integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a “big picture” view of employee issues and concerns, there may be value in establishing an advisory group made up of representatives from the schools and various TAC departments.

  This group could meet regularly with the superintendent and cabinet to provide input on topics under consideration in OPS. This would give each employee group and department an opportunity to evaluate how decisions will affect them and offer solutions or alternatives “from the trenches” for addressing problems or improving procedures. It would also provide a venue for promoting understanding of jobs and responsibilities among employee groups and build a stronger team sensibility. This type of advisory council offers a way to involve employees at the beginning rather than the end of the decision-making process so that they feel their input is valued.

Assistant superintendents and directors can use school visits as an opportunity for face-to-face meetings with groups of school staff – including teachers and all support staff groups, as well as the principals. Even short face-to-face meetings can be an effective way of encouraging two-way communication and dialogue.

- **Expand the orientation program for new employees.** Focus group participants advised that more effort needs to be placed on training for new staff members and those who are promoted into new jobs. For office staff in particular, they noted that there are no orientation sessions on how to do their jobs, and it is “sink or swim” once they are hired. This approach to job orientation is inefficient and can lead to a less-than-productive and negative atmosphere for those new to the district.

  Some suggestions for addressing new employee needs include:
Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with district culture and procedures and strive to help them feel part of the team. Provide new employees with an orientation package that includes:

- General information about OPS;
- An overview of the history of the school system;
- A list of all district publications, their purpose and when they are published;
- Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor; and
- Tips on being a positive “ambassador” for the schools and the importance of good communication to OPS’ success.

Introduce the TAC staff in the various departments they will interact with. Provide time for new employees to ask questions about policies and procedures related to their employment.

Have the superintendent or a designated cabinet member welcome the staff and talk briefly about district goals and accomplishments to date.

TAC departments should each present a brief overview of the services they provide, along with a “who does what” contact list handout. This would help new employees understand how OPS functions and assist them when they have to make contact with various departments. The departments could also be introduced to new employees through a “trade show,” with each department creating and staffing a booth to showcase its services.

Include a communications component as part of the orientation program for new staff hires. This provides an opportunity to stress the importance of being an ambassador for the schools and of relating accurate information and facts to the public. It also provides an opportunity to do some “myth-busting” of employee and community perceptions of OPS. The director of communications also can highlight the employee communication vehicles available to them and stress the responsibility of all employees to review e-news updates, newsletters and alerts on a regular basis as part of the responsibilities of their new job. Guidelines and expectations related to news media relations should be reviewed so that staff clearly understand media protocols.

Offer similar sessions at additional times throughout the year depending on the need and number of new hires. An alternative is to capture the orientation meeting in a video format and post it on the website to be reviewed by new employees and others as needed.

Ensure all new hires have an employee handbook and any required forms. All employees should have access to an employee handbook. It should provide the information presented in the orientation, as well as additional information identified by the HR department and by staff. This could be an online handbook on the staff intranet. If it is created as a wiki, it can easily be kept up-to-date, and departments can add to it as needed. Other resources, such as FAQs, can be built over time – staff members can submit questions to be answered, for example.
- **Improve job-specific orientation.** Time needs to be spent with employees as they assume a new job at all levels of employment. Either the employee’s supervisor or designee should spend time in coaching and mentoring the employee on their new position. A bit of upfront coaching can save time and frustration and eliminate or reduce costly mistakes that may now be evident in the “sink or swim” approach to job placement. There should be district-wide standards for site-based orientation, to ensure a consistent experience for employees new to OPS or new to their job.

- **Keep school secretaries and office personnel in the communication loop.** School secretaries and other office personnel are a critical part of the communication loop in any school system. They come in contact with numerous internal and external stakeholders every day. Each one of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between stakeholders and OPS. For these employees to function effectively in this role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them on a regular basis. Principals and administrators can take the following steps to ensure that key office staff members have the information they need to do their jobs well:
  - District Communications should provide message scripts and Q & A documents for frontline staff about key OPS issues (e.g., campus safety incidents, kindergarten registration, special events, boundary changes, etc.).
  - Review daily and weekly schedules so that they are aware of activities going on in the school or department, as well as major events across the district.
  - Review deadlines for reports and other information required by TAC or the State Department of Education.
  - Review the major issues being discussed by the Board so that they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
  - Ensure they know where to find the district calendar, agendas of Board meetings, and other publications so they can answer questions and share information.
  - Provide them with a TAC directory that details who to contact in each department for specific needs.
  - Include them in planning meetings and discussions, when possible.

- **Set expectations for managers/supervisors to meet regularly with their staff.** Regular staff meetings within departments should be an expectation. Similar to staff meetings at schools, they should include all staff and cover both department-specific updates, as well as OPS news. These meetings should be held at least monthly.

- **Involve staff in decisions that affect them.** Staff morale can often hinge on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions must be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is
particularly important for TAC administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in school facilities throughout the district. For example, many participants in the staff focus groups said that they don’t have an opportunity to give input about decisions related to their jobs, or if they do give input they don’t hear back on the outcomes. These scenarios lead them to believe that their expertise and feedback is not valued and that “nobody is listening.”

To demonstrate that district administrators and principals value staff input, it is essential to provide time at the beginning of meetings for input, allow sufficient time and advanced notice for staff to give input, offer various ways of giving input, act on the feedback when possible, and explain why it was not implemented if the input was not acted on.

Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. Once again, closing the communication loop is critical to helping improve operations and morale.

- **Develop a Management Memo for school communications.** We recommend that OPS develop a process to consolidate operational communications from TAC departments to the schools before they are distributed. One technique that has worked for other school systems is a consolidated Management Memo. This is a compilation into a single weekly communication of routine information from all district departments. A top-level administrator or executive assistant should be responsible for compiling and condensing information into topic areas (i.e., testing, facilities maintenance, professional development, etc.). This strategy can help eliminate dozens of separate memos each week and save many minutes of the principals’ valuable time. The key is coordinating the distribution of memos and information up front.

Aligning communication to the schools in advance also brings to light overlapping department deadlines that are problematic for the schools. A management memo would force TAC departments to compare project timelines and prioritize needs to ensure that principals are not being asked to submit multiple reports and data by the same deadline. This memo also will help TAC staff learn about what is happening in other departments and can serve as a useful tool to help break down the “silos.” Management memos should be archived on the staff intranet for future reference.

- **Express appreciation.** It is unavoidable that the difficult economic and political climate is impacting employee morale. It is important to recognize that it is not “business as usual” for the school district, local businesses, and OPS families. It is more important than ever to acknowledge the daily efforts of all staff members – teachers, support staff, and administrators – who are shouldering extra tasks and making do with fewer resources so that the quality of education in OPS is not compromised. We encourage district leaders to seek opportunities to thank employees, celebrate successes, and create a team focus on the future. Small day-to-day acknowledgments of employee efforts can make the difference between a motivated or stressed-out staff, especially in tough times.

Schools and departments should continue to look for ways to regularly celebrate small successes. In an intense work environment, humor and sensitivity to people as individuals
helps keep everyone happy and productive. In addition to any formal recognition programs, principals, administrators and supervisors should be encouraged to regularly acknowledge staff members in a more informal way. It may seem overly simple, but small things can make a big difference in an otherwise stressful day. Some suggestions include:

- Continue to commend employees for their initiative in a public setting such as a staff or Board meeting;
- Recognize them in school newsletters and/or websites;
- Send notes of congratulations for work well done and copy those notes to their personnel files; and
- Take time to say a personal thank you.

It is also important to focus on employee wellness, reducing workplace stress and ensuring that staff have a healthy work/life balance. Organizations that have such programs in place tend to be seen as “top” employers, and they realize the benefits of such programs in increased employee morale and productivity.

Recommendation 9: Increase the focus on diversity and inclusive communication.

As Omaha’s population has become more diverse, it is important to increase the focus on inclusive communication. Participants in the focus groups of Spanish-speaking and Migrant/Refugee/Native parents were happy with their schools and believe their children are getting a good education, but they noted that communication with them is limited and much of it is not translated. Many were uncertain as to how and where to access the information that they need.

Diversity, however, must be understood in the broadest sense, creating a welcoming environment for every child, family member, and community member, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, family structure, religion, differing abilities, or sexual orientation. OPS must think carefully about any individuals or groups who may not currently see themselves reflected in the life of the schools or district or those who face barriers, be it physical, mental, emotional, or linguistic.

Here are some suggestions for increasing the focus on diversity and inclusion:

- **Ensure that every communication effort has a diversity/inclusion component.** OPS should have a structured approach as to how and when to communicate with non-English-speaking parents. Set clear measurable objectives for increasing diversity communication and measure success on achieving these objectives.

- **Conduct formal research with the diverse communities to better understand their communication needs.** Increase the extent to which they feel welcome and included, and remove barriers to their full participation.
Plan for strategic translation services. To begin, OPS should review all forms, publications and letters and ensure that key information (i.e., ESL materials, FERPA letter, enrollment information, etc.) are translated into the dominant languages spoken in the district. While it is unrealistic to translate all materials into multiple languages, the phrase, “This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you,” can be translated into a variety of languages. This reference sheet can be attached to school documents and serve to signal non-English-speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information.

When the district does translate materials, it is important to ensure that translations are accurate and grammatically correct. While informal translations for quick notes home from the school office or teacher are functional for some day-to-day purposes, translations for important district documents should be done professionally. Just as the district would never produce publications in English that are poorly written or filled with errors, the same standard should apply to documents produced in other languages.

Maximize the use of SchoolMessenger for reaching families. For many non-English-speaking and immigrant/migrant populations, direct phone calls are often the best way to reach and connect with families, and focus group participants confirmed this as well. OPS should investigate how it can maximize use of the SchoolMessenger system to better communicate with identified parents and families. The challenge is to collect and update phone numbers and sort them by language group. Important messages in various languages can then be delivered in a timely manner. Investigate software that allows for messages to be recorded in different languages and disseminated to those parents who have signed up.

Another suggestion to improve connections with these families is to initiate a SchoolMessenger call in their respective languages to welcome them at the start of a new school year. It would be a nice touch by the district to send a message like this and the families would appreciate the outreach. Taking time to deliver a special message would demonstrate that OPS cares about their children and welcomes their involvement.

Investigate Spanish language and other ethnic news media outlets that serve Omaha. In each major media market, there are local outlets that serve the region’s non-English-speaking audiences. District Communications should investigate opportunities to disseminate information via radio and television. In most instances today, it is not necessary to translate information for these media outlets as the reporters are bilingual themselves and can communicate in either language as they prepare a story. Focus group participants commented that OPS should use the local Spanish newspaper and radio and to reach them, so we encourage the district to look into this option.

Connect parents electronically with a multilingual outreach team. If bilingual staff members are geographically scattered or few in number, a strategy being used by some school systems is to use Skype to quickly connect a bilingual liaison or outreach specialist with newcomers in any school or office. Training school and TAC secretaries on Skype makes every school a welcome center, and starts new families who don’t speak English off on the right foot by connecting them with a friendly staffer who speaks their language. This strategy could be used any time you need an interpreter, especially in an emergency situation.
[1] Make sure all OPS materials and communication vehicles visually reflect diversity and inclusion. This means depicting children and adults of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as differing abilities. It also means showing various types of families – single parent, blended, and same-sex parent families.

[2] Assess whether district and school processes are welcoming for all types of families. Are translated forms or assistance available for those who don’t speak English? Do school communications go only to the parent with primary custody or are there flexible arrangements for separated or divorced parents who do not have primary custody? Do registration forms accommodate same-sex parents and blended families?

[3] Hold bi-annual or quarterly meetings with non-English-speaking families. In addition to the ESL Fall Conference, ESL staff should work with the schools to establish bi-annual or quarterly meetings with OPS’ key ethnic groups, such as Spanish and Karen-speaking parents. These meetings can be fairly short, but would provide an opportunity for families to offer input and have their specific questions answered by district and school administrators. It would also demonstrate that OPS truly values these families and is willing to devote time to the issues that are of concern to them. This would require more of a time commitment but would demonstrate that OPS is making an effort to reach out and engage all families in their children’s education.

[4] Expand opportunities for non-English-speaking parents to get involved in the schools. From serving as chaperones on field trips to helping plan cultural celebrations for the schools, it is important to create welcoming opportunities for parents to become involved in their child’s school. Family members can assist in planning cultural celebrations for the schools that would not only be authentic, but would enhance the educational opportunities of other students as well. Involving bilingual parents as liaisons can help bridge the gap between the school and non-English-speaking parents and build a rapport with families that may help them feel less intimidated and more inclined to attend important meetings and school functions. Bilingual parents may also be able to assist as translators for meetings and other school functions. It is also important to encourage school PTA leaders to reach out and welcome non-English-speaking families with programs that address their needs.

[5] Advertise the ESL Classes and other opportunities for parents. There are some good programs offered by OPS but the information is either not getting out or it is only getting out at some schools. It seems to depend on the principal at the school and what connections ESL parents have. OPS offers ESL Classes for families in targeted schools, but many of the participants in the focus groups appeared to be unaware of this program. Because of this, OPS may be missing an opportunity to connect with minority parents that could pay dividends later on down the road.

Many of the focus group participants said they would be willing to learn English if the district provided an opportunity for them to do so. Some districts are already doing this by providing licenses to language programs such as Rosetta Stone in their computer labs. Once these parents learn English, they often become ambassadors for the district and a bridge between the schools and their communities because they have a common background. If the
desire is there on the part of the parents to learn English, OPS should do what it can to make the investment, invite the parents in to learn, and convert them into ambassadors for OPS.

In the focus group of Spanish speakers, one knowledgeable parent talked about an Instituto Liderazgo Familiar, a program that helps get Hispanic parents involved with OPS and show them how to communicate better with the schools. OPS should consider creating a brochure or flyer explaining the various programs available to parents and encourage their participation. The information could also be promoted to parents through local Spanish media outlets.

■ **Establish a Cultural Diversity Committee.** Many districts have found cultural diversity committees comprised of staff, representative parents, and community members valuable in helping them address emerging language and cultural barriers impacting the schools. This committee could work closely with the Minority Achievement Council and also help to frame concerns and suggest solutions to problems.

■ **Conduct cultural awareness training with all staff** so that they are comfortable and better understand the students and families they will be interacting with in the schools.

■ **Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families.** Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable, such as church or home. Seek ways to reach out to families and build strong connections to the schools. Using community liaisons who work directly with families is one strategy for communicating face-to-face with parents that has been effective in other districts.

■ **Build partnerships with local ethnic and cultural organizations.** A strong relationship between the district and community agencies that serve specific constituent groups (i.e., Latino, Somali, etc.) will allow OPS to benefit from their advice and expertise and help provide access to these growing community groups. Consider inviting representatives from these organizations in yearly to consult on new initiatives and programs that impact their communities.

■ **Plan for a future multilingual component on the Web site.** As a long-range goal, OPS should investigate ways it can communicate with non-English-speaking constituents through the website. Two districts leading the way in this area are Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools and Peel School Board in Ontario, Canada. Speakers of languages other than English can now find information about their schools in one click from their website homepages. Web pages have been created in Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese among others to enable non-English-speaking families to more easily find news, documents, and information about services. Visit their sites at [www.fcps.edu](http://www.fcps.edu) and [www.peelsb.com](http://www.peelsb.com) for ideas on how to use the websites for multilingual communication.

In the short term, OPS should begin to incorporate translated forms and documents into the Parent Links section of the website.
Recommendation 10: Expand and enhance outreach and engagement efforts.

An intentional effort to engage the public in education in meaningful ways creates civic investment and a sense of responsibility for the schools. Engagement efforts should strive to build involvement and interaction with the community. Public engagement is an important part of any communication program, but it is only successful when the process involves stakeholders in all phases of decision-making, from start to finish, and this requires a timeline that allows for real dialogue and shared ownership of outcomes.

In order to include opportunities for parents, community members and staff to participate in dialogue with the Board and administration on major initiatives or program and policy changes that impact the schools, OPS must factor this into decision-making timelines. While it is difficult to put exact start and finish times on any given issue under discussion, one way to begin is by determining the outside deadline for a final decision, and then work backwards from that point. The bottom line for planning is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process, and not just brought in at the approval stage, after the bulk of development work has been done. Also key to successful engagement efforts is communicating the outcome of the process and the actions that will be taken as a result so that participants feel their participation and contribution was meaningful and valued.

Although OPS has held public forums on the superintendent search and on the budget, these appear to have been structured primarily as hearings rather than open dialogue sessions. For the most part, participants in the focus groups did not feel that OPS provides opportunities for the public and staff to offer input into decisions, so we believe this is an area that needs to be addressed.

Many school systems that have held regular public forums and town halls have found that it can be difficult to sustain active participation. When initiating engagement efforts, it is important to continually evaluate what works and what doesn’t in order to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future. We encourage OPS to gather feedback from participants after each engagement activity is complete in order to more thoroughly evaluate the success of the process and make improvements designed to expand participation. Ask participants about what they valued most, what could be improved, how effective they thought the process was, and what topics they are most interested in engaging with the district on in the future.

We also have found that as engagement efforts evolve and family schedules get overbooked, people are often more interested in participating in smaller venues on topics of specific interest to them. Research also shows that one of the “gaps” in communication with parents is that schools too often forget to issue “invitations” for parents to become involved. This should become a regular component of communication with parents, at both the district and school level.

Some strategies to consider in broadening OPS’ outreach to different target audiences include:
- **Create strong connections with families new to OPS.** Connect early with new families to welcome them to the schools and involve them in the district. This outreach should also target non-English-speaking families. As new families join the community, OPS is acquiring a force of potentially enthusiastic and loyal supporters. It is critical to reach these new families when they first move to the district to welcome them and let them know the schools are committed to working with them to make their children’s educational experience a success.

Some school districts develop a program and team for reaching out to new residents. OPS could recruit veteran parents and PTA leaders to form an OPS Parent Ambassadors Club to welcome newcomers to their schools. This can also be a great role for once-active parents whose children are now grown and out of the system, as it provides them with an opportunity to stay involved and mentor young parents. These “experienced” parents can serve as resource contacts and advisors while providing a peer connection to the schools.

Provide new families with key materials such as a calendar and handbook, and information brochures that explain how they can become involved in their child’s school and in the school district. Also provide answers to the most frequently asked questions that new residents usually have. An ambassador group often has a representative or representatives at each school, and every effort is made to find a way to meet or talk new families. Contact new residents by phone, or invite them to a special orientation meeting at their school or at the district.

This outreach can be particularly valuable for parents of special needs students and those who don’t speak English to help them access available services. The Parent Ambassadors Club becomes the “Welcome Wagon” for the schools and would help put a friendly face on OPS by engaging newcomers and ensuring that their first experiences in the district are positive.

- **Engage parents as “learners.”** Special events such as Parent University programs offered in many districts provide support to parents beyond the local school’s outreach programs. Offering workshops on parenting, the curriculum and how to supplement academics at home, child nutrition and exercise, Internet safety, and other topics that engage parents in their children’s education, provide them with the tools they need to become involved. Make information about how to take advantage of these learning opportunities easy to access by publishing it in district and school publications, posting it to websites and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and promoting it at meetings and events.

- **Maximize PTA and Citizens Advisory Committee involvement to involve stakeholders.** The school PTAs and the Citizens Advisory Committee can play an important role in serving as a bridge that keeps people connected to the schools. Participation in these organizations should be nurtured and sustained in order to maximize their value as an important component of quality schools. These people are also important ambassadors and advocates for the school system. Parent organizations, advisory councils and school improvement committees can provide stakeholders with meaningful involvement opportunities that allow them to feel ownership and responsibility for their schools and ensure that their voice is heard, but only if
they have meaningful work to do and their role is well-defined and supported by the principals and TAC administrators. Articulating the charge and scope of responsibility at the outset for any parent group convened by the school or Board will help define how their work fits into OPS’ overarching goals and minimize unrealistic expectations.

We recommend that OPS institute a districtwide PTA Council of representatives from all the schools. This group should meet several times a year with district administrators to receive updates on district plans and initiatives, share best practices that are working for school PTAs, and have an opportunity to ask questions and provide input and feedback on pending decisions and projects.

The Citizens Advisory Council’s function should also be reviewed. It was somewhat unclear to the auditors as to the express purpose of this group, and the website only lists the meeting dates and does not include an explanation of what its charge is or how citizens can get involved. This group is also very large, which makes it difficult to focus efforts on specific tasks. We suggest that a small steering committee of current council members be convened to consider ways the council can be reconfigured so that it has a clear focus and mission related to OPS goals. An option to look at may be breaking it into smaller feeder area groups that meet quarterly, and then meet together annually for a general confab.

■ Develop a Leadership OPS program. An excellent way to build awareness among community leaders and interested citizens in how OPS operates as a public school system is to develop a Leadership OPS program. This type of program is patterned after those offered by many cities to improve understanding and interaction with citizens. A Leadership OPS program would offer an “inside view” of how the school system operates and share information on educational goals, decision-making processes, budget challenges, accountability, policy development, and more.

The components of successful programs being used by school districts include an enrollment process for a limited number of participants, a 5- to 6-week program featuring different topic areas for each session, and are also designed to build leadership traits. This type of program can serve as a training ground for future Board members as it offers an in-depth look into how a public school system functions.

■ Continue to strengthen business collaboration efforts. Business leaders who participated in the focus groups clearly value education and praised the program opportunities offered by OPS. They also felt that the district has been very purposeful in building community partnerships and has demonstrated that it values collaboration. We encourage OPS to continue to expand the ways it collaborates with businesses, agencies and other organizations in Omaha and Douglas County. Engage the Chamber of Commerce in helping to create, access, and support programs that offer a mutual benefit to the district and local businesses. The business focus group participants also expressed a keen interest in receiving more direct information from OPS targeted specifically to their interests and needs.

■ Start a legislative advocacy group. An informed group of parents and community members can support the district by advocating on behalf of OPS and public education. It is often more
effective in bringing about change when the call for action comes from citizens and not just the Board and administration. Some districts produce information pamphlets on state legislative programs and proposed laws each year. These offer complete information about local legislators and how to contact them. During the legislative session, updates on the progress of bills and actions impacting education could be posted to a special section of the website and shared with the Key Communicator Network. Educating stakeholders about important legislative issues helps to create strong advocates and build ongoing support for the schools.

OPS may also want to consider offering some special activities to engage state legislators and highlight the impact of education legislation on the schools. These could include: visits to legislators by the Board and superintendent; a Legislative Day offering school tours and opportunities for elected officials to dialogue with teachers and students; a Legislative Breakfast showcasing the district’s budget process; a letter-writing campaign recognizing legislators who support public education; and providing student artwork for legislators’ offices.

- **Implement a “See for Yourself” program.** One of the most effective ways of demonstrating the quality of the educational program is to let people see it in action. Opportunities that allow business and community leaders to spend a couple of hours or a day shadowing a principal, teacher or student can be especially enlightening for those who have not been in a school for a long time. The goals of this program are to provide a greater understanding of today’s schools for business and community leaders, expose principals and school staffs to different ideas and perspectives, and begin a dialogue between school leaders and business/community leaders on the needs and responsibilities of the schools.

  School systems that offer this type of program find it helpful to designate one day annually for the activity (such as during American Education Week), and hold a debriefing session at the end of the day for participants or invite them to a follow-up breakfast to discuss their observations and ask questions. Some districts videotape participants’ comments about the experience for use in marketing the school system.

- **Create an OPS Alumni Program.** OPS has an impressive pool of notable and influential alumni. As part of the effort to strengthen the bridge between the Omaha community and the schools, we believe OPS could benefit from creating a formal alumni program to sustain long-term connections with graduates and involve them in activities that build pride and support for the schools and district. This would not replace individual high school alumni groups, but would be designed to function in a more philanthropic and advocacy role for the district.

  Expanding connections with successful OPS graduates through a districtwide alumni program could be a wonderful resource the school system could tap and regularly involve. With increased technology capabilities, it is possible to develop interactive alumni programs to seek alumni assistance as volunteers and business partners in developing special programs for their schools. In some school systems, alumni are involved in student leadership programs and fundraising to provide scholarships.
An alum in one of the parent focus groups noted that she graduated from OPS 11 years ago and has never been contacted. “Ask us for money for advocacy and other efforts. We shouldn’t have to seek out a way to give,” she commented. We encourage OPS to consider ways to leverage this valuable resource and keep former students connected with a program that reflects their school pride and allows them to “give back” to their alma mater and the district.

- **Create connections and expand communication with “empty nesters.”** “Empty nesters” and senior citizens are a growing and important resource for today’s schools. Not only can they provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors, and mentors, as voters they also have a great impact on the district. School systems can benefit by finding ways to serve this growing population while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students. Some ideas to consider include:

  - **Create a team of “parent mentors,”** once-active parents whose children are now grown, to assist new parents in navigating the school system and to mentor them in how to work effectively as partners with teachers and the school.

  - **Promote involvement opportunities in community newspapers and publications.**

  - **Have students publish a newsletter containing articles on teaching and learning** in today’s schools. Distribute it to senior and community centers and post it on the website.

  - **Include “empty nester” representatives in Key Communicator Networks** (see Recommendation 7).

  - **Create a “News of Interest for OPS Patrons” section on the website home page** that contains articles of specific interest to taxpayers, such as budget information, facility issues, and events open to the community, as well as important updates on OPS initiatives.

  - **Include “empty nesters” on finance and facilities committees.**

  - **Tap influential citizens to mentor student leaders** or to design a “Future Leaders” program for high school students.

  - **Encourage student groups with an interest in technology to teach interested community members new communication skills** (i.e., using digital photo and video software or social networking sites).

  - **Make annual presentations at senior and community centers** on what schools are teaching and include students from different grade levels in the presentation.

  - **Send extra yearbooks and school publications to senior and community centers.**
- Contribute school information to senior residence and community center newsletters.

- Provide informational materials for doctor/dental offices or other businesses where people sit and wait for services.

**Recommendation 11: Increase the visibility and accessibility of OPS leaders in the community and schools.**

Building trust in OPS leadership should continue to be a priority, both internally and externally. By maintaining open communication about decision-making processes, the Board and administration can clearly demonstrate their commitment to a “transparent” style of leadership that allows stakeholders to monitor and participate in the educational process. This not only helps to foster trust and credibility in the system, but also encourages all stakeholders to assume responsibility for the success of their schools.

Focus group participants, both internal and external, said that they appreciate opportunities for face-to-face interaction and indicated that would like to see increased visibility of district leaders in the schools and in the community. Some strategies to consider include:

- **Increase the accessibility of Board members and administrators at meetings.** Board members and administrators can create positive interactions with the public by being available in the lobby or meeting room prior to the start of a public meeting as well as afterwards. Having Board members available to welcome and interact with constituents and staff is a powerful public relations tool. We also suggest that the Board consider scheduling some of its regular committee meetings at times when interested citizens can attend (i.e., evenings or Saturdays) instead of always during the work day.

- **District leaders should visit schools and attend parent group meetings as often as possible.** While this is time-consuming, employees appreciate any efforts by district administrators and Board members to visit schools and spend time in classrooms and lunchrooms. When leaders are visible in the schools, it helps build staff morale and counteract the perception of TAC as an isolated “ivory tower” that is disconnected to the schools. Administrator visits should not be strictly limited to business meetings or problem-solving. Efforts also should be made to visit food service, transportation and maintenance support staff. Board members should try to visit schools when their schedules allow.

We recommend that all visits be reported on in some fashion as a follow-up. For example, the superintendent, administrators and Board members could report on visits or attendance at special events as a regular part of the Board meeting agenda. Other avenues include adding brief notes in school and district publications or websites and sharing impressions at staff meetings. In a district as large as OPS, administrators may only be able to visit a limited number of schools every month, so something as simple as a “Superintendent’s Travels” box on the website or in the staff newsletter that lists the date and site visited will demonstrate that administrators are not locked behind closed doors. Not only do regular site visits raise
the visibility of school leaders, it also gives them “bragging rights” about the school system, which builds pride and staff morale.

- **Encourage district leaders to become active in local civic and service organizations.** Community and business leaders are regularly asked to become involved in education and the schools. It is equally important for the Board and administrators to play an active role in the community and demonstrate their commitment to those who support the schools on a regular basis. This also provides ongoing opportunities to share information about OPS with influential community leaders. Cabinet members should be encouraged to get involved in various agency and foundation boards and commissions, either at the city level or with local businesses in the community. This will help to position OPS as a leading school system and ensure that it is well-represented with important community groups.

- **Increase collaborative efforts and OPS involvement in community projects and development initiatives.** Another important consideration is to ensure that OPS is “at the table” when major community issues are being considered by key community leaders. Given OPS’ location and prominent position as the largest school district in the state, leaders should maintain a visible presence and have a prominent voice in decisions that impact Omaha.

- **Consider creating a Superintendent’s Business/Civic Advisory Council.** Implementing a Business/Civic Advisory Council could also serve to increase involvement, build a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for student achievement and school success, strengthen relationships, build understanding of the needs of schools and business, and allow OPS to tap local expertise. Business/Civic Advisory Council members could be invited to meet with the superintendent and other administrators several times a year to discuss management, budget, marketing and resource challenges facing the district. Business and civic leaders could also assist OPS in helping to frame issues in lay terms and in disseminating information to the constituents they serve.

Some school systems have used business/civic advisory councils to examine the business side of operations and make recommendations for improvement. Others have had representatives train school employees in management and customer service strategies. In many cases, these business/civic leaders come away impressed with the school system’s sound business practices and are willing to state as much to skeptical citizens, the news media and elected officials, essentially serving as powerful key communicators to the community.

These advisory council members should be included on mail and email lists to receive district publications and news updates. They also should be included in the Key Communicator Network (see Recommendation 7).

- **Implement a “speakers’ bureau” that community organizations and businesses can tap for meetings and conferences.** A speakers’ bureau would provide OPS with an opportunity to directly communicate programs and initiatives to key civic and community groups and patrons. Identify various administrators and employees (such as award recipients or topic specialists) who are available for speaking engagements on a variety of topics. Prepared
PowerPoint presentations and videos will make this effort professional. This service could also be offered online for easy access and booking. A speakers’ bureau would allow OPS to take its message to the public rather than always bringing the public to the district.

■ **Seek out opportunities to present sessions at state and national conferences.** In order to raise OPS’ profile and build its status as a leading urban school system, it is important to share successes at educational conferences around the state and nation. OPS has much to brag about and some truly stellar programs that could serve as models for other school districts, but unless you “take your show on the road,” OPS will continue to be known best for its politics rather than its quality educational program.

■ **Plan activities to introduce the new superintendent to the district and community.** Whenever a new leader joins an organization, it is important to quickly connect that person with the community in order to establish a solid foundation for future interactions. Some suggestions to consider for introducing the new superintendent include:

  ▪ Schedule a series of individual meetings with influential community leaders (i.e., elected officials, major employers in the district, editor of the *Omaha World Herald*, Chamber of Commerce director, local community college/university presidents, ministerial alliance, etc.). These leaders can then be invited to be part of the Key Communicator Network.

  ▪ Schedule meetings with key district groups such as teacher association leaders, the Minority Achievement Council, and the Citizens Advisory Council;

  ▪ Invite patrons to attend a special “Meet the Superintendent” reception before or after a regular Board meeting; and

  ▪ Schedule short introductory meetings with staff at each school within the first few months on the job. We believe it is critically important to immediately establish the superintendent as open and accessible, and if employees feel they are a low priority it will be difficult to create a positive momentum for change. In the short term, creating a video message from the new superintendent outlining his vision and initial plans would help to set the tone and facilitate a timely and consistent introduction to staff at all buildings.

■ **Consider starting a Superintendent’s Blog or posting regular video messages on the website.** Focus group participants indicated they would welcome more district communication from the superintendent and a regular blog or video message would provide an excellent opportunity to expand the superintendent’s outreach and raise visibility across OPS. A blog can be used to address topics such as current issues and updates on the district’s progress, and raise awareness of legislative decisions that impact the schools. Video messages also can be used to address issues, highlight progress toward goals, celebrate student and staff successes, and deliver key messages. These types of message features should be placed in prominent positions on the website homepage and sent out via links in e-publications to garner maximum exposure.
■ **Use Twitter to highlight school visits.** Whenever the superintendent visits schools, take advantage of the opportunity to highlight programs and feature individual schools in a proactive manner. Consider setting up a superintendent’s Twitter account for tweeting comments, photos and links to teaching and learning experiences during school visits. An intern or a student assistant could accompany the superintendent on visits and be trained to send tweets on direction (so that the superintendent can focus attention on the visit). Encourage stakeholders to follow the superintendent’s Twitter account by announcing it in school newsletters, on websites and at meetings. An example of how a superintendent is using Twitter successfully in this manner is Dr. Joshua Starr, superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. See an example on his webpage at [http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/).

■ **Investigate opportunities for the superintendent to write a regular column for the *Omaha World Herald* or appear as a guest on a municipal cable television or local radio show.** Contact newspapers and the local cable channel to see if they might be interested in having the superintendent provide a regular column or update on the schools and answer questions about how OPS is preparing students for the future. Local media outlets often welcome additional material to fill space and times, so we encourage OPS to reach out to them to determine if opportunities exist to work together in keeping the community informed about the schools.

**Recommendation 12: Implement branding/marketing strategies to build OPS’ reputation as a leading school system.**

Focus group participants expressed a strong connection and loyalty to OPS and the schools. They appreciate the dedicated, caring teachers and staff, the array of program opportunities, the students-first focus, and the district’s diversity. These are all strengths that should be capitalized on from a marketing perspective.

OPS offers a quality educational program, but its image suffers by comparison to neighboring school systems that have more effective communication programs in place. A branding and marketing effort should focus not only on promoting a positive image and attracting new families and staff, but also on retaining families who are contemplating enrollment in other districts or alternative education programs. A strong “brand” identity is beneficial to the city as well, because good schools help to attract and sustain local businesses and the community’s economy.

A branding effort can help mark the shift to the future and put a fresh face on OPS as it moves forward under the leadership of a new superintendent and Board. More than a name, logo or tagline, strong brands are known for something unique – a promise of value that no other product or organization can claim in quite the same way with as much credibility. The goal of branding is to develop customer loyalty. In developing this marketing effort, OPS needs to carefully consider how to most effectively develop its communication efforts to include this approach.
The following suggestions can help develop branding and marketing efforts:

- **Consider creating a new district logo and tagline.** As OPS begins to focus on its key messages and freshen its image, we recommend consideration be given to updating the district logo. A new graphic look can serve to announce a new era, garner attention and reenergize communications. An effective logo design and positioning statement should create an immediate visual impression that clearly identifies OPS as a school district whose mission is preparing students for success. The logo is an important component of the identity OPS is looking to build in the community and should be the result of a thoughtful process and skilled graphic artist. Therefore we strongly recommend against holding a contest to design a new logo.

  In addition, we recommend that a positioning statement, or tagline, be crafted to be used in conjunction with the logo. A carefully developed positioning statement should clarify a single overarching message that represents OPS, both for the present and future, and clearly distinguishes it as serving children. When we asked focus group participants to describe OPS in one or two words, the strongest and most common descriptor used was “Opportunities.” People clearly identify the district as one that offers great potential and possibilities, so this would be a good place to start in developing a positioning statement.

  Some examples of positioning statements used by school systems include: Prince William County Public Schools – “Providing a World-Class Education,” and Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD – “An Innovative Leader in Learning.” Whatever tagline OPS decides upon, it should be used in conjunction with the logo and in a consistent manner across the district.

  It is helpful to implement standards for incorporating a district logo and positioning statement on all publications (from the district and schools). This can help to ensure that nothing is produced without consistent branding messages and graphic elements in place. For example, all school newsletters should clearly brand the school as belonging to OPS. All newsletter banners (whether print or electronic) should display the district logo and clearly indicate the school is part of a system. It is also important to extend this graphic brand image to the websites, again making sure that there are common elements that help the reader make the connection to OPS.

  Whatever logo design and tagline is adopted, the key is to introduce and institutionalize its use across the school district. All publications, documents and websites should also incorporate some common design themes along with the logo so that there is a “family” look that immediately identifies them as being from OPS. We believe a logo redesign could be particularly timely as it offers OPS the opportunity to claim the start of a new, exciting era focused on the future.

  One final consideration in the development of a new logo is to include opportunities for staff and parents to offer input into final designs being considered.
Assess all publications and visual identity materials to ensure a consistent brand “look,” feel and experience. All communication materials being used in OPS, whether print or electronic, websites, video, marketing materials, signage, etc., should present a consistent brand identity. The graphic design elements of publications, websites and signs, when laid out together, should clearly show common elements that create a visual recognition of the OPS brand. Currently, publications are designed by the General Administration department which oversees Printing and Publications services. At present there appears to be minimal coordination with District Communications on publication design, which detracts from a cohesive brand-focused presentation. For example, a review of individual magnet school brochures revealed a broad design quality spectrum, from good to poor. Printing and Publications needs to work collaboratively with District Communications to improve quality and develop a consistent graphic look to all print materials.

Consider developing a visual identity profile. There is a need for a consistent visual identity across the entire OPS system. The current OPS visual identity is fragmented; materials do not follow any standard branding, visual identity or common graphic elements other than inclusion of the OPS logo. As a component of the design assessment of materials, we suggest OPS consider contracting with a graphic design specialist to create a visual identity profile that includes templates for banners, mastheads, letterhead, newsletters, websites, specialty brochures and publications, handbooks, and other materials. This should include style guidelines for the use of the OPS logo. Some districts create a stylebook that provides schools and departments with information and guidelines on the use of the logo and positioning statement, graphic design tips, and writing style and punctuation. A graphic design professional can provide the expertise needed to create strong visual recognition and a consistent look and feel to all print and electronic materials carrying OPS’ name.

Conduct exit/entrance surveys. Short surveys administered to parents when withdrawing or enrolling students in schools can provide valuable information for marketing and communication planning. Similar surveys can also be administered to staff. These surveys should be designed to find out why they are leaving or what brought them to OPS, what their expectations were or are, how best to communicate with them, etc. This information can help identify specific schools or departments where communication needs to be improved and provide important data for marketing efforts.

Implement an outreach campaign to real estate agents. Many school districts have made a concerted effort to nurture strong relationships with real estate agents, which enables them to promote the merits of the district and accurately respond to questions about the schools. Real estate agents are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community and they play an important role in creating a positive “first impression” of the schools. It is important for them to present accurate information about OPS in their discussions with prospective buyers. Because OPS serves an urban community, it is particularly important that accurate information be shared with prospective home-buyers to help counter concerns about school safety. In addition, real estate agents have a vested interest in helping to promote Omaha, and quality schools are a positive sales commodity.
Our understanding is that at present, District Communications provides information packets for real estate agents who request them. We believe it would be advantageous for OPS to develop a marketing piece (in addition to the Magnet School Choices pamphlet) that is more specific for use with potential homebuyers. This could be as simple as a Choose Omaha Public Schools brochure that includes links to information on the website that outlines the spectrum of opportunities available to students in OPS. We also suggest creating a section of the website with new and potential families in mind that highlights why they should choose OPS schools and also offers links to community, city and county information sites. An example is the Guilford County Schools, N.C., web page for Prospective Parents at www.gcsnc.net/education/school/school.php?sectionid=33763.

Another way to share information with local real estate agents is an information seminar. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year at a school. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Give them a checklist of information that is available on the district website and a brochure or information packets that they can give to clients when showing homes in the district. By working with the state or regional Realtors association, it may be possible to obtain continuing education credit for the seminar, which provides further incentive for agents to attend. OPS also might consider investigating possibilities for partnering with a real estate group to provide information sessions or seminars. Real estate agents are key communicators who must be kept informed and updated on new developments in OPS.

- **Develop guidelines for offering school tours.** Research shows that people who have recently been inside a school building have a better impression of schools than those who have not. OPS should consider developing guidelines for offering school tours to community members, and particularly parents of pre-schoolers and new residents. A school tour and visit is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighborhood residents and prospective families to promote the benefits of OPS schools. School tours are an excellent way to showcase the benefits to students and demonstrate fiscal accountability to taxpayers. Along with developing guidelines, train key staff and also student leaders to serve as tour guides.

- **Be a visible presence at community special events.** While schools often hold special events open to the community, such as the Belvedere Elementary Health and Wellness Fair, the city of Omaha and Douglas County likely host a number of special events with a family focus throughout the year that provide opportunities for local organizations to offer informational booths. OPS could expand its marketing effort by hosting a booth at events like the County Fair to provide information about its schools, both for potential families and to recruit teachers and staff.

Another suggestion is to hold an “Experience OPS Schools” fair that is open to anyone interested in learning more about the schools or in options available for their children’s education. The fair could include school tours, opportunities to meet the staff and visit classrooms, curriculum presentations, kindergarten registration, and Q&A sessions, among other possibilities.
Create targeted audience information packages/CDs/DVDs. Given the short life-span of print publications in today’s 24-hour electronic news environment, and the high-cost of production and mailing, materials should be developed that can be multi-purposed to minimize costs and maximize effectiveness. A basic information package or CD/DVD that incorporates videos can be adapted to market OPS to a variety of audiences, such as real estate agents, parents of preschoolers, families considering a move to Omaha, immigrant/migrant families, teacher recruits, business leaders, elected officials, and potential partners.

Videos that explain what students and parents can expect at critical grade level transitions (i.e., primary to intermediate, intermediate to secondary, etc.) are a helpful tool as well. Publications such as the Annual Report, magnet program brochures, etc., can be used and regrouped in different ways to reach targeted audiences. What will make these information packages most effective is to provide only information specific to the target group so people do not need to sift through materials that aren’t pertinent to them. All of this information also can be segmented by target audience and posted on the website.

Recommendation 13: Emphasize the importance of customer service.

Effective marketing is based on solid programs that meet customer expectations. Parents, students and community members who enter an OPS campus or office should not only find employees and an environment that is welcoming and friendly, but one that mirrors the positive attributes they have heard about the district and its schools. Customer service is an element of good “ambassadorship” that is important from both an external and internal perspective. All employees, from the administration on down, need to clearly understand their roles in providing the services today’s education “customers” demand. In order to be effective in this important role, employees also need to feel empowered to make decisions related to meeting customer needs. Internally, staff members, particularly those who work at TAC, need to understand how they support each other in their jobs, and how to meet the needs of their colleague “customers” in the schools. Some suggestions include:

- Foster a service-orientated attitude by setting service standards for all staff. Staff in TAC departments should see their main focus as providing direct support to schools, as well as providing excellent service to parents and the public. Encourage all TAC departments to establish standards for their levels of service to schools and the public. School staff and TAC departments should work together to identify key services and set standards that help foster strong relationships. Schools should similarly set standards of service for students, parents and the community. Some standards may be set at the district level, to ensure consistency across the system.

- Ensure that messaging and customer experiences match. We recommend that OPS assess the first impression that visitors get when calling or visiting a school or TAC. While employees are well-intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception if there is no clear signage or messaging to direct them or they feel intimidated and confused about how to ask for assistance.
Some questions to consider include:

- How are phone calls managed?
- Do calls bounce from department to department or does every staff member “own” the caller’s question or problem, even if it doesn’t fall under his or her area of responsibility?
- Is voice mail used to shield staff from the public?
- Are all calls or emails answered within a reasonable time frame?
- How are queries tracked, and by whom?
- Are consistent answers being given to the same questions, especially if different departments are called?
- How long does it take from an initial request for information to fulfillment?

Some school systems use “secret shoppers” to conduct a review of how visitors are approached, whether the school presents a welcoming façade and how problems are handled. Once a school has been evaluated, an improvement team of staff and parents can be created to address problems identified and make specific suggestions about how to improve the “first impression” environment in the schools.

It is important to note here that it is not enough to simply emphasize to staff the importance of good customer service and ambassadorship. To institutionalize a culture of service excellence, OPS also must provide training that supports staff in this role (see Recommendation 16). And, since “What gets measured gets done,” we recommend that customer service and communication measures become part of job evaluations for managers, supervisors and administrators.

**Recommendation 14: Maintain and build relationships with the local news media.**

Most school districts have a love/hate relationship with the news media. District administrators need to understand and respect the media’s role in society, the reporter’s job, and the requirements and deadlines of different media organizations. Media representatives and reporters need to understand and respect the pressure, requirements and mandates educators face, and develop an appreciation for the challenges inherent in today’s education environment. The Internet and social media continue to influence the evolution of journalism and the process used to research and report the news. The focus group of local news media representatives indicated there is a need for OPS to establish a more effective system of responding to and communicating with the news media. Some suggestions to consider include:

- **Initiate a work session with local news media to discuss district policy and guidelines for sharing student and school information with reporters.** Critical topic areas to discuss include: district guidelines and protocols for routine media inquiries, perception of media response time, release of student information and use of photographs, reporter and photographer access to schools, and communication during crisis situations. It may also be helpful to hold a meeting for principals with a panel of reporters willing to talk about how
they do their jobs and field questions from the principals. This could help facilitate a more comfortable working relationship.

- **Review district guidelines and protocols for handling routine media responses at the school/department level.** Media representatives in the focus group said that they are able to access information by calling District Communications when it is time sensitive, looking at online postings and the OPS news tips, and talking to parents, principals, police and legislators. Review district media guidelines to ensure that they include specific protocols for routine media requests or story pitches that can be handled at the school or department level. Creating protocols for schools and departments to follow when handling routine media calls can help facilitate response times and relationships with local news outlets seeking information and story ideas.

  Additionally, the guidelines should outline what constitutes a districtwide issue or crisis that should be managed by the superintendent and District Communications and what types of media requests can be deferred to individual schools or department heads.

  The media guidelines should include procedures for tracking media responses and outcomes, and keeping District Communications advised of media activities in individual schools or departments. In addition, the guidelines should advise principals and administrators on how District Communications can assist them with their media needs and provide directions and timelines for submitting requests.

  Many large districts create a media relations handbook that contains these guidelines and protocols as well as tips for effective media response. This can serve as a handy reference tool for all administrators and is an option OPS may want to consider.

- **Create an “OPS News Room” on the website for easy access by reporters.** To better serve the routine information needs of the news media and reduce reporters’ dependence on reaching staff to provide routine information, an expanded section of the website should be created with news media needs in mind. This should be accessible through a tab on the homepage (see Recommendation and reporters should be able to subscribe to automatic notification through an RSS feed of any new content in the News Room. Easy access and additional information will make the site more “media-friendly.” Talk to the local reporters who regularly cover OPS to determine what information to provide in the media section.

  Some suggestions for bolstering media content include:

  - Provide an OPS fact sheet that includes data such as enrollment and staffing numbers by school, demographic breakdowns, age of buildings and historical notes, etc.

  - A link to the weekly “OPS Story Ideas.”

  - Include links to bios and high-resolution head shots of the superintendent, top administrative staff and the Board.
- Link to high-resolution graphics of the OPS logo, logos of other key initiatives or campaigns, photographs of district buildings and schools, and other important visuals.

- Provide contact information for District Communications staff as well as their specific areas of responsibility. Include after-hours media contact information.

- Include an archive of district publications, including newsletters and marketing publications.

- Post high-resolution photos (can be minimized in size before posting) video, and b-roll of breaking district news or special events.

- Provide a media sourcebook – a list of OPS staff who are experts on various topics of potential media interest (i.e., student assessment, facilities and construction, special subject areas such as math and literacy, dual language, special education, nutrition and wellness, study tips, how to help children deal with grief, how to deal with bullying, divorce or blended families, etc.). Keep the list up-to-date and add information and contacts as issues become “hot topics.” Staff with interesting or unusual areas of expertise should also be included.

- Provide media guidelines for:
  - Requesting interviews with district personnel.
  - Campus visits.
  - How OPS will communicate with the media in a crisis. This should include: identifying a primary contact and spokesperson; procedures for news briefings and handling requests for interviews or access to campuses; location of media assembly areas; and any policies related to crisis management.

- **Provide annual media relations training for administrators.** We also recommend that all administrators receive annual inservice in media relations that not only includes training in delivering an effective message but also explains their responsibilities and accountability as key communicators for OPS (see Recommendation 16).

- **Strive to repair and improve the working relationship between OPS and the Omaha World Herald.** It is not unusual for central urban school districts to have a challenging relationship with the major newspaper of record in the community. The proximity to the schools and quick access to central administration offices makes it deadline-friendly for reporters, and the nature of an urban system guarantees a steady stream of stories. However, OPS and the Omaha World Herald have a particularly contentious relationship that was noted in every focus group we conducted. The general consensus, right or wrong, is that the Omaha World Herald is only interested in negative stories about OPS and constantly portrays the district in a bad light.

  Our review of news clippings from 2011 and 2012 found that the reporting on most news articles about OPS was fairly straightforward and presented facts and an accounting of the
story based on the information available to reporters. Editorials and letters to the editor tended to present a much more negative view, which is to be expected in opinion pieces.

In the auditors’ interviews with news media representatives, including from the *Omaha World Herald*, we found that editors and reporters were interested in improving working relationships with OPS. With the advent of new district leadership and administrative organizational changes, OPS leaders – both the superintendent and Board as well as District Communications – have an opportunity to rebuild the relationship with the *Omaha World Herald* and establish a more open and transparent flow of information. We encourage District Communications to establish regular editorial meetings with the *Omaha World Herald* and the superintendent and Board president to improve understanding and facilitate conversations that are mutually beneficial.

**Recommendation 15: Conduct regular reviews of the crisis management plan and revise and update communication response protocols as needed.**

It is clear that in today’s world, school districts must be prepared at all times to deal with the unexpected. From incidents of violence to weather events to major health epidemics, a current crisis plan is a must and employees need to receive training in order to understand their roles and function effectively in a crisis. Conduct crisis response training annually with all staff and hold safety drills regularly in the schools and district buildings. There are many aspects to crisis management – preparation, response, communication, and post-crisis support. OPS has a crisis management plan in place to support response efforts. We encourage district leaders to conduct regular reviews of the plan and revise and update response protocols as new emergency practices and strategies evolve.

For example, the tragic school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 highlighted the need to review and revise communication protocols as well as decision-making timelines when schools are threatened. OPS’ crisis management plan should be a dynamic document that allows the district to respond swiftly and effectively when incidents occur.

The role of each TAC administrator and department should be outlined in the plan to eliminate confusion and facilitate timely response in the event of a critical incident. We also recommend that the role of District Communications be clearly delineated in the crisis management plan. Communication should be a major component of any crisis response effort, but it is important to outline specific roles and responsibilities to ensure that these are not overlooked when an incident occurs. Poor communication with staff, parents, news media and the community in a crisis situation can do more damage to the district’s reputation than the crisis itself.

NSPRA’s *Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual* could be a model for OPS to either adopt or from which to extract important communication protocols in crisis situations.
Recommendation 16: Continue to improve the effectiveness and usability of the OPS and school websites.

The Internet, digital communication and social media have dramatically changed the way school systems need to think about providing basic information, as well as how they interact with internal and external stakeholders and the general public. These sites are now critical communication and marketing tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of OPS and its schools.

Today, parents and taxpayers expect to be able to access school information quickly and easily online. The website is a key component of the overall communication effort and OPS must strive to increase interactivity and keep the site dynamic and interesting so users return regularly. It is important that information on all of the OPS websites – district and schools – be kept current. It is important to remember what makes a good website.

Generally, it is one that:
- Meets the needs of the target audience(s);
- Is a credible and timely source of information; and
- Meets the goals and objectives of the district.

Studies have shown that to be credible, your website should:

1. Present a professional appearance
   - Have a good design and layout;
   - Be clean and use easy-to-read text;
   - Have a good color balance; and
   - Include clear, quality graphics and photos.

2. Provide content clearly, concisely, and coherently
   - Keep paragraphs and articles short but provide enough detail for those who want additional information;
   - Be written with good grammar and spelling; and
   - Offer useful and relevant information per reader research.

An excellent use of interactivity on the OPS website is *Annual Report*. Clicking to turn the pages and being able to zoom in on sections of it is an excellent way to engage the user. The *Annual Report* is graphically appealing and uses lots of photos and graphs to help present information. It provides a noticeable contrast to other areas of the OPS website.

There is valuable information on the OPS website; however the majority of focus group participants indicated that the website is confusing and difficult to navigate. A makeover of the homepage can significantly improve the usability of the OPS website. The aim should be, whenever possible, to deliver content to users within one click.
Some suggestions for enhancing and improving the website include:

- **Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality along with multi-media to engage users.** The best websites provide more than just static content for users. They provide users with interactive functionality and dynamic content, which brings them back to these websites regularly. Multi-media features such as video, photos and audio also engage users and keep them on the website longer. General web research shows that users want to customize websites to their own interests and needs. Social media elements such as blogs, wikis and the ability to comment on articles increase user engagement. Along with “pulling” users in with engaging content and functionality, the best websites also “push” out information through strategies such as self-select subscriptions, e-newsletters and RSS feeds.

- **Maximize available space on the homepage.** OPS does a good job of keeping most of the information on its website on the upper half of the computer screen. This is the newspaper equivalent of keeping information “above the fold.” Only some information is missed by having to scroll to the very bottom. However, this is still a fair amount of white space that could be used more effectively. Some suggestions are:
  
  - **Add a “Frequently Asked Questions” tab to the top navigation bar.** A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the homepage of the website is a useful resource for the public and staff. Some TAC departments have created FAQs for various specific programs (i.e., the Careers tab under Human Resources and the School-based Health Centers under Student and Family Services) but there is not a general FAQ section that addresses a broader spectrum of issues. This page could be compiled and kept current by asking TAC and school secretaries to track the questions they are most often asked by callers.

    The FAQs can also be used for countering misinformation and rumors. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion – or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community – accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another a prominent spot on the homepage for easy access. School and district publications should promote the OPS website as a source of information when people have questions. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be clearly identifiable on the homepage and not added to a pull-down menu or buried deep within the website.

    - **Include a “How to Use this Website” section.** Many focus group participants said that they had to “dig” to find information on the website, which is time consuming and frustrating. To help address this problem, provide a link with tips and guidelines for navigating the site and finding specific content areas. In addition to being a helpful tool for site visitors, it will save time for office personnel who often have to guide parents and others through the site by phone. A good example on the OPS site that can be used as a potential model for other areas is the Parent Portal section, which does attempt to give a tutorial on how parents can access the portal. The use of the FAQs for this section also serves as a model for other web pages that require some explanation.
- **Add an “OPS News Room” tab to the top navigation bar.** The “OPS Story Ideas” tip sheet and news releases are currently located near the bottom of the right hand column of the website. We suggest that an “OPS News Room” tab be added to the available space on the top navigation bar and related information be added to a menu that could include the weekly news tip sheet, current and archived news releases, a “media center” for reporters (see Recommendation 14), and a page for student-reported school news (see Recommendation 5).

- **Create a feature box to highlight the top news stories from the OPS News Room.** As noted in Recommendation 14, reporters and other interested stakeholders should be able to subscribe to receive new information posted to the online OPS News Room. If there are issues in the district, OPS should “break” the news on its website first. From school lockdowns to serious occurrences, there should be status updates on the homepage/News Room. Make other related materials, such as parent letters, available. OPS should aim to break any stories on its own website before they appear in the local media.

- **Use video in a more prominent manner on the homepage.** As noted in Recommendation 5, consider placing feature videos in the revolving carousel at the top of the homepage with a brief description of what it is showcasing. Also consider adding an OPS YouTube channel. Videos can be a valuable component in telling the OPS story – putting the user in the middle of compelling stories about staff and students. Videos can also be promoted widely through social media. Driving people to the website and a wide variety of stories about the schools, students and staff can significantly put a personal face on public education in OPS.

- **Add a “subscribe” feature.** Give users a variety of choices of types of information to subscribe to – news releases, Board meeting highlights, job postings, lunch menus, etc. User testing will help determine items that visitors wish to receive by email. Alternatively, create an RSS feed on key website features, such as the “OPS News Room,” or any other part of the website that OPS feels is especially worthy of stakeholders’ attention. Doing so will automatically notify visitors when new or updated information is posted to the page, allowing the website to “push” specific information out to interested audiences.

- **Add a “Follow us” option on the homepage.** Once OPS begins using social media as part of its communication effort, include links to the official Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts, as well as school social media sites.

- **Be consistent about creating a “homepage” for each main section of the website.** To allow for more sophisticated handling of a large amount of content, especially as website content grows, each main section of the website should have its own “landing page” that serves as a homepage for that section. Some OPS departments do this and others do not. Each department and program landing page should include an introductory paragraph that explains what purpose of the department or program. We cannot assume that parents or the general public are aware of all that goes on in a school system.
■ **Expand and improve the “About OPS” page.** The first link on the homepage menu is the introductory link “About OPS.” This page contains good information about the district, but the page itself is very bland and uninviting. Consider adding photos or video to add visual interest to the page. We also suggest that the page be retitled “Welcome to OPS.” A *Welcome* page can set the tone for the entire site. It serves as a first impression marketing message and should offer a greeting, describe the district and its demographics, and provide some historical background to give the visitor a sense of the district’s place in the community. Imbed links to other sections of the website in the message copy (i.e., to magnet schools, special programs, state and national rankings, etc.) so that readers can immediately jump to their areas of interest.

■ **Use the website to deliver key messages.** Information placed on the website should be considered in the context of how it delivers key messages. One suggestion is to create a “This Week in OPS Schools” section on the homepage that would contain short informational items and key messages that change weekly and allow for a variety of timely topics to be addressed. To make the website more interactive, site visitors should be asked to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or by emailing responses. Feedback links that let users offer comments could be made available in most sections. Comments collected from these links can offer valuable insights into the information needs of users – and how well the current site is meeting them.

■ **Calendar website content to ensure it is current and accurate.** For each item of content on the website, determine a calendar date by which it should be removed from the site or reviewed to ensure it is current and accurate. At a minimum, review the content twice a year. This calendar should also identify the title of the staff member responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the content – normally the person responsible for the content in “real life” should also be responsible for the website content review.

■ **Limit the use of PDF documents on the website.** Reliance on PDFs should be limited so as to improve the accessibility and search optimization of the website. Anything that requires the end user to have to make more clicks than necessary or download a PDF instead of seeing the information right away should be discouraged. Some pages on the OPS website were comprised of almost all PDF’s, which can make it intimidating for the user, which can result in them skipping the information completely. Examples of this are the District Calendar page and the School Maps pages. Present the information on html pages and offer the user an option of printing a PDF.

- **District Calendar** – A reasonable reader expectation is that the calendar is readily visible when clicking on that section. Instead, there is a long list of PDF’s greeting the end user. While archiving items on a website is important, in this case we question the value of 14 years of old calendars. More careful thought should be given as to what information is archived and not just archiving for the sake of archiving. Again, this is a perfect opportunity to create an interactive calendar that the user can look at at-a-glance. Investigate ways that users can click on a specific day and have all activities pop up on the screen.
- **School Maps** – Currently, users have to download a PDF to see each attendance boundary. If there were a way to graphically present this information with one map that is color coded, it would be much better and easier for the end user to find what they are looking for. For example, the Cooperative Zone map is closer to what should be used for the other maps in the “School Maps” section, although the map is virtually unreadable because of the small detail and still requires downloading a PDF. We also could not find a color key that indicated what the zones are. Investigate ways that readers can zoom in on maps by clicking a specific zone or area. Anything interactive makes it much more interesting and functional for the user.

- **Incorporate use of the website into the crisis communication plan.** Websites are also critical information conduits during crises, and it is helpful to keep this in mind when planning content for the site. Develop crisis information pages in advance. The pages should contain basic response information (i.e., student pick-up, evacuation locations, media briefings, basic OPS/school facts used in news stories, such as enrollment, grade levels, number of employees, etc.). Consider creating at least one “dark” page for each school, to be activated in case of a crisis. This page could include evacuation location, emergency contacts, key facts about the school, and other elements from OPS’ crisis plan. This information can then be activated or posted on the website when necessary.

- **Incorporate a marketing component into the website.** The website is an important component of OPS’ brand. It is often a prospective new resident’s “welcoming handshake” with OPS. Families planning a move to Omaha will use the website as a starting point to learn about the schools and options available for their children. Another target audience for marketing information is families who are home schooling or sending their students to private/parochial schools. Develop a section of the website that specifically addresses why parents should choose OPS and invite families who are schooling their children in alternative programs to subscribe to the e-news update and “OPS News Room.” A good example of a website that markets to families looking for choice options is Mesa Public Schools in Arizona, [www.mpsaz.org](http://www.mpsaz.org).

The website should serve as an interactive, dynamic, and rapidly changing communications medium reflecting the diversity, energy and excitement in OPS. Paying attention to some of the focus group observations and incorporating some of the recommendations listed in this audit can help move OPS in that direction.

- **Include short bios and headshots of TAC administrators and key staff.** Outside of the Board and Superintendent’s pages, no other sections of the website included information on the administrator running the department. In some cases, not even a name is listed. People want to make a connection with staff members who lead the district and their child’s school. Encouraging each administrator to include a short introductory paragraph on their department and their vision would build confidence in the staff who are overseeing school operations. It would also help to standardize and provide some consistency between each of the website landing pages. An example of a district website that does this well is Clarksville-Montgomery County School System in Clarksville, Tenn. Each department has a photo of the lead administrator, a mission statement, an About Us statement and a statement on how the
department is Supporting Our Students and Supporting Our Staff. And example can be seen at [www.cmcss.net/departments/instruction/](http://www.cmcss.net/departments/instruction/).

- **Begin investigating the creation of a mobile app version of the website.** As social media is added to the communication effort, you also need to prepare to offer a mobile app version for on-the-go parents who depend on smartphones for all their information needs.

- **Enable users to share website content.** Provide a number of ways in which users can share website content – via Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn posts, YouTube, etc. Allowing users to share information this way will support marketing efforts and build more word-of-mouth credibility.

- **Market the website.** Remember to use every opportunity to market the website by requesting that all district staff add the website address to their email signatures and making sure that the website address appears on all print materials, OPS signage, district vehicles, etc. OPS should consider the website to be a key component of the overall communication, marketing and branding strategy.

- **Conduct research and user-testing to determine future enhancements to websites, teacher pages, and intranets.** It is important to conduct ongoing evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of the OPS website, school websites, teacher pages, Parent Portal, and staff intranets to ensure that they meet the needs of stakeholders and the district is maximizing their value as communication tools. Web analytics, such as WebTrends or Google Analytics, evaluate the number of visitors to each site, how long they spend on the site, which pages they visit most often, how they move through the site, and other useful information. District Communications should regularly review web analytics statistics to gain a clear understanding of how various audiences are using these tools.

- **Gather user feedback by hosting “hands on” sessions with various audiences.** Bring together groups of 6 to 10 users, such as parents, staff, and community residents. Give them a series of typical tasks to complete (i.e., finding information about how to register for school, locating Board agendas or committee minutes, checking lunch menus, etc.). After watching volunteers perform several tasks, seek input about how user-friendly the experience was and how it could be improved. Ask users what additional information, interactive features, and functionality they would like to see added to the website. Perform this type of user-testing for the OPS website, school websites, teacher web pages and the staff intranet. Also, conduct user-testing when you are going to implement major new changes to any of these websites to test that the new features are working as users would expect or want them to. This testing should be an integral ongoing part of maintaining OPS’ external and internal sites.

- **Research and review “best in class” websites and intranets.** Examples of award-winning school board websites from NSPRA’s 2012 Electronic Media Awards program are available in the list of winners at [www.nspra.org awards/pubs_media](http://www.nspra.org awards/pubs_media). Also, view websites and intranets that have received awards from the International Association of Business...
Communicators (IABC), Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), PR News and other communications entities. Webinars offered through such organizations such as IABC, PRSA, and Ragan Communications also provide the opportunity to get an inside view of award-winning intranets. These web seminars can also provide valuable “how-to” insights. Extensive web usability information is available at www.useit.com.

Strive to provide increased support to improve the consistency and quality of school websites. We recognize that this is an ongoing challenge given the number of schools in the district. However, this need should be evaluated regularly to determine parent and student needs and expectations and optimum support levels so that it is given consideration when budgets are planned each year.

Focus group participants expressed disappointment in many individual school websites because information is often outdated. Today’s connected parents expect to be able to access school information via the Internet, communicate quickly via email and receive important information from the school in a timely manner. OPS uses Parent Portal and SchoolMessenger notification technology to communicate with parents, students and employees; however, OPS must also deliver effective websites for individual schools as well as for the district.

Individual school websites need to be planned and assessed with an eye to marketing and highlighting each school’s unique offerings. As parents have come to expect ready access to online information about their children’s schools, it is also important that the school websites provide current information and opportunities for parents to supplement the school program at home.

Offering staff “how-to” workshops on using web program software, style guides and templates, and creating html and web graphics can help employees feel comfortable and competent in using their websites effectively. Inservice training on a variety of web topics, including effective web searches, online curriculum development, and database development will improve employee productivity and provide OPS with another opportunity to enhance its reputation.

Parent Portal is popular with parents and students and is an extremely effective tool if used as intended. Key to its success is teachers being conscientious about posting information and keeping pages current. Focus group participants indicated there is discrepancy across the schools and among the teaching staff on keeping their sites and pages updated. When parents and students access the site and find that information is out of date or not there, it creates frustration that reflects badly on the school and the district. This is a wonderful tool that adds value for families, but only if their expectation for its use is met by the staff.
Recommendation 17: Provide communication training for staff.

Perceptions about any school system or organization are influenced by the personal interactions and experiences that the public has with its employees. The success of these interactions can make or break an organization’s reputation, even one with an outstanding communication program. Most employees desire to be good representatives of their schools, but it is incumbent upon district leaders to provide them with the tools and skills to help them be successful in this role.

We understand that professional development training time is limited given the busy schedules of TAC and school staff. However, a key component of a strategic communication plan is ensuring that staff members have the skills necessary to communicate effectively, so we strongly encourage OPS to give serious consideration to this need. The principals that responded to the communication survey distributed for this audit indicated they would like to have some inservice training offered to help them and their staff members improve communication efforts. Some communication training opportunities to be considered include:

■ **Provide mandatory media training for administrators.** Media relations training is offered at the New Principals Institute, but we recommend that all administrators receive annual training in media relations to develop and update their skills in delivering an effective message in an interview or during a crisis. This will help them feel more comfortable when they find themselves in a spokesperson role and ensure key messages are delivered effectively. One of the lessons we’ve learned from member districts that have been impacted by large-scale crises (i.e., devastating tornados in Missouri in 2011, Hurricane Katrina, fires in California and Colorado, and school shooting incidents) is that a communications office alone cannot manage the communication effort without assistance from the entire administrative team.

When team members are trained and comfortable in their roles, crisis communication is more proactive, smooth and effective, which contributes to faster response and resolution. And in a district the size of OPS, it is simply not feasible for a small communications staff to handle the routine communication needs of every individual school and department, so it is important that all administrators develop basic skills in this area.

■ **Offer inservice in customer service and ambassadorship.** In addition to addressing the role of employees as school ambassadors during orientation for new hires, continuing staff members should also receive training in “ambassadorship” as part of introducing a renewed focus on effective communication. Provide them with an “OPS Ambassador of Education” tool kit of information that they can use in their daily interactions with the public, such as tips for dealing with difficult people, and conduct refresher sessions each year. OPS leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as communicators and ambassadors for education, and support them in this effort by providing timely information, clear, consistent messages, and continued training. Reinforce employees’ efforts by highlighting good ambassadorship in district and school newsletters and on the website. In addition, consider recognizing an “Ambassador of the Month” at Board of Education meetings.
Recognizing that it is difficult to pull staff away for lengthy inservice sessions, OPS may want to consider breaking customer service training into smaller time units. NSPRA’s *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for Tapping Your People Power* CD offers a variety of options – from meeting starters to hour- or day-long workshops – for delivering this type of training.

**Offer principal training on developing school and classroom communication plans.** We recommend that a component of OPS’ strategic communication plan include the development of school communication plans that tie directly to it. These can be fairly simple and straightforward and should be designed to deliver key messages and measure the success of building-level communications. Individual classroom plans can also be developed that support a school’s communication goals as well as those of the district. NSPRA’s *Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy* guidebook and CD provides practical tools and tips for teachers that may be of use in OPS.

**Offer staff training in preparing effective school/classroom newsletters.** Research indicates that school and classroom newsletters are an important source of information for parents. Training in basic layout techniques, effective use of type fonts, graphics and color for staff members responsible for producing the newsletters – print and electronic – would ensure greater readability and consistency across the district and help the schools make their publications a “must read” for all parents. Providing schools with a selection of basic newsletter templates – either print or electronic – can simplify preparation and ensure that banners appropriately “brand” the school as part of OPS. For schools that prefer to create a unique graphic identity, OPS should set style standards for required elements (i.e., district name and logo) to ensure branding consistency (see Recommendation 12).

**Recommendation 18: Develop processes and systems to improve management of District Communications functions and build understanding of the department’s role in OPS.**

District Communications focuses on publicizing news and information about OPS and the schools as well as garnering positive media coverage. It also strives to support the schools with crisis communication and special events.

Administrators and principals indicated that they would like more assistance from District Communications with their general communication and marketing needs. However, providing the increased level of service desired by the schools and other department leaders can be challenging. As the need for timely, effective communication has grown with the increased use of technology to deliver key messages and information, so has the need to become more strategic to manage critical functions and the increasing number of requests for communication services.

District Communications has a lot going on, but it needs a comprehensive communication plan to provide a clear framework, delineation of responsibilities, and a means of prioritizing the workload. Developing specific processes and systems for managing the workflow
will help ensure that District Communications operates as efficiently and effectively as possible while offering a service orientation. Some suggestions include:

- **Conduct regular research and evaluation on communication efforts.** One concern that District Communications staff expressed was how to prioritize and focus their efforts. As the district has grown more complex, so has its communication needs. The advent of multiple new communication technologies, along with an increasingly diverse constituency, has increased the complexity of communication and underscored the need to take a multi-layered approach to delivering information and key messages. In addition, today’s parents and community stakeholders expect to be actively engaged in the education process and this requires ongoing outreach and opportunities for dialogue and participation in decision-making.

Effective communications, engagement, and marketing programs are based on a solid foundation of research. OPS’ strategic communication plan should include a research component designed to identify what stakeholders know or don’t know, what information they want to receive, who the key audiences for specific messages are, and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. In today’s media-oriented society, information overload is a problem not just in the workplace, but at home as well. Therefore, information must be of interest and value to target audiences to capture their attention.

Before expending resources on redesigning or creating new communication vehicles or programs, research should be conducted to determine what is currently working or not working, and identify user preferences and messages that resonate with specific groups. Research will also help identify tools and strategies that are no longer deemed useful or that demonstrate a low return on investment, be it in staff time or money. These can then be eliminated from the communication plan.

Research-based communication will support OPS’ efforts to engage and build solid relationships with key stakeholder groups. This communication audit is a significant start that will guide OPS in developing a strategic communication plan, but ongoing research will be needed to ensure that communication remains relevant and effective. Research does not have to be expensive or require a trained researcher. A number of effective strategies exist that District Communications, schools, and other departments can implement with a minimum amount of effort.

Some suggestions include:

- **Conduct readership or viewership surveys of district and school newsletters, websites, and videos.** The primary focus of communication vehicles – print or electronic – should be to deliver news and information about the schools and OPS based on what parents, community members, and employees say they want to know. We suggest that readership and viewership surveys or focus groups be conducted yearly to determine changing interests and evaluate content needs as well as format and method of delivery. Encourage principals to conduct surveys on their individual school newsletters and user-surveys on the websites.
The surveys can be simple, but the goal is to determine whether people are reading or viewing each publication, video, or website and if they find them valuable. If not, redesign or eliminate the vehicle and invest the money in other communication activities. A readership or viewership survey can also provide guidance on the type of information to expand. We suggest surveys be conducted early in the year to determine stakeholder interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes. Surveys can be conducted online, by including an insert or tear-off page in print publications, or, at the school-level, by distributing them to parents at parent-teacher conferences or open houses.

- **Include communication questions in existing surveys.** Take advantage of existing opportunities to evaluate communication effectiveness. Incorporating two or three targeted questions related to communication in regular and ongoing parent and staff surveys can help track message effectiveness and build a baseline from which to evaluate communication efforts.

- **Hold focus groups.** Use focus groups with parents, staff, and community members to gauge readership of publications and websites or viewership of videos and cable TV programs, as well as to gather input on a variety of other issues. They can be informal (by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions of groups, such as advisory committees and councils, that are already meeting) or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative under consideration.

- **Use intercept surveys.** Another form of research that can be implemented efficiently and quickly is the intercept survey. When holding a district or school event, give a cadre of staff members two or three questions to ask attendees as they arrive at the event. Using a digital audio recorder can make it easier to gather the answers quickly. This can be an effective way to gather some input from a specific target audience.

- **Include SMART objectives.** To maximize research data, the strategic communication plan must include SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Ambitious but attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) objectives for each goal. This will allow for an effective evaluation of the investment in communication.

- **Evaluate outcomes.** At the conclusion of any major project or initiative (such as a bond campaign), District Communications should evaluate its success and determine which communication strategies worked well, which can be improved or revised in the future, and which can be eliminated. The evaluation should focus on impact, results, and outcomes, not merely outputs. This step is often overlooked, yet its value as a planning tool is critical to strategic communication efforts.

- **Develop procedures and inform district and school staff about accessing and using the communication services offered.** District Communications should essentially operate as a service agency to its internal customers – the schools and TAC departments in OPS. Its goal should be to provide communication services that make it easier for others in the district to
complete their work. To accomplish this, inform employees of the procedures and steps in place to best facilitate these services.

As a first step, we recommend that the director outline procedures for accessing the most efficient service and receiving the best results. Develop a project schedule and provide timelines for different types of communication services and tasks (i.e., media relations support, photography, printing, writing and editing, video production, etc.) to establish realistic expectations for response times and production turnaround. As recommended above, post directions and guidelines on the department’s web page or produce a print brochure that can be sent to all schools and departments. Assess the current process of how schools and departments notify District Communications of media-worthy stories and upcoming events and adjust it if necessary.

We also recommend that a component of inservice training for school and department secretaries, principals, and administrators at the start of the year include information about how to take advantage of these services. These steps will help improve service and allow District Communications to operate more efficiently.

- **Evaluate and track time on task.** District Communications staff are involved in a variety of different projects, from publications, videos and TV production, media requests and SchoolMessenger notifications, special events and programs, strategic counsel and crisis communication, engagement efforts, marketing, and more. In order to ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful for each staff member to record the actual time they spend on each task and request.

  Regular review of how time is spent will allow the director to evaluate office efficiency and determine if there are tasks that take time away from communication priorities that could be shifted to other departments in the district or that could be managed differently. Create a work flow plan to track each ongoing task or special project (i.e., *OPS News*, media response, video production, etc.). Sharing this information with administrative team members can also build awareness and understanding of the communication function and help set priorities for the year.

- **Critique communication tasks and ask the hard questions.** We urge the entire District Communications team to take a hard look at all that it does and ask how current projects and tasks fit into OPS’ mission and goals. Some questions to ask include:

  ✓ What would happen if a specific program, tactic, or service were eliminated?

  ✓ How critical are the ramifications of the program, tactic, or service to district goals? If eliminated, how will the goals be impacted?

  ✓ How will the eliminated program, tactic, or service provide more staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives?

  ✓ What other department could take responsibility for the program, tactic or service?
The District Communications team should be the best judge of what should stay and what should go based on their assessment. Every great communication office always has too much to do, so eliminating a task or function should not be threatening to anyone. The cuts may even include a sacred cow or two that may upset staff members or others in the district who feel personal ownership. But now is the time to make room for new, critical, strategic measures that support OPS’ desire to be a leader in communications.

- **Schedule time to meet with school principals on their turf.** Every school has its own personality and the director and communications specialist should schedule time to meet with individual principals, tour their schools, and talk about communication issues and goals, both for the district and for the individual school.

  While it is not feasible, given the size of OPS, to work closely with every school to improve communications, an option that has worked in other large districts is to identify two to four schools each year that District Communications can help with developing a comprehensive school communications plan. Start with principals who are interested in improving public relations and communication, as they are most likely to invest the time and energy needed to develop a successful program.

  This suggestion also applies to working with TAC administrators. The director should meet regularly with other department heads to help develop key messages and communication strategies that address how they are working to raise student achievement and meet district goals. For example, when a major national report is released, look for ways to demonstrate how OPS is responding or already meeting recommendations.

  By reaching out to the schools and district departments to offer assistance, District Communications will be better able to show the important relationship of good communication to student achievement and accountability, and demonstrate the value of the communication function.

**Considerations for Staffing and Implementing Recommendations**

  We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* and it is designed to provide OPS with both short-term enhancement strategies for the communication program as well as long-range recommendations that can be incorporated into the development of the district’s strategic plan. Given the current staff capacity of District Communications, it would be unrealistic to expect them to undertake all of the proposed recommendations immediately, and to be most effective we encourage OPS to consider adding some additional staff when it is feasible.

  Under Dr. Moon’s leadership, as part of a general reorganization of central office administration, some restructuring of District Communications has already been implemented. The former Executive Director of Communications position has been elevated to an Assistant Superintendent of District Communications and Community Relations/Government Relations, overseeing an expanded program. This has helped to formalize the communication function at
the executive council level. The next step should be the continuation of this restructuring by assessing current and needed communication positions for the District Communications department.

It is important to keep the long-range scope of the recommendations in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem overwhelming. The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping OPS and District Communications to not only improve, expand and enhance current efforts, but to begin incorporating new components that will allow the communication program to reach a premier level that will serve as a model for other urban school districts. As a starting point, we suggest that OPS initially focus on those recommendations that can be addressed immediately with existing staff and build from there.

In order to support District Communications’ efforts to successfully implement a strategic communication plan, it is important that consideration be given annually to the budgetary and personnel resources that will be needed as OPS’ communication needs continue to grow and change. The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive and OPS leaders must prioritize by need and importance how communication resources are expended.

As we have noted throughout this report, the recommendations presented are not intended for District Communications alone. While the department certainly has primary responsibility for critical communication tasks, all OPS departments and schools must be accountable for improving communication and take the lead in some of the areas addressed in the report. We encourage district leaders to review the recommendations in this light and with an eye to how specific communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among TAC departments.

A number of the recommendations in this report involve communication activities that can be managed at the school level by principals and at the department level by TAC administrators. Each school can also create a communication team of staff and parents to assist with newsletters, websites, surveys, staff celebration and recognition activities, and other events. In any successful communication program, it is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools.

However, in the long-term, we believe OPS will need to give serious consideration to expanding District Communications staff in order to maximize communication, engagement and marketing efforts and develop the cutting-edge program that it aspires to as a leading school system in Nebraska. We fully understand the budget ramifications for increasing staff, so we present this suggested structure to demonstrate how existing communication needs might be addressed under ideal circumstances, and to highlight the importance of planning for communication in the development of OPS’ strategic goals for the future.

The following position suggestions are based on our findings from the communication audit, and reflect one possible way to reorganize District Communications. We encourage OPS to look at the communication offices of other urban school systems for ideas, and we are happy to talk with you further about how positions might be restructured.
Chief Communications Officer – In many large school districts comparable to OPS, there is a senior communications/public relations professional who serves as the strategic counsel to the superintendent, Board of Education, and top level administration. This position is responsible for overseeing all functions of the communications office, including direct supervision of District Communications staff, media relations, marketing, public engagement processes, publications (print and electronic), social media, district-wide website content (non-departmental or individual school), and ensuring a proactive communication effort.

The Chief Communications Officer would report to the OPS Assistant Superintendent for District Communications and Community/Government Relations and should function as a senior advisor, manage crisis communications and critical issues, serve as the primary spokesperson for the district, oversee public engagement processes and build strong community relationships. The Chief Communications Officer would be responsible for developing a strategic communications and marketing/branding plan, direct ongoing internal and external communication activities, and serve as the direct supervisor to District Communications staff. The person in this position should also attend all cabinet and executive level meetings whenever possible in order to understand the background and ramifications, and provide advice and input on the communication aspects of emerging issues. This would be a new position for OPS District Communications.

OPS District Communications currently has two Communications Specialist positions. We recommend that OPS consider refocusing the duties of these positions on specific communication areas.

Media Relations/Social Media Specialist – Media relations is an important component of an effective communication program in a large urban school system. While the Chief Communications Officer would serve as the primary spokesperson for critical issues and crises, the Media Relations/Social Media Specialist would be responsible for handling routine media inquiries and news dissemination through a variety of external and internal vehicles. This position would also be responsible for managing the messaging on the district’s Facebook page and Twitter account, as well as other social media tools that OPS might incorporate into its communication efforts. The position would also be involved in ensuring all external communication channels are operational and information is disseminated in a timely manner, including feeding and updating content on the district website. This position would provide back-up support for the Chief Communications Officer.

Publications & eCommunication Content Specialist – This position would be responsible for writing and coordinating the various print and electronic publications (marketing materials, Annual Report, newsletters, e-updates, etc.), and updating the website homepage, adding fresh content and updates to the site’s main information pages (Calendar, Annual Report, Parent Links, etc.). This position would also be responsible for ensuring that internal staff communication channels are operational and information is disseminated in a timely manner. In addition, this position would work collaboratively with the media relations/social media specialist to ensure key messaging is posted to all OPS social media sites.
Given OPS’ communication needs, if it is to meet the expectations of parents, staff and the community, we also suggest adding the following positions:

- **Video Production Specialist** – Video is now an important component of websites, social media, marketing, and general communication efforts beyond basic cable television programming. Video could become a key element in telling OPS’ story well, but to be effective, it needs to be planned and skillfully executed. Adding a Video Production Specialist to District Communications would fill a current need and help OPS become more sophisticated in its use of communication technology. Photography needs would also be handled by this position.

- **Community Partnerships & Special Events Coordinator** – OPS has a myriad of partnership programs ongoing with business and community organizations. Based on input from the communications audit, we believe opportunities abound to expand partnerships even further. A dedicated position focused on strengthening existing community/business relationships and expanding and adding programs would bring even greater benefits to the students of OPS.

Some additional suggestions related to District Communications function and structure include:

- **Review and revise District Communications staff job descriptions and responsibilities.** As District Communications strives to improve its effectiveness and become more strategic, it is a good time to review the job descriptions and responsibilities of staff in terms of how they relate to changes being made to the department and to the recommendations in this report. A thorough review may help identify functions that have changed or that should be eliminated, whether all existing functions are being addressed, and whether responsibilities have been added that impact job performance.

  Conduct a second review after the strategic communications plan has been developed and revise the job descriptions if necessary to ensure that staff time is focused on projects and activities that support the goals and objectives of the plan as well as those of the district. This refocusing of primary tasks and responsibilities should allow the director to spend more time on the critical strategic communication and engagement activities that are important to a large school system such as OPS.

- **Create a Communications and Marketing Advisory Council.** An option to consider is developing a Communications and Marketing Advisory Council comprised of professionals in the community. The purpose of this council would be to serve as a sounding board for OPS’ communication efforts. Recruit members of this council from local businesses and agencies and include individuals who work in public relations, advertising, marketing, or media relations as their profession. They could meet regularly with the director of communications and provide insight, expertise, and counsel on communication/marketing initiatives being considered by the district. They may also be willing to assist OPS by providing resources to support various communication projects.
- **Consider implementing a Communication Cadre to assist and support communication efforts in each school.** Communication Cadres are teams of staff members who are tasked with helping to gather news and information about their schools and disseminating key messages to staff and parents. Under the direction of District Communications, Cadre members can prepare news releases on activities and events, prepare newsletters and website news content, post school information on Facebook pages, and assist with district-wide communication initiative.

The best Communication Cadre representatives in schools are people who are interested in communication, know what is going on and have a “nose for news.” The most important attribute is that they have a passion for their schools and want to help build a positive reputation. An excellent group to tap for this role is aspiring administrators – teachers pursuing their administrative certification who are looking for leadership opportunities and to expand their professional skill set. Ask each principal to appoint a staff member to serve as representative to the Communication Cadre.

The Communication Cadre can also assist in reporting rumors and emerging issues. These representatives would be responsible for notifying District Communications about important happenings at their schools (i.e., events, awards, student and staff accomplishments, special interest stories, etc.) that have district-wide appeal. Create a news tip sheet or referral form that Cadre representatives can complete and submit for consideration. Submissions can be sorted into categories (i.e., for use in internal or external publications, expanded to a news release, or for inclusion in the weekly OPS Story Ideas, etc.).

District Communications should offer training at the beginning of the year that provides guidelines for what constitutes a viable news story and tips for tying stories to district and school objectives and strategies. Cadre members could also convene periodically during the year to share building-level communication best practices and successes and receive updates and additional professional development from District Communications staff. We also recommend holding an appreciation reception or meeting at the end of the year to celebrate positive communication achievements.

- **Increase collaboration between District Communications and the General Administrative Services department.** As noted in Recommendation 12, there is a need to implement a visual identity profile and improve collaboration on the graphic design components of publications. A more direct and collaborative working relationship between District Communications and General Administrative Services would help to ensure that all graphic design, be it for print or electronic publications, the website, banners, or any other materials, reflects a consistent, professional, sophisticated look and feel that is clearly recognizable and branded district-wide to OPS.
Conclusion

OPS is a quality school system with the same communication challenges all school systems face in today’s complex education environment and difficult economic climate. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and OPS leaders understand that effective communication is critical if the district is to move forward and maximize its potential as a leading school system in Nebraska and the nation.

Today’s successful school systems recognize that communication is most effective when it is a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. Recognizing that budget limitations are a concern, we have tried to provide recommendations that can be implemented at minimal expense or by reallocating existing funds. However, it is also important that staffing and budget allocations for communications be reviewed annually to determine needs and ensure continued effectiveness.

Making the commitment to improve communication is critical to creating a successful two-way communication process that builds support for education and understanding of the important role public schools play in our global society. OPS leaders have demonstrated a commitment to planned, strategic communication and we believe the district is ready to move forward in creating a model communication program for the future.
Perceptions of the Focus Groups

The following is a summary of comments and perceptions gathered in focus group sessions held during the on-site visit December 10-13, 2012. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the auditors’ questions. Rather, it summarizes what the auditors felt were significant beliefs, concerns and suggestions of participants. *It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.* Input from the focus groups led to many of the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report.*

Group: Citizens Advisory Council (I)

OPS Image
- “Community.”
- Diverse.
- Wide variance of schools.
- Magnet programs.

Changing Image
- No – media fuels negative perceptions.
- There is potential for change with a new superintendent, but the process was slowed down.
- Schools are modernizing with WiFi and laptops.
- The graduation rate in the dual language program has been positive.
- From an inside parent or student perspective, they see changes, but not from the outside. OPS does not do a good job getting its message out.

Trust
- There is no trust right now.
- It depends on the school your kids go to. One participant’s principal keeps parents well-informed.
- Lots of people looked at the issues around the superintendent search process and wondered, “And these people are teaching our kids?”
- There is an enormous imbalance of salaries for administrators and teachers and a serious question about how resources are distributed across the district. Some schools need more than others. There is no transparency on a needs assessment and how decisions are made. How federal money is administered at the local level is a mystery.
- Standards and the respect level in OPS are lowered in the schools and about the schools.
- Some participants said they are happy with their school but wouldn’t want to go to other schools in the district.
- Parents feel the new grading scale isn’t preparing students properly, which doesn’t build trust with all the changes.
Regaining Trust

- Be transparent.
- Answer questions, be responsive, be forthcoming with data and methodology, repeatedly and historically.
- OPS will need to build the teacher base up; address young staff turn over and development needs to build confidence.
- Place more emphasis on learning instead of test scores.
- With mandated tests, district is just focused on that. How do we find the balance?

Most Value about OPS Education

- The diversity. There is less of a culture shock when students get into the corporate and working world, which is a huge plus.
- A student participant agreed that diversity has a large impact on his learning.
- There are so many offerings for kids, i.e., magnet programs.
- Participants said they want to believe in public education and value the diversity it offers.
- Dual language program.
- They value a lot of the teachers; teachers could go to other districts.
- Lots of positives.
- The sense of pride that teachers instill in the students and the feeling of connectedness.

Strengths of Communication

- The Parent Portal is a good step forward in communicating in a modern era.
- It varies from school to school; they can tell the difference.
- Advertising the different magnets and open house.
- SchoolMessenger; they all appreciate it, but many wish messages were sent by school or classroom.
- They like that “real people” answer the phone when they call schools and put you in touch with the right person. Email is a little slow but calls are returned quickly.

Communication Improvements

- Schools do a good job, but from a district level it’s not as good.
- Schools can’t rely on sending flyers home with middle school students.
- Get parents involved from elementary through high school.
- Update the website. There are also too many steps to go through to make updates.
- Some participants noted that when they email Board members they don’t reply and some administrators don’t either. This should be a basic courtesy of treating parents as partners at all levels.
- District could do better with email and doing more with technology to keep them informed.
- OPS needs to leverage alumni. One participant reported graduating 11 years ago, but has never been contacted by the district or school. She would get involved if asked for money or to help with advocacy efforts, etc. Alumni shouldn’t have to seek that out. OPS would have more resources to tap into with outreach to alumni.
• If schools were seen as pillars of the community, communications could reach beyond those that are there. Schools could be a gathering place in the community if they were truly seen as “the anchor.”
• In Catholic school communities there is an emphasis on where students are going to college. Seek out alumni to donate to scholarships, etc. Address the lack of personal contact.

Sources of Information
• They watch the news; whatever the media tells them is what they know.
• The agenda for Citizens Advisory Council meetings. The group questioned how to share it and get others involved.
• Need to reach engaged parents to help share information.
• OPS is not using technology to get information out to everyone. Some said they never get anything from the district, only from their school.
• From other parents, gossip. etc.
• Facebook or Twitter.
• You may or may not find information on the website that you are looking for. Specific department pages can appear dead for over a year. News on sporting events is from nine months ago.
• One participant had never heard of the dual language program and reported receiving no information about it from the district.
• Neighborhood associations may not be the best source, but are often the loudest source.
• Some said their principals keeps them informed,

Information on Child’s Progress
• Have to go to the Parent Portal for it.
• Some reported they have never used the Parent Portal.
• Schools have to be trained to use it.

Information on Activities/Events
• About half felt they were informed about activities and events.
• After middle school, parents have to go look for it or get it by word-of-mouth.
• Participants said the district and schools may assume that parents don’t care, but they don’t always know about events. Important piece of communication is that the expectation is there that parents want to know what is going on.
• Some teachers email parents every week but others don’t; it depends on the teacher.
• School newsletters.
• One participant reported her school’s newsletter is published every other month, so half of it is always outdated.
• Communication is good at the elementary level; at middle and high school levels, newsletters come out after the event.
• The group suggested OPS ask parents on parent surveys what kind of communication works best for them. Many don’t feel they are getting the information they need or feel they have to hunt for it.
• Some parents in the district don’t have access to technology.
Best Way to Communicate

- Use multiple formats.
- Depends on families.
- With diversity, it has to be in multiple forms at all levels, even written forms have to be prepared in different ways.

Social Media

- About half the participants in the group were interested in communicating via social media.
- They expressed concern over the district’s history of using technology; they were not sure they have faith in OPS ability to pull it off.
- They were concerned about comments that might be made about teachers or students, and how it would be monitored, etc.
- Twitter, if school specific, would be useful

OPS Website

- Horrible layout, doesn’t work well. The search engine doesn’t work; some things aren’t public.
- Teens in the group said that if they see a page with a bunch of links, they won’t spend even five minutes looking for something.

Interest in News/Features on Website

- A few participants said they look at the news stories.

Parent Portal

- They like this feature.
- One student participant noted checking grades and assignments.
- As a parent, they can look at the site with their child to see what happened with grades.
- They like that teachers’ email is listed so they can send a note. The group felt that about 60% of teachers are good at responding to parent emails.

Improving School Websites

- Schools won’t make the effort if there are five levels of bureaucracy in order to update it.
- Some reported that it is hard to get to a specific school’s website and the navigation is difficult.
- Students reported that they use school sites a lot.
- One participant said her school is keeping information up to date, but parents are involved and are staying on top of it.

Informed of Board Actions

- Via the news media.
- Website.
- Board proceedings aren’t widely communicated; they usually find it by seeking it out.
Communication Role of Board

- They are in charge of important policy. There aren’t many governmental bodies that are more powerful because of what they do for and to the community. Their standard should be high because they command an enormous amount of money and community voices should be heard. “The Board’s behavior has been terrible at best and scandalous at worst.” They have an enormous obligation to communicate in multiple ways.
- They never see Board members coming out to schools asking for any input on important decisions or come to give a report.
- Some reported Board members had visited their schools and are willing to come if they are invited.
- The Board should communicate on more issues than just those they want parents to show up for.

Improving Board Communication

- Take contact numbers off the website if you aren’t going to respond. It gives the perception that Board members are available when they aren’t.
- “I’m not letting the Board off the hook on this. What has been glaringly absent is open dialogue between the Board and superintendent on the policies of the district. That debate is not discussed in public; it’s done in a back room. You lose that richness when there is no transparent discussion.”
- A student participant noted that his high school has many important people come to meet with students, such as Justice Clarence Thomas, but he has never met an OPS Board member.

Opportunities to Give Input

- One Board member has a Facebook page and keeps parents in her subdistrict informed. She is open to listening.
- Regular Board meeting input.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- There is a feeling that input isn’t wanted because there aren’t regular opportunities, which results in parents not pursuing it.

Improving Engagement

- All parents should know who their Board members are and Board members should have a Facebook account. It’s their fault that people don’t know who they are.
- There are many ways the Board could communicate that it isn’t using.
- Tell parents what the district needs and call on them for support. It’s a two way street.

Perceptions of Board

- There has been so much that is negative in past months, it doesn’t reflect well on the Board or OPS.
- There are many asterisks that explain bad graduation rates, but the news media doesn’t identify those.
• Many of the outlying districts who are part of the Learning Community don’t understand the challenges at OPS.
• One participant said that coming in as a military family, most of the negatives she heard were via the media, but in reality she feels her school is one of the best. It is the opposite of what was portrayed by the media.
• Negative press has an impact on the economic mix of the student population.
• The Board needs to realize they need to regain trust because of their actions.
• They need to paint a picture of the benefits of attending OPS.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• They hope the next superintendent understands them. They chose OPS and love OPS. Understand and listen to them. They don’t need anyone to come “fix” them. The first order of communication is to listen. OPS has outstanding teachers and students who excel.
• Communication is a big deal; a bigger emphasis should be placed on results if you are actually doing what you say you are going to do. Emphasize results over making everyone happy; focus on what is being done for the kids.
• They would prefer that the relationship between principals and the superintendent were stronger so that principals have a voice.
• The superintendent should have an open office, like legislators do, so you can meet one on one.
• The superintendent should be at PTA meetings to meet parents.
• Offer tours of schools throughout the year so people can go and meet with Board and superintendent in an open forum. How will they know how to make decisions if they aren’t in the community and don’t know how people feel or what’s being said? Once they know that, they would be better able to make decisions.
• Non-verbal communication is important. How you say something and what character you show; how you listen and care and hang in to work on an issue. There are lots of “politicians” out there.
• Communication is building-driven.

Group: Citizens Advisory Council (II)

OPS Image
• Great education.
• Diversity of programs for all students.
• “Mass chaos” when it comes to size.
• Too big; less personal.

Trust
• Unaware of most district leaders.
• They know building-level leaders and for the most part, trust them and their staff.
• Losing respect for Board, which then trickles down to other staff members.
• District changed student report cards/grading system three times in recent years.
• One participant reported that last month, a principal was pulled from a school and no explanation was given to parents; it’s difficult to trust leaders when no communication occurs.

Sources of Information
• Email and Parent Portal at school level.
• Good teacher/parent communication at schools.
• They do not know whom to contact at TAC to find answers.
• Need better information and contacts for transportation; they receive conflicting information.
• The most credible sources of information are principals, assistant principals and secretaries.
• The district website is helpful if you know where to dig for specific information.
• Parents in this group did not feel Twitter or Facebook communication would be helpful.
• The Citizens Advisory Council is good because it provides face-to-face opportunities.
• PTA meetings.

Information Desired
• More on the budget.
• Legislative actions being sought so parents can be supportive.
• Receive OPS Report Card information from OPS, not the Omaha World Herald.
• Personnel changes.
• More information on teacher evaluation.

Communication Challenges
• The availability of email to all parents.
• Staff time to communicate via email and the Parent Portal.
• Language barriers must be overcome.
• How to understand the hierarchy of OPS, especially beyond the building-level.
• Need a process for raising valid concerns with OPS leadership.
• Getting TAC administrators to speak at PTA meetings.

Board Communication
• This group said they really do not know what the Board’s vision is.
• “I just see in-fighting when I think of the Board.”
• The Board is in a defensive mode just about all the time.
• The only time they seem to see Board members is when they are up for election.

Group: Parents (conducted in Spanish)

OPS Image
• Participants in this group said they needed more information to form an opinion.
• One person said that OPS seemed “open.”
• Another said that they felt well-informed because the principal at their school is a Latina.
Several noted being happy with their children’s schools.
Participants felt that OPS is concerned about the students.

**Changing Image**
- This depends on what area of town the schools are in as far as image, good or bad.
- A participant followed up with “If you live on the Southside, you might not have any problems, but not so in other areas of the district.”

**5 Years from Now**
- Parents in this group said they would like to see OPS as “the best” district in five years.
- Others would like better communication with OPS.
- Some in the group added that they would like to see test scores raised.

**Most Value about OPS Education**
- Most parents in this group felt that their children are getting a good education at OPS.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- More interpreters are needed.
- “OPS wants to help everyone, but might not know how to help.”
- Another participant added that parents simply need to call the school or district. Parents need to take the initiative.
- One knowledgeable parent in the group talked about an Instituto Liderazgo Familiar, a program that helps get Hispanic parents involved with OPS and helps parents communicate better with the schools.
- Many parents said it would be good if OPS offered refresher courses for parents to help their students with their homework (i.e., in Algebra).
- OPS should teach English classes to parents.
- Schools need to share their best practices. If one school has a program that works and another school five minutes away has the same problem that needs addressing, duplicate the program so others can benefit.
- OPS needs a program for parents, especially those who don’t understand English.
- Another parent added that shortly after the school year, OPS should initiate an automatic phone call to parents, in both English and Spanish, to welcome them to the school year.

**Accessibility of Information**
- OPS needs to make information easy to access and easy to find.

**Information Desired**
- Parents in this group wanted the same information that is provided to other parents, as long as it is provided in a timely manner.

**Information on Child’s Progress**
- The group felt that this was an area where parents needed to be more proactive.
Timeliness of Information
- Parents agreed that information needs to go out in a more timely fashion.

Best Way to Communicate
- Most parents in this group felt that direct face-to-face contact was the best. Offering translation services at school meetings is a goal to strive for.
- Utilize Spanish radio more to communicate with them.

Opportunities to Give Input
- This group, with the exception of one parent who was actively involved with their child’s school, didn’t seem to know what channels to go through to provide input, other than communicating directly with their school’s principal.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- Many in this group were not aware of the new superintendent search.

Group: Magnet Parents

OPS Image
- Huge and diverse.
- Big and complex.

Changing Image
- Changing like the surface of a pool; it ebbs and flows, not like a river that is changing course. One reported that friends chose non-OPS middle school for their child. People are concerned about middle school. Elementary is fine and they love the high school program.
- One reported that friends are moving because of the schools, yet didn’t think they had even investigated OPS before making that decision.

Trust
- No, trust is poor, but not necessarily the district’s fault. The media reported a “shooting at the high school,” but the incident was actually across the street. The media never portrays OPS successes or explains its challenges.
- There is no political action to address violent crime, and nothing to help, like social workers in the schools. OPS get a bad rap because this is underfunded.
- One reported that a teacher said the TAC building is “top heavy.”
- As a parent, one participant said it seems there are a lot of layers here (at TAC), so also saw it as administration heavy.
- They trust principals and teachers. The further away from the school they get, the less trust they have.
- Education is getting a bad rap now too.
- Things like the superintendent search and One City One School District initiative hurt trust.
• Some felt there are a lot of business practices and decisions made at TAC that don’t make sense for kids.
• There is a lot of division in Omaha; it is one of the most segregated cities. One said that the city tried busing when she was a child, but it just caused Millard School District to grow instead. The One City One School District created a perception that OPS is so big they need more money, instead of focusing on “white flight.”

Most Value about OPS Education
• Diversity. This is what the world is like.
• Need to be proactive to keep people from developing stereotypes. They don’t want to give up the diversity in OPS.
• One participant said he is comfortable with the options for his kids. Diversity is valuable to him but not the #1 factor, academics is. “White flight” occurs because parents feel their kids aren’t getting the best shot to succeed. Things at OPS are not that different than it is elsewhere. OPS strives to have high achievement, but also strives to make learning meaningful and applied and connected to real work experiences.
• One parent said she feels OPS is getting a bad rap; it takes students others won’t take, but it has a lot of inner city problems.
• One participant said he values that OPS seems to have a priority on the whole child. It offers more arts than at other schools. OPS is doing a good job fighting the “teach to the test” mentality. It is working hard to balance that and he appreciates it.

Improvements Needed
• OPS is underserved in disabilities like dysgraphia in gifted kids; it doesn’t have adequate services.
• Gifted students end up being tutors to others.
• Schools shouldn’t have classes bursting at the seams.

Strengths of Communication
• Can’t identify anything.
• One said he personally feels he has direct access to the people important to his kids’ education. Schools communicate regularly pretty well.

Communication Improvements
• OPS is not communicating clearly about a strategic plan. One participant said he is paranoid that his child’s magnet program will be cut.
• OPS needs a strategic plan with a mission. District has changed the grading system every year for the past four years.
• Parents don’t like to hear that other parents are frustrated.
• Get rid of the A+ logo. Its laughable, and a false communication to the public. Need a mission statement and goal.
• The more negative stories there are about the district contribute to confirming a bias against OPS. It directly impacts the schools because errors are magnified and good things are overlooked. It also impacts, on a practical level, how people choose schools. Today’s meeting is a good example. One noted that it seemed that “no one knows what everyone
is doing around here.” [Note: there was a discrepancy in the meeting times sent out in notices to focus group participants.]

- Inefficiency in communication equals inefficiency in time and money management.

Sources of Information

- Nebraska’s Watchdog.org.
- School newsletters. Wish it was websites but they aren’t updated. It takes five minutes to find the lunch menu for the week on the website. Open house information is buried.
- Have to use Google to find something on the website.
- One participant said if he doesn’t keep the newsletters he’s out of touch.
- School newsletters have some district information.
- One reported receiving *OPS News*.

Information on Board Policies/Actions

- Learn about it on TV or in the *Omaha World Herald*.
- They don’t feel that information is transferred or communicated from the district, which adds to mistrust.
- Information on the superintendent candidate meet and greet didn’t give all the information, only start times, so parents can’t plan.
- Another said she would have planned to be there, but the notification wasn’t specific enough.

Best Way to Communicate

- Need to look at different platforms to reach diverse audiences, but need to coordinate the information.

Social Media

- One reported the school PTA has a Facebook page.
- Several felt Facebook would be fantastic for snow updates and other event updates. It helps people feel connected.
- District doesn’t advertise events. Parents should be able to get information on the website.
- Offer a mobile app so that parents can self-select information to be sent to their smartphone.
- Look at cost benefit between an app and Facebook.
- Not using Twitter.

OPS Website

- It’s a mess; it needs a huge overhaul. It’s not user-friendly or attractive. OPS could tell its story better through pictures and other electronics.
- Teachers don’t update their pages.
- No one can get access to the Internet for online course materials.
Opportunities to Give Input
- Not sure. On grading changes, one reported going to a meeting and felt it was a sales meeting, that the decision had already been made.
- “One City One School District was a dumb idea, but if you said so, you were blasphemous.”
- OPS is not open to critical friends; it wants people to toe the line.
- One participant said they have to have magnet advisory forms, “but what am I really advising on? I want to really have input. Give us something to advise on.”
- With new technology, parents have more means to educate themselves. But administrators will say, “I have a degree and know better,” but “I know my child.”

Improving Engagement
- There are a lot of parents who can’t engage, but there are plenty who can. OPS has a large community of people who want to be called on as parents. They love that OPS has an open door policy for parents to visit the classroom. Parents can be positive role models. OPS needs parent involvement; it can help compensate for lack of funding.

Perceptions of Board
- It looks bad when the newspaper runs stories on how a Board member can’t get a copy of the district organizational chart or is being stonewalled for discussing issues before voting on them. Some people have been on the Board for decades, which one participant found shocking.
- Many times Board interactions are the only thing the media picks up on, instead of a good story at a magnet school.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- They want to hear that the next superintendent recognizes the district’s strengths and is committed to building and supporting those strengths. There should be a vision and plan on how to proceed. They hope the next superintendent is someone who knows how to engage and includes it in their vision and goals.
- The superintendent needs to engage with community leaders and higher education leaders as well.
- It would be nice to hold press conferences on a regular basis. The media comes to Board meetings because they are open meetings. Give regular, hopeful messages out there.
Group: Migrant/Refugee/Native Parents (with interpreters)

OPS Image
- Many in this group said that OPS was providing a good education to their students.
- Education is of a good quality, especially where poorer families live.

Most Value about OPS Education
- Some parents in this group said that the Early Head Start program for 3-4 year olds was very good. One parent noted the skills her child was developing and felt that her child was progressing.
- These parents talked about a “Kid’s Club” and commented that all the schools have them and are set up to help children with their homework.
- One parent mentioned the quality of the vocation training in OPS.

Improvements Needed
- One mom said that it appears that the 3-4 year olds just play, and felt that more learning could take place at that level.

Sources of Information
- Most of these parents said they got their information from teachers, letters, face-to-face communication, calling in to their child’s school, and newspapers.

Information Desired
- Most in this group felt that they received all the information they needed, from the biggest event to the smallest issue.

Best Way to Communicate
- Parents in this group said that letters sent home and phone calls were the best and preferred methods of communication. Parents in this group said that sometimes they received phone calls from an interpreter to give them information.
- Many in this group acknowledged that illiteracy might be an issue with this community. The comment was made that letters sent home might not be understood regardless of language.
- Some in this group commented that letters sent home are in English and that their children were too young to translate.
- One parent in this group said that the Internet was the best way. He added that text messages and email were also preferred methods.

Informed of Board Actions
- Many in this group did not know what the Board does or how they are organized.
- One participant in the group stated that he has lived in Omaha for 26 years and that he reads the newspaper to get news about the Board.
Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- People in this group acknowledged that in Omaha, the community has changed, so the new superintendent must be someone who recognizes this diverse community. All in this group were in agreement.
- One person said that the new superintendent must be a good communicator.
- Another added that the superintendent must be a visible leader.

Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
- Safety in the high schools needs to be a priority.
- Budgets and funding are issues.

Group: Business Partners/Civic Leaders

OPS Image
- Big.
- Diverse.
- Constantly partnering with business.
- Challenged.
- There is so much opportunity.

Changing Image
- Don’t see much change – it is kind of neutral.
- Stagnant.

Trust
- Different audiences may have different answers,
- There is a lack of trust, so that is something to build on.
- There is a powerful segment of the community that doesn’t believe there is any trust.

Most Value about OPS Education
- Magnet school opportunities. Focus the schools so there are more opportunities for kids to get the curriculum they are interested in.
- If leadership is strong, they are taking the reins and building in innovative strategies. But there are also big voids as well. You can feel strong leadership when you walk into a building.
- They get a sense that there is a real ownership of accountability in the district.
- The dual language program is a gem and OPS is making an effort to include diverse populations. Demographics are changing very quickly. Leaders are trying to adapt and acculturate that change.
- OPS is very purposeful about building partnerships in the community. It has shown that it values working in collaboration.
- The district continues to collaborate and innovate and tries to help students see themselves in the community. That would be a great story to tell.
• K12 and UNO students are working together on projects that offer great opportunities to tell stories. Need ways to push those stories out.
• The representative from the Police Department said that she believes there’s a media interest in positive stories and she would be willing to help push them out.

Strengths of Communication
• District convenes different task forces and advisory committees. But there’s a much bigger piece missing in how it is communicating with the community at large.
• It seems that OPS does a fairly decent job communicating with parents.

Communication Improvements
• All of Omaha is not getting the message. We are not talking a lot about topics like immigrant populations, etc.
• Maybe information needs to be communicated from a different perspective.
• There are so many story gems just from the district’s work with diverse populations that could be told.
• Omaha is not very interested in engaging around multilingual immigrant groups.
• There are some gaps with parents, but also challenges. One participant noted that many parents she deals with aren’t Facebook savvy and prefer face-to-face communication.
• For social service providers, it would be nice to get an e-newsletter on what’s going on in OPS.
• The superintendent has an advisory council that is helpful.
• OPS blocks huge chunks of the Internet, which is a big barrier for getting tools for teaching students.
• Schools should be showing kids what’s appropriate in Internet usage.
• Immigrant families don’t hear much from the district; there is a lack of connectivity, though OPS has made an effort.
• OPS doesn’t get its messaging out about immigrant, bilingual programs.
• People don’t know about the programs offered.
• One participant reported hearing something on the radio about a program and was impressed.

Sources of Information
• Teachers and administrators, people they are partnering with. Those who work in the district and that they have a relationship with.
• Local news media. There was good communication between the Police Department and OPS under the former director of communications; not as sure of that now. But OPS is so big, information doesn’t always trickle down to staff.
• Other large community partners, such as the Chamber of Commerce. Updates are not provided directly from OPS.
• Teachers are the strongest voice and the ones several said they connect with most frequently.
Accessibility of Information
- They can usually find someone to get an answer from when needed.
- For most part, they find information accessible.

Information Desired
- This group thought it would be great to plug into a strategic plan and a specific set of goals. They would like to do that to help achieve OPS achieve its mission and find mutual benefits.
- They would like to hear more about how the community can help schools and kids. Right now, they don’t know what they can do.
- More about innovative things OPS is doing, trends it is following, best practice changes, and how district is assessing itself.
- A map of how OPS is working with all its partners and how the relationships work.
- There is a violence problem in Omaha and they would like to know what OPS is doing to help address it.
- Empowerment network does a good job with community collaboration and OPS attends meetings, but never communicates back on what it’s doing. There is a disconnect on how kids perceive civic duty; it’s hard to find anyone in OPS to take ideas to about Crime Stoppers.
- They wonder whether OPS feels it’s a passive participant (in initiatives like Bright Futures). They don’t see OPS leading the charge, or being willing to participate.
- There is no one to infuse energy into community projects and build excitement. It’s just a bureaucracy right now.

Information on Activities/Events
- One participant felt communication is very one-way. She provides information on opportunities for teachers, but doesn’t hear anything back.
- Others in the group agreed.

Best Way to Communicate
- Email.
- This group liked the idea of a Facebook page.
- Need face-to-face as well.
- OPS should have a media advisory committee similar to Millard School District’s.
- Send out an update on what’s going on in the district.
- Take the superintendent and director of communication on a media tour.

Social Media
- This group felt OPS has to jump on it, there’s no way around it. If good content is provided, they will use it. The Police Department is using Facebook and Twitter.

OPS Website
- It’s frustrating; you can’t find the names of curriculum supervisors because the site is not updated. It should be simple to contact someone in the district.
- It is a frustrating interface.
• Schools have individual templates, but the quality depends on who at a school is keeping it updated (some sites have lots of typos, etc.). The disparity is very clear between schools that have resources and those that don’t.

**Informed of Board Actions**
• Local media.
• They appreciate that when there is a big event, such as the superintendent candidate meet and greet, the district gets invitations out.

**Opportunities to Give Input**
• Don’t know.
• One participant had never felt the district had reached out to her.

**Improving Engagement**
• Invite people in for activities so they can get to know the district.
• The City of Omaha uses an online town hall (Engage Omaha) as a way for people to submit ideas and get a response. OPS might consider trying that approach.

**Perceptions of Board**
• One bad thing can eradicate all the good stuff.
• Need to get more positives out.

**Image Improvements Needed**
• Several said they don’t really know what the Board does, but they know when things go awry.
• They learn about the Board through the negative things that have happened.

**Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent**
• It is really important to get out in the community in the beginning so that people know who the superintendent is. Then the superintendent can empower others to carry the message.
• There is value in showing your assets. One participant said he is a huge proponent of getting more faces out there, especially the superintendent on big issues.
• This group hopes the new superintendent has clear expectations and a vision for OPS that reflects the values of the community. They want to know the superintendent is on the same page and that he will reach out and validate that. This group felt they are constantly reaching out to OPS and not getting much back.
• Be more transparent.
• As an example, the new police chief has three priorities the department always talk about. Having talking points provides clear direction.

**Greatest Challenges Facing OPS**
• Culture change must be so difficult in the school district.
• There is a huge immigrant population and language barriers.
OPS is “where the rubber meets the road” on diversity. It’s trying to keep up with the change and diversity. They feel that the fast pace of change is the cause of much of the media’s pushback. OPS is an easy target.

**Group: News Media Representatives**

**OPS Image**
- OPS has the image of an inner city school district.
- OPS is a big bureaucracy that is getting bigger.

**Changing Image**
- One participant commented that people in the community are asking a lot of questions, (i.e., is OPS really focused on bettering education?) The group felt there is less and less public trust.
- One participant felt there are fewer positive stories coming out of OPS, and noted that the last three teen homicides were all students from OPS schools.
- There are two images of OPS. One is about teachers; that they are hard-working. Then there is the image of administrators, which is more tarnished and presents more hurdles to overcome. There is a lot more respect for the teachers than for administrators.
- One participant did express some concerns about safety in OPS.
- One participant said she was an “OPS kid” and has seen a lot of change.
- The group agreed that good things can happen in the district.

**Five Years from Now**
- This group said that they would hope for better accessibility to the district, more transparency, and more positive stories.

**Trust**
- There is some trust, but this has been lessened after certain situations which were not handled well.
- One participant said she and her sister graduated from OPS, but her sister now sends her children to Catholic school.

**Regaining Trust**
- OPS is doing a lot with the superintendent search to involve the community, which points to an attempt at transparency.

**OPS Education Program Compared to Others**
- This group agreed that the educational programs offered by OPS are on par with other districts. There are no major differences. Participants agreed that some districts fund certain programs better than others.

**Strengths of Communication**
- The group felt that OPS does a good job promoting the magnet schools.
Sources of Information
- The weekly “OPS News Tips” is a good source of information for this group.
- Board agendas, parents, principals and the Police Department were all cited as good sources of information.
- Information also comes from state legislators and newsletters posted online and for the most part, information is easily accessed.
- One participant reported having a great working relationship with the district.
- OPS should recognize the Bellevue Leader as a resource.
- There needs to be more of a sense of urgency in OPS to respond when media calls come in.

Best Way to Communicate
- Email or calling immediately was the best way to communicate, especially if it is a pressing news story.

Social Media
- If OPS had a Facebook page, this group felt reporters would use it to get more information.
- OPS isn’t staying in touch with kids if they don’t pursue social media.
- OPS could use Facebook to post important information, like buses running late.
- The district has a huge opportunity to use Facebook for communication. Hire staff to oversee it.
- OPS should check to see what other school districts are doing with regards to Facebook and social media.

OPS Website
- This group agreed that old news on the home page is frustrating.
- Podcasting of the Board meetings is a good thing to do.
- They would use the website more often if information was easier to get to.

Informed of Board Actions
- There is a perception that certain Board members know information about particular situations that others don’t, and that contributes to the negative image of the district.
- Board members are unprofessional with each other and the way they address each other.
- Board members need to remember that they are the face of OPS.

Improving Engagement
- The Board should be open and honest with the public, not just about education, but about finances and budgets.
- A question was raised regarding how much kids are interested in their schools and how much parent involvement there is.

Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
- How to continue to provide a quality education instead of being worried about OPS’ image.
• Raising test scores and the graduation rate.
• Dealing with federal mandates and meshing everything that has to be done in education.

Group: Student Leaders

Like Most About School
• These students liked the diversity of their schools and the fact that they can communicate with all types of people.
• There is an accepting environment at their schools.
• The school spirit and the pep rallies make for a tight-knit school.
• There is a supportive environment on their campuses.
• The sense of camaraderie. Everyone knows everyone.
• The Student Foreign Exchange program is a positive.

Best Part of High School Experience
• Student involvement is a highlight.
• Making friends.
• Learning different languages.
• Playing sports and getting involved in athletics.
• Unity classes.
• Sharing common interests with friends.
• One student said that playing on the football team was a good experience. There are caring coaches at the school.
• Overall, there is a good, positive atmosphere at the schools.

Ways to Improve School Experience
• A better job could be done to involve all students in school spirit. Not all students go to games. One participant felt his school needed to do a better job of promoting games and that there was a lazy or lackadaisical attitude about it.
• Another said the school booster club was made up of “old ladies” that didn’t care anymore.
• One student commented that band and show choir could be better organized at their school. Students sometimes miss practices because of conflicts with other extracurricular activities.
• Another agreed and said that she often had conflicts with dance and softball practice.
• Several students said they would like more opportunities to learn different languages.
• More parent involvement is needed.
• Some felt that neighboring school districts had more fun things to do than OPS schools.

Wish I Had Known…
• “Don’t date in high school.”
• Be more involved and have fun.
• To get more involved in dual enrollment in order to receive college credits.
• Some students mentioned that there were certain teachers whose classes were “just a waste of time.” They wish they had known to avoid certain classes.
• To use better time management
• To pick their friends better and more wisely.
• The group said they should have had more community involvement.
• To get more involved in their freshman year so that their school experience could have accumulated over their entire time high school.

Learn About Academics, News, Activities, etc.
• Many in the group said they learned about academics and activities from siblings.
• Some of their friends told horror stories about certain classes.
• Teachers have a lot to do with student interest in a class.

Best Way to Communicate with Students
• One student said that the district doesn’t communicate with students at all.
• The group reported that they have to set up OPS email accounts at the beginning of the year, but OPS never emails students during the year, so they thought it was pointless.
• The group agreed that more could be done with the OPS student email account.
• Certain information can only be accessed through computers in the lab; you can’t access it from home.
• Students thought that social media could be used more, but their Facebook access at the schools is blocked.
• They noted that there are many unofficial Facebook pages, for example, the dance team, National Honor Society and the Thespian group.
• One student said that a coach had a football Twitter page and that similar accounts are used to remind students about DECA meetings and when certain fundraisers are due.
• Promoting activities at least three weeks in advance with posters would be a good way to reach students.

Information Desired
• Everything online in OPS schools is blocked, so it is hard to get information.
• One student mentioned that there was a district-wide OPS musical and students didn’t get the information.
• On the other hand, there was an All-City Music Festival and information about that was shared. It would be good to have more consistency with distribution of information about school events.
• One student said that there was a disconnect. He felt cheated about not receiving more information about scholarship opportunities.
• It would be helpful if school counselors shared more information.

School Website
• School websites aren’t updated well.
• Some schools do a better job than others of updating their websites. One student said that some schools let the kids update the sites.
• Some in the group noted that homework is often posted on their school’s web page for students to access.
• Some teachers post links on the websites.
• Sometimes the links that are posted don’t work and cited links for football, cross country and volleyball.
• One student said that no team rosters are posted online. It would be nice to have pictures and slideshows of the activities on the websites.

OPS Website
• Some students said that they only use the OPS website to get to their school site. They said that OPS doesn’t use the website to highlight what schools are doing, and that it is a missed opportunity.

Website Improvements
• The group said that OPS only posts elementary school information on its website, and not information that is important or relevant to high school students and their parents.
• If there is something important for students and parents posted to the website, it needs to have an interesting or engaging title or headline. One student commented that he is not going to read an article that doesn’t have a good headline.

Opportunities for Input
• Through Student Council they have some input, but they weren’t sure whether that input is used or not.
• One student commented that homecoming and prom “suck” every year because of little to no input from students.
• There is lots of lip service given, but the administration needs to follow through on student suggestions.
• Another student commented that they may ask for input, but there is no follow-through.

What Community Needs to Know About the School
• This group felt that OPS gets a bad rap. OPS needs to highlight accomplishments and each school and let the community know that it is making strides to get better. OPS needs to reward all of the schools with good press, not just the top schools.
• These students also felt strongly that OPS needs to stop changing the grading system. Some felt that the schools and the district were making it easier to pass by going from a 5-point scale to a 4-point scale. Try something for more than just a year before making a change.
Group: Elementary Teachers

OPS Image
- OPS comes off as disconnected and “discombobulated.”
- One member of this group said that since 1978, OPS has lost sight of what happens in classrooms.
- One person said there are disconnects everywhere and that action plans are not being followed.
- A comment was made that there is no accountability.
- There is very little in common with site-based management. Each school runs differently.
- The district is perceived as being too top heavy administratively.
- A comment was made that the last superintendent was overpaid, which led to a negative view of the district.
- OPS has gotten away from fun activities. “Kids need to be kids.”
- There are more behavior issues with students now.

Changing Image
- This group felt that OPS needs to graduate more students to change its image.
- One person said that it’s hard for OPS to change its image when the Omaha World Herald is ready to pounce on any negative story. Someone added that for every negative story that comes out of the Omaha World Herald, it turns into four negative because every media outlet piggy backs on each other’s stories.
- The negative stories are definitely filling the void.

Trust
- There is a lack of trust and a big disconnect.

Most Value about OPS Education
- OPS has a great special education program.
- The Career Center promotes great education in engineering and math. These programs should be promoted more.
- The dual language program is another positive education program.

Improvements Needed
- This group suggested that an accountability group should be developed to discuss issues and concerns. “There has to be a point where communication starts.”
- One participant commented that too many former employees come back like a “bad penny” after retirement. This brought many nods of acknowledgement from the group. One person dubbed it the “boomerang effect.”

Sources of Information
- Talking to other employees at their school.
- TV, the newspaper, or other media. They felt that staff are generally the last to know.
Timeliness of Information/Support for Role as Ambassador
• This group gave a resounding and collective “no” on receiving information in a timely manner.

Best Way to Communicate
• This group said that the best way for OPS to communicate with them is in a straightforward manner so that staff isn’t caught off guard.
• “Treat us like adults” one person added.
• As far as method of communication, email is fine, but face-to-face is better.
• Other methods mentioned included social media, Facebook and Twitter.

Communication Improvements
• There is a lack of communication between the schools and the district.
• There is confusion about who reports to whom in the district; no one knows.
• OPS needs to communicate better with teachers.

OPS Website/Portal
• This group thought the OPS website was fine. It looks good and has positive news on it.

Perceptions of the Board
• The perception of the Board and OPS is that they lose good teachers. Young teachers come to OPS and get jaded. The new teachers are put out into the low income schools with the most problems.
• One person commented that OPS is like a “meat grinder.” New teachers come in and whatever comes out, comes out.
• Someone said that teachers should get more pay because they teach in a low-income district. The district gets more money for that, so why not the teachers?

Opportunities for Input
• One participant described it as “An illusion of input.”
• TAC should “show us that they value our opinion.”

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• The new superintendent needs to clean house and downsize
• The hope is that the new superintendent has some “clout.”
• They hope the new superintendent encourages communication between TAC departments.
• The new superintendent is going to have to say “follow me.”
Group: Secondary Teachers

OPS Image
- Large.
- Unfairly criticized.
- Hated.
- Urban.
- Large number of students doing unique things.
- Diverse.
- More “public” than most of the other districts in Omaha.
- More scrutinized.
- Supports students more than other districts.

Changing Image
- Changing for the worse; *Omaha World Herald* runs only negative stories. Board decisions feed negative image and people aren’t thrilled with the district.
- How leaders spend the money is an issue.
- There is a perception that OPS is not a quality education system (as compared to Millard and Westside 66).
- Statistics on OPS publicized by the Platte Institute are negative and being used to hurt the district. The agenda is to promote charters and home schooling.
- Student behavior causes people to think of OPS students as “bad.”
- The media in general focuses on violence involving students, which tends to reflect negatively on the schools.
- Board hasn’t helped with the image due to their infighting and public mistakes.
- Trust is a big issue.

Trust
- This group did not feel the community trusts OPS to provide quality education. If it did, OPS wouldn’t have such a negative image.
- Some were not sure if the educational program in OPS is effective.
- Parents and patrons at lower economic levels don’t trust authority figures and see the district in that role.
- Those at the upper economic levels don’t trust OPS high schools because they believe there are too many negative influences.
- Test scores make it look like not much is happening that is good in the schools. But with 2,200 kids in a high school, some aren’t going to do well. What is not considered are all the positive things going on or the academic growth of students.

Regaining Trust
- If the community came into the buildings, it would build trust. Invite people in on a daily basis, not just when schools have on their “Sunday best.” Need a reason to get people in the buildings.
- One participant noted that it is hard getting parents to come in to some schools.
- Get the public in so they can become advocates.
• Staff in the schools distrust TAC staff because they aren’t ever out in the building. Schools are “run from afar.”
• Media is reactive. They don’t publicize the positives.

Most Value about OPS Education
• Teachers build relationships better than any district in the area. OPS may not have the greatest test scores, but kids will come to teachers on issues like having no heat at home or sharing that they won a scholarship. All agreed that teachers work hard to build trust and relationships with kids.
• Every building has something unique to offer and puts kids first as a priority.
• OPS truly takes every student. OPS values and believes that it is a “public” school district and works to raise all students up. OPS needs for the community as a whole to understand that things to support students are in place and being done.
• This is also true for students with mental health issues. There are no facilities in town, so they provide them at school.

Improvements Needed
• Be more proactive in decision-making. Come to the buildings first to see if something planned is really going to work. “It has to be more than a snapshot; it has to be a photo album.”
• Every school is different; district is not “cookie cutter.”
• OPS supposedly has site-based management, but that is in name only in many ways.
• When the new assistant superintendent of Curriculum & Learning came in, site-based management went out.
• They get mixed messages on what they are supposed to do because of the size of the district. There should be more communication at the top before it comes down to the schools.
• It takes time for programs to develop and improve. There is always something new and it never has time to mature. OPS needs to focus on doing something well.

Strengths of Communication
• Kailyn Watson is always an advocate when she comes to buildings, and tries to give schools equal coverage. She tries to promote positive stories and diversity.
• Use of email (First Class).
• When something happens that calls for a response from Communication Services (i.e., the media shows up), it is very professionally handled.

Communication Improvements
• OPS is always on the reactive side of things, which creates trust issues (i.e., grading changes).
• So many decisions are reactionary in nature.
• The Board needs to communicate with teachers. One participant noted that a letter from the Board to all staff was sent by email today, which she thought was nice because she didn’t remember getting one before (it addressed test scores and thanked them for doing a good job, etc.)
• Another participant then wondered if the letter was sent because of the communication audit and the Board wanted to be sure and get positive comments.
• Several felt that it spoke to the level of distrust that they immediately questioned something meant to be a positive gesture as being done solely because of the audit process.
• Several said they were afraid of retribution if they say anything, especially from leaders at the top. Some participants felt they can talk to their principals.
• No rationale is provided on decisions; they never hear anything from district leadership.
• Seemingly big decisions (i.e., grade books, standards-based grading, etc.), have been made without involving teachers. Classroom practitioners were not involved. Decisions were made by people who haven’t been in a classroom in years. The level of input depends on where you are in the organization. There are so many levels between teachers and the top; it’s hard to have a voice.
• The people making decisions have to talk to the teachers.
• They don’t know who in the departments are making the decisions. “It’s ‘the guy.’”
• Meetings are scheduled all on same day at the same time, which leaves no administrators in the buildings. This happens not just once or twice, but monthly.
• When they are going to be out of the school, administrators should communicate the purpose of the meeting they are going to be attending.

Sources of Information
• The news media.
• Administration doesn’t know anything either.
• Administration is concentrating on their piece of the pie, which filters down to principals. It seems it is really hard to communicate.
• One participant felt that at her school, curriculum specialists and the principal are good about telling as much as they know or can tell. They seem earnest, but may not know all the information.
• Everyone has access to email to find out what’s going on. Just need to read what’s there.

Publications
• They no longer get OPS News as a hard copy, and it is not as well-read online. This group would be more apt to read it if they had a hard copy.
• Its purpose is to promote positives in the district.
• OPS News would be perfect for the public to receive.
• It is not particularly useful to teachers.
• It needs to go to parents and the media.

Information Desired
• “Where OPS kept the $6.3 million.”
• It is easier to be an advocate for leadership if you see them. As far as TAC staff and the Board are concerned, this group said they never see them in the schools.
• One participant said she has never seen district supervisors in her area of expertise as a curriculum specialist. It’s rare to get supervisors of content areas into the buildings.
• Several others said they do see supervisors in their schools.
• Some said Board members just “pop in.”
• Others said they see Board members at special events.

Information on Board Policies/Actions
• They guess by looking at an agenda.
• Sometimes agendas are vague.
• Find out through the news media.
• They haven’t received much information on the superintendent search.
• “If you don’t read Board minutes and see anything in the media about actions, you wouldn’t know what was going on.”
• Teachers don’t have time to read the links to the website.

Timeliness of Information/Support for Role as Ambassador
• Sometimes information is sent out too close to the date to be timely (i.e., two days before something is due or to take place).
• The “big stuff” is timely.
• With First Class email, there are too many conferences one has to be in to get information.

Best Way to Communicate
• Face-to-face.
• It’s different for each situation. Sometimes email is appropriate, sometimes a staff meeting is best.
• Face-to-face in the buildings, but not otherwise.
• Have to be careful because they don’t need more meetings.
• SchoolMessenger calls.

Social Media
• Some in this group would use it, especially Twitter, to get information before seeing it in the media.
• Can’t get away from traditional information even though it’s a trend, because not everyone uses social media tools.
• Kids and others would be more likely to get on social media and find information.
• Instant communication is a tool to tap into.
• If individual schools could have Facebook pages, they would get used.
• Some schools do text students.
• Coaches use texting and parents want to text them.

Parent Portal
• Central High uses Parent Portal. “It’s a Godsend.”
• Teachers can’t put in the specifics they would like; they have to choose from canned comments.
• As a parent, it’s an awesome tool to hold kids accountable.
• There is some confusion over how to use it.
OPS Website/Portal
- It is hard to navigate when looking for an answer.
- Some departments are better than others at getting things like content standards posted.
- “I used to know where to find things, and now I don’t know where to look or have time to look for it.”
- The online sub-finder is difficult to find. If you don’t know the exact web address, you can’t find it. The search engine doesn’t work well. Sub-finder not under “s.” It’s not intuitive.
- Students are using the Parent Portal to check grades.
- At the secondary level, Infinite Campus and Parent Portal are being used well. As a parent of an elementary student, one said she isn’t seeing it being used as effectively. There is not enough training for teachers to use it effectively.
- Not only have they locked down Infinite Campus, you can’t access YouTube videos that would be helpful.
- IMS doesn’t trust teacher professionalism; everything is locked down.
- Staff can’t download tutorials from TeacherTube.

Source of Board Information
- News or email.
- Not shared as if it’s important; it’s just posted on the website.
- No minutes are posted, only the agenda. Teachers have a right to know what’s going on (i.e., about IEPs or negotiations).
- Some principals may mention some things.

Communication Role of Board
- Individual Board members should communicate with their schools. There is no reason they should not be visiting and being a part of what’s going on.
- “Come look at who you are representing.”

Improving Board Communication
- Tell staff what they are talking about because it affects them.
- Some watch Board meetings on cable.
- How good are they at email or other strategies? How can we help them be more comfortable communicating?
- One participant said her district Board member has asked that all communication come by phone or mail only.
- Why is the Board conducting a new superintendent search? They never explained what happened to the other two candidates.

Opportunities to Give Input
- Most felt that opportunities have never been there. They don’t know what door to open to have an opportunity. If leaders do ask for input, “they do what they want anyway.”
- People can go to Board meetings and speak.
- The superintendent candidate meet and greet is from 4:30 -6:00. Who in the public can be there at that time?
Committee meetings also are held during the school day.
At TAC it depends on the department, but for others, they have no clue.
One participant reported trying to give input on the wording of the grading scale; it was very frustrating.
They don’t know who to go to for answers or to give input. Some said they don’t know what people do at TAC.

Perceptions of Board
- A bad board.
- One participant said his in-laws are bitter at him for keeping wife in OPS and urban schools.
- Any positive feedback is trashed by media coverage.
- Perceptions affect teacher morale. The Board should be here for teachers too. They feel like second class citizens.
- Need more Board outreach.
- The actions of the Board influence parent decisions on where they enroll their child, positive or negative.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- Communicate openly and honestly.
- Come see them, not just on the first day of school.
- Get to know the principals; so much depends on them. The differences are astronomical.
- If it’s something bad, prepare them for the worst.
- There are influences outside of the district trying to influence OPS that are not always positive (i.e., legislation, etc., that are trying to hurt public education). Some are more hidden; transparency is a problem because it might hurt OPS. Political considerations are an issue.

Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
- Politics from the governor’s office on down.
- Monies coming in campaigning against OPS. Need to rally the community on behalf of the district.
- OPS will lose good teachers if departments don’t talk among themselves and communicate.
- Teachers are so worried about test scores they can’t do much creative anymore.

Group: School Secretaries

OPS Image
- Big.
- Diverse
- My “home district.”
- Sometimes overlooked.
Changing Image
- Getting some bad publicity. OPS makes the newspapers more than other districts; media picks on OPS. Stories on other districts are not as negative.
- “Maybe we aren’t tooting our own horn and communicating the positive things.”
- OPS hasn’t come back yet from picking the wrong superintendent.
- Other districts aren’t as diverse or have the socio-economic spread that OPS does.

Trust
- Some felt there isn’t any; others felt there is in their areas of the district.
- The group didn’t think the west Omaha area has much trust.
- One participant felt it is 50-50. There is a strong misconception of what private schools offer and a lack of understanding of what’s available in OPS. Parents are complacent in allowing OPS to determine what their child needs. Parents need to be involved.
- It’s not about trust as much as it is a shift of responsibility.
- Too many parents let their kids make decisions about their education because they don’t want to tell their child no. Parents need to get back to being parents.
- We need involved parents to make a good school.

Most Value about OPS Education
- More opportunities and choices. Private schools don’t have the choices and get some of their resources from public schools. It is wasted tax dollars when people don’t take advantage of the magnet schools and variety of program offerings.
- The magnet program; and dual language is outstanding.
- OPS tries to reach one end of the spectrum to the other.
- Teachers are dedicated and getting it done the old-fashioned way. Kids are excelling and test scores are going up.

Strengths of Communication
- There are a lot of different types of communication – notices are mailed, email, phone, SchoolMessenger, mass media. It can be over-saturated.
- SchoolMessenger system.
- There are lots of resources for communication; maybe district is not taking advantage of using correctly.
- Schools are doing a pretty good job.

Communication Improvements
- Address the lack communication.
- Communication is not a strong point.
- OPS doesn’t communicate well.
- Newsletters only go to OPS staff, nothing is pushed out.
- Are schools in *Omaha World Herald* community zone sections getting covered? This would be a way to “get OPS’ horn tooted.”

Internal
- Don’t just focus on teachers. One participant said she still doesn’t know anything about the program at her magnet school.
• This group said they can get lost in the shuffle, whether they are seasoned secretaries or newbies. There is a big lack of communication.
• One participant said that when she was hired, she found a veteran secretary who was willing to relinquish information and help her. New hires run into walls trying to get information.
• Some in the group reported that they are not informed when students are transferred – they just show up and don’t have the proper paperwork. The SPAs are not communicating with school offices.
• Only elementary secretaries meet on a regular basis. Middle and high school secretaries and school registrars don’t have a meeting.
• Have TAC departments attend their meetings and provide updates.

Sources of Information
• Email, but it’s hard to keep up with, there is so much.
• Principals.
• Elementary secretary meetings.
• OPS News, but they don’t have time to go look for it.
• One participant said she has to search for information at her school, and be the liaison to connect the dots. She has to be proactive.
• The group felt it is up to them to make decisions and think ahead.
• They try to help think for their principals on what needs to get done.

Accessibility of Information
• It’s available with a lot of research.
• They don’t get copies of letters when a child is being moved to a foster home; they have to search out the information.
• Protocols are very inconsistent, everyone sets up their own process, but there are still legal issues to some of these things.
• Parental rights have to be addressed.

Information Desired
• Parents are calling them for information and they don’t have it.
• New secretaries don’t get trained; they are just “thrown in” and hope someone will sit down with them for a few hours. They only receive training on software they will be using.
• “You are at the mercy of who was there prior to train you.”
• One participant said she made her own handbook for doing her job.
• The secretaries’ meeting is set up in a lecture format. They can send in questions in advance on concerns, etc.
• Lots of the information they receive in the meetings is repetitive.
• They can’t depend on their principals because they don’t know how to do their secretary’s job.
• District needs a manual and a trainer.
Timeliness of Information/Support for Role as Ambassador
- They refer media calls to District Communications.
- Secretaries have five conferences to open in First Class and it’s the same message in all.
- They need to know what’s going in the greater community.
- A calendar of events that is updated would be helpful.

Best Way to Communicate
- Still email. Make it mandatory to open it.
- Prioritize messages and don’t repeat them.
- Maybe a community update or a weekly bullet list of news.

Social Media
- Most in this group were concerned about using social media.
- Twitter might be useful for sending out messages.

OPS Website/Portal
- The calendar is not up for next year.
- Most of the participants in this group find it easy to navigate, but they often have to walk parents through it on the phone.
- They receive more calls on the Parent Portal.

Informed of Board Actions
- They are told about the agenda, but not about the actions taken by the Board.

Source of Board Information
- If they have time (which most said they didn’t) they read the meeting minutes.
- Most information comes from what the news media chooses to put out.

Improving Board Communication
- Come into the schools; spend a day in their shoes. Visit with everyone, not just the principal. Go into a classroom.
- The Board seems archaic and tired.
- Visits should be unannounced. If you alert teachers, you won’t get an honest impression.
- Some said Board members have visited their schools; others said they have not seen a Board member.

Opportunities to Give Input
- If there are opportunities, they don’t know about it.
- “Meetings aren’t for opinions.”
- Some felt the TAC administration and Board are so far removed from day to day operations in the schools; they don’t know how their decisions will impact schools.
- This group said they are never asked about changes to their work tools.
- Some reported that secretaries were asked to test Infinite Campus.
- Another said she was never asked about the database codes she uses at her high school.
Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- The group said they are asked input at some meetings, but rarely see evidence it is really considered.
- “We come with legitimate complaints and ideas, but we never hear back and never see any changes.”
- They don’t seem to be on same page at all the schools (i.e., some schools are K-6, some are K-4). Nothing is the same district-wide and they feel OPS is losing some kids to other districts because they are on same page.

Improving Engagement

- If Board meetings were held more centrally, maybe more people would attend.
- Meetings start at 4:30 so people can’t make it. If they wanted parents to hear from the superintendent candidates, they would hold the meet and greet later.
- OPS has held some public forums.

Perceptions of Board

- This group didn’t think parents know anything about the Board.
- There has been discord recently. The Board is not perceived as knowledgeable.
- The complainers are those who don’t vote.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent

- Be out in the community more, visit the schools.
- Pop into parent-teacher conferences.
- Level the “elite” system; people are treated differently in different areas of OPS.
- Have the superintendent come talk to them at a secretaries’ meeting.
- Demonstrate more mutual respect.
- Attention is focused on teaching staff, but all staff should be respected.
- Some schools and people get preferential treatment.
- The teachers’ association is very strong, so administration listens to who is the loudest.
- All staff are here for the same purpose and all need to respect one another and contribute to making the district function correctly.
- Everyone affects the lives of students.

Group: Support Staff Reps

OPS Image

- Participants in the group felt that OPS does not have a very good image, especially with the Omaha World Herald, which they felt constantly publishes bad news stories or “dirt” on OPS.
- The superintendent search has been negative and not explained well to the public.
- The media as a whole touts only the bad points about OPS, never the good ones. The example was shared that the dropout rate has decreased but the media doesn’t mention that.
- OPS is the media’s favorite “chew toy.”
Changing Image
- The image of OPS is changing for the worse and the perception is bad.

Five Years from Now
- That OPS is respected and reflects the success of the students.
- They hope the new superintendent will get OPS balanced and grounded, and provide good leadership.

Trust
- The public only hears filtered news. Parents have to trust the district.
- OPS has developed magnet programs to show its commitment to education. Parents need to understand that OPS is working hard to educate the children of the district.

Regaining Trust
- OPS should put out more positive stories and stop acting like a victim.
- OPS needs to reshape the story that is being told, and tell the story better.
- OPS should ask the media to print or report on more good news and not just the “bad stuff.”

Most Value about OPS Education
- The Career Center is a great facility and could be the focus of more success stories.
- The One World Community Center is also a great program.
- The gifted program.

Improvements Needed
- The new superintendent needs to be visible.
- “We need to toot our own horn.”
- Use more social media.
- There was some “bad communication” and OPS needs to be more proactive rather than reactive.

Communication Improvements
- Promote programs like teaching nuclear science online to gifted program students.
- This group said that a periodic OPS district information conference would be helpful.
- Employees should be able to post opinions to oppose viewpoints that are expressed online.

Sources of Information
- Staff meetings.
- Each other and other employees.
- Information needs to be delivered in a more timely fashion.
- Sometimes they don’t get information until the next day.
- Some TAC information sessions were held, but they were unsure if these are still occurring.
Perceptions of Board
- The perception of the OPS Board makes the district look negative.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- The last superintendent was never seen, unless there was a big issue. The superintendent should be out in the community promoting OPS. The next superintendent definitely needs to be a good PR person and to be the face of OPS.

Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
- Meeting the needs of the students.
- The budget.
- Communication – how are we going to change our story?
- Gaining the trust of the public.

Group: TAC Secretaries

OPS Image
- Huge district.
- Strength.
- Best kept secret in town.
- Issues.
- Based on newspaper articles.
- “I cringe every morning when I pick up the newspaper.”
- Parents complaining.
- The TAC building is an issue too. The marble and brass in the lobby give a “fancy” impression.
- People see all the cars in the TAC lot and thinks it is all administration. They don’t realize half the building is a Career Center.

Changing Image
- Image is much more negative than it was 5 or 10 years ago.
- Very controversial.

Trust
- No trust because of the negativity. Good things are kept a secret.
- OPS always gets bad press, or the media takes a snippet of something true and spins it negative.
- It is hard to get good news out with the negative high profile of the Board.
- OPS is going in the right direction on test scores, but it’s never good enough or fast enough.
- It’s hard when even the governor doesn’t support you.
Regaining Trust
- OPS is moving in the right direction though the Board president has made some missteps. She has made a good impression on the community, but it will take time.
- Wipe the slate clean and start over with everything.
- There are executives and foundations in Omaha who don’t support OPS because of what they read in the *Omaha World Herald* or hear about.
- Everyone is forming opinions based on the newspaper.

Improvements Needed
- Diversity is lacking in staffing.
- There’s more to diversity than race – ageism is rampant. District needs to focus on other diversities besides race as well.
- Create a sense of team and sharing of information in the TAC building.

Strengths of Communication
- Retirement website and financial planning and retirement workshops.
- Letters sent out on various issues.
- District is doing well with the superintendent search, making candidates available to people and to the press afterwards.
- District is trying to make communication more consistent.
- Transportation is constantly looking at improvements but the word doesn’t get out.
- There are positive things in OPS, but information isn’t out there.

Communication Improvements
- “TAC exists not to serve schools but to dictate to them.”
- Departments could learn from each other.
- “I think we do forget what the district is about.”
- “The longer you are away from a school building, the more disconnected you get.”
- Within the buildings, morale overall is down. People are overwhelmed with constant changes; personal time after work is affected. There is no compassion and too much negativity.
- Some things may be communicated to supervisors but are not being passed down. Why is there such a separation?
- District operates on a “need to know” basis.
- The “trickle down” theory of communication is not working well. Sometimes it feels like administrators don’t want to share the knowledge (or power).
- People who want to complain don’t have the facts, but they don’t either so they can’t address misinformation.
- All in the group agreed that TAC departments aren’t talking to each other.
- There is a lot of history between departments; ongoing feuds. Everything is about “turf,” and there is lots of duplication and a “don’t tell” attitude.
- For example, the Research department didn’t compare school calendars against testing calendars. People can’t think of their own department as being so important.
Sources of Information
- District email, but it’s so filtered.
- Hearsay.
- *Omaha World Herald* or TV news.
- It’s “hush hush” if you work in TAC. When you leave the building you have to watch the news to find out anything.
- Some said they found out on the news that STD test kits were being passed out at schools.
- It was helpful to hear facts about the Teacher Action Plan.
- *OPS News* – most of the group said they read it; it’s good for information about students.
- The videos clips are good.

Accessibility of Information
- It’s pulling teeth sometimes to get information.
- District does provide good training on things like Microsoft Office.
- District offers classes to expand skills (i.e., computer skills classes are held during the day).
- Supervisors have guest speakers all the time.

Information Desired
- They don’t have time to read the Board meeting minutes. This group would like a summary of Board actions.
- When something happens in a school, they aren’t notified, but they get calls from parents and aren’t able to respond. They feel stupid when they don’t know what happened.
- They hear about new people through the grapevine. Introduce staff.

Information on Activities/Events
- This group wishes TAC staff could be in the buildings more.
- Secretaries should spend a day in a school to appreciate what school staff are dealing with.
- The only inservice is once a year, usually on phone etiquette. Need some team building.

Information on Board Policies/Actions
- They go to the Board web page and look for the agenda or minutes, but have to search because it’s not easy to find.
- People can watch Board meetings on TV.
- One participant said she listens to the podcasts.

Timeliness of Information/Support for Role as Ambassador
- There’s a general orientation but not much else for new hires.
- “By the time you are hired for a position, you are already behind because the person you replaced is already gone.”
- They have to learn on the job.
Best Way to Communicate
- OPS could use a bigger communication office. They should be able to have all the information and answer questions. It would be nice to have one office to call to get answers.
- Email, but something more organized, maybe a round-up or news bulletin.
- Departments could send information out weekly.
- There needs to be a regular meeting or updates for TAC employees.

Social Media
- New teachers communicate that way, and HR has looked at it.

OPS Website/Portal
- It is not updated and staff information is out of date in some sections.

Source of Board Information
- The Board web page

Communication Role of Board
- Do a wrap-up summary of actions.
- It will take time for them to be more transparent. The president is trying.
- There are too many Board members.
- New blood and perspectives will help.
- Communicate to potential candidates what to expect as a board member.

Opportunities to Give Input
- Most felt they do not have opportunities.
- People can contact a member directly, or speak at committee and Board meetings.
- Some in the group said their supervisors are keeping them from talking to Board members.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
- Some felt leaders don’t listen, but others felt they do on some issues.
- Another participant said that district leaders listened to parents when a focus school was taken over.

Perceptions of Board
- “That’s what makes OPS a joke.”
- The *Omaha World Herald* was positive on how the Board handled the second superintendent search.

Image Improvements Needed
- Some Board members need to retire.
- When the Board argues publically it is very negative; the perception is that some Board members bring up issues because the meeting offers a big forum.
- Right now the Board is clearly divided between two camps.
• One member plays the devil’s advocate and is chastised by the rest.
• Some felt this is changing with the new Board president.
• Older Board members are “bullies.”
• When the former director of communication retired, so did the face of the district.
• OPS doesn’t have a spokesperson anymore.
• The former director had a lot of friends in the community and generated good positive energy around the district. They don’t see anyone representing the district like she did.
• Some felt there is more of that now with the Board president.
• It was stifling for those who couldn’t get their opinion out there because of the Board’s tight control.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• Open and honest.
• Take time to get to know the staff.
• Be accessible and take time to know people.
• Don’t have favorites.

Group: Secondary Principals

OPS Image
• Everyone working together as a team.
• Commitment to education.
• Diversity.
• Opportunities for all.
• Confusion.
• Who are we?
• There is a trust issue at all levels; it’s been a hard year.
• People don’t know who to call to get answers.

Changing Image
• District had an opportunity to change this summer, but it’s even worse now.
• The image has changed with OPS staff. They do not feel supported; feels like they are on an island.
• There have been subtle changes over time. There is a chasm with teachers and administrator associations.
• They don’t know who their constituencies are – there are lots of transitional neighborhoods, some old, some young. “We don’t have a solid image of who we are.”

Trust
• The community doesn’t know if they can trust OPS leaders to do the right thing. They have spent a lot of money looking for a superintendent.
• The community gives the benefit of the doubt to a large extent. But there have been a number of public issues (superintendent email scandal, the $6 million budget issue, etc.); it’s been one thing after another. Part of it is coincidence; part of it is the district’s own
fault. Everything happening at once has led to confusion. The district is growing and people believe in it but have questions.

- They are trying to make sure people have trust at the building level.
- The issues are the same as what is seen nationally. We have allowed others to frame the issue around privatizing public education and questioning it if necessary. The pendulum swings between the business and minority community and people with agendas. One City One School District created the battle.
- OPS has great people who work hard but they can’t frame a retort. They are frustrated.
- They are frustrated that it was said that no one internally is qualified to be superintendent; that sends a message to the community.
- Twice the Board couldn’t come up with a minority candidate. It’s a slap in the face to the community. Someone is leaking information before they know about it.
- “We are not a broken district, yet we are presented as one.”
- There is concern about 12 Board members coming into buildings with their own agendas.

**Most Proud of in OPS**

- That they are still getting things done in spite of everything, and the additional pressure of AYP and standards.
- It’s nice to be able to call on principal colleagues for help.
- They’ve come together because they have to; they do not feel supported by the district.
- There really are no other districts like OPS. OPS is an anomaly in Nebraska, with more ESL students than the total number of students in some districts. The mission is totally different than that of neighboring districts. Teachers feel they can make a difference and want to make a difference. OPS is battle-tested daily.
- They have research-based facts that OPS kids come to school with less than those in neighboring districts every day.
- Omaha has changed dramatically in the past 30 years. Choice is built in here, parochial schools are strong, so charter schools aren’t needed.

**Strengths of Communication**

- Face-to-face communication is done well. They know who the key communicators are.

**Communication Improvements**

- District Communications has gone through a shift this year, so this group said they don’t really talk to communication staff now. They have taken a hit on that piece. The former director would do damage control and send emails weekly or more often on what was happening.
- This year they have been on their own.
- There is no positive news in the *Omaha World Herald*, it’s all negative.
- Share the news before they see it in the newspaper.
- Anything presented to the Board should be shared with them.
- It seems like there are five steps when something comes to them, like a reassigned student.
- Improve transparency and trust.
- People are stepping into the communication void.
• OPS needs new branding.
• District marketing is not good.

Sources of Information
• Now it’s all rumor (i.e., around transportation). They said they don’t get any information anymore.
• Parents are asking questions and they don’t know answers, so parents think they are hiding something.
• “It feels like we are individual limbs on a tree with no support.”
• Basically, they feel they were told they are broken and someone has to be brought in from outside to fix it. District can’t seem to fix transportation issues and it’s been three months. It’s hard for someone to come in and get the rhythm. First you have to understand it. If change was wanted, OPS should have gone with an internal candidate for superintendent.
• Meeting agendas are all Curriculum & Instruction.
• Curriculum & Instruction has a very strong leader. Community and Family Services is now leaderless, so Curriculum & Instruction has stepped into the void.
• OPS did not prepare for systemic changes or for the next set of leaders.
• Board is not asking principals what they think.
• None of the principals in this group were involved in the search process.
• “No one will ‘own’ the next superintendent, because we had no voice.”

Publications
• Teachers like OPS News.

Information Desired
• There is an orientation session for new principals on media relations.
• Every memo they get from TAC says, “The principal will…” but they aren’t getting any key messages anymore to help them.
• How to respond in a crisis. For example, there was a shooting over the weekend and their question was “Are we still following the same plan as last year?”
• Parents and students are confused about the new grading policy.

Social Media
• Some in the group expressed concerned about how to control messages with social media. One principal reported he had a problem with his Twitter account being hacked by students.
• There is no one at TAC to protect them.

OPS Website/Portal
• It looks dated.
• Too busy.
• The site needs more languages.
• It should be updated daily.
• Communities rely on the individual school sites.
• One participant said the Parent Portal is more a tool for students than parents in the school. Parents lose passwords. There is a problem with staff not keeping it updated.
• There is no training information on how to get onto the school network.

Effectiveness of School Websites
• You have to be a magician to figure out .netnuke. It is not a simple system.
• One participant said she tried to update her school site over a weekend, but had so many problems it left it in disarray. The teacher homework pages are now gone.

Assistance Needed to Improve School/Dept Communication
• Train them and their staffs on how to use the programs being rolled out (i.e., SchoolMessenger).
• They have to call IMS to get messages out.
• It would be interesting to look at a district that has a good communication program.
• OPS has always “played it close to the vest.”
• Hold a meeting on the crisis plan.

Informed of Board Actions
• They may get an email on a First Class conference they belong to, but they have to find it.
• They get the agendas, but have to watch TV to see what the Board does.
• The Omaha World Herald.

Communication Role of Board
• They are not communicating well with each other right now. There is a lot of distrust of the Board’s attorney due to the prior superintendent situation and how it was communicated. There is great divisiveness within the Board.
• It seems that Board members have hidden agendas.
• There could be in conflicts between the Board secretary and the superintendent.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
• Most felt the answer is no, as evidenced by the fact that they were not involved in the superintendent search.
• They were not asked for their thoughts on what qualities the new superintendent should have.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• Present a clear vision; we need to know where we are going. Everyone needs to know what it is we’re trying to get done. Are you about efficiency, equity or excellence? OPS hasn’t sold excellence well.
• Take on a cheerleading role and set a vision.

Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
• The aging-out of staff.
• Poverty level of kids.
• Working together as one district.
• Taking advantage of the opportunity to get things back on track.
• Getting Board to understand that we have to get this right.
• It might change again if the Legislature reduces the number of Board members.
• We have to tell the story of what we do well.

Group: Elementary Principals (I)

OPS Image
• Diverse.
• Urban.
• Large.
• Test scores.
• Free and reduced lunch.
• Excellence.

Changing Image
• It depends on the community. School by school, people will say it’s great, but for those who read the Omaha World Herald and those in the community at large it is not quite as good. The hidden stories aren’t told – there are many great things going on in the schools.
• Everything in OPS is bigger and with that comes more negativity and more criticism. As a parent, you hear great things, but OPS can’t catch a break with the media.
• If you talk to kids in the district, they have great things to say, but from other kids that haven’t been in OPS schools, you hear only negatives.
• There is a negative impression in the surrounding districts and statewide.
• They see a shift because of what’s in the news or happening nationally. People think they can come into the district and do better.
• Nebraska is not a Common Core state and people are questioning the standards.
• Some feel that Nebraska is always behind.
• OPS is also reduced to being judged by test scores vs. other districts without the diversity challenges in OPS.
• Things have changed for the worse over the issues around superintendents and the Board.
• People who don’t understand how OPS operates. They have a negative image and believe the Board is lying to them.

Trust
• The fact that OPS is growing says something, but not sure if it’s a sign of trust. The district doesn’t have the trust of those behind the scenes.
• Realtors tout other districts in the area.
• The community believes in OPS because of the work they do.
Regaining Trust
- The community doesn’t realize the diversity of OPS. People just look at it as having the lowest test scores; no one talks about the diversity. Diversity is a wonderful thing, not a negative.
- Trust could be regained if the community could be more engaged in things and have an opportunity to give an opinion on decisions in advance.
- There are so many opportunities despite the challenges. OPS has great teachers and administrators.

Improvements Needed
- The inequity between schools is not good. There are haves and have nots.
- In practice, there’s a lot of management required of them beyond being instructional leaders. They feel there is a disconnect when they are judged for this when they don’t have a way to evaluate top administrators, who they never see in their buildings.

Strengths of Communication
- Communications support in a crisis.
- District Communications has been a nice buffer between the schools and media.
- Curriculum & Learning communicates very well.

Communication Improvements
- OPS does not do a good job of marketing the schools and what the district has to offer. If you don’t have a child in school, you don’t know what’s going on. OPS needs to improve marketing and outreach to the universities and businesses.
- Getting the Omaha World Herald to pick up stories.
- There are great things happening in each school but the word isn’t getting out.
- Magnet schools present at some conferences, but there is not much visibility otherwise.
- “We don’t do a good job promoting what we have.”
- Internal communication is critical. Top level administration needs to be better at communication. They are proud of their colleagues for the work they do, but communication can be better.
- Principals need to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Supervisors always know things and might share information with teachers, but principals are still not in the loop.
- Goes back to TAC departments not talking to each other.
- A big problem is gossip in the district. People assume they know things.
- When things happen in their buildings, they will talk to someone in TAC, but the TAC departments aren’t communicating with each other. There are lots of people at TAC who don’t know what is going on.
- Research does their work in secret (no one knows how it works).
- At the schools, more families are using teacher web pages, but teachers don’t have time to keep them updated. It is mostly young, single teachers who are doing it.
- There is a perception that TAC is top heavy, but if cuts are made there, then buildings feel the lack of support which adds to their jobs.
• It sometimes seems there is a sense of urgency to get programs out there without first looking deeper, so district keeps making changes.
• That doesn’t build trust and makes you look like you don’t know what you are doing.

Sources of Information
• Talking to colleagues.
• For things that impact buildings immediately, information comes from TAC departments.
• District is trying to strike a balance of not pulling them out of buildings too often.

Information Desired
• Information about tutoring. Parents are calling, and they aren’t sure what to tell them.
• Background information and talking points about issues; what’s happening with the legislature.
• They are receiving key messages now.

OPS Website/Portal
• It is easier for someone internally to find information than those on the outside; you need to know what you are looking for. It’s easy to navigate to the school sites.
• The first thing that pops up is the good stories, which is positive.
• First Class is a good tool.

Effectiveness of School Websites
• Updating them is time intensive; the program is very difficult. It takes a lot of training and is time-consuming. There is no “undo” function, so it is easy to accidentally delete information.

Assistance Needed to Improve School/Dept Communication
• They don’t know what to ask for related to communication assistance.
• Teacher web pages – tech support isn’t there often and they don’t have time to help with the web pages. Provide staff development for teachers or someone to keep sites updated.
• The state is now requiring that tests be taken on computers, but they don’t have that capacity.
• Interpreters to help prepare information sent home. It’s an issue to get things translated.
• Some said they are not sure who to go to for translations.

Informed of Board Actions
• Go to meetings.
• Parents tell them about the meetings the next day.
• Agendas are posted.
• Some watch meetings on TV.
• Most said they don’t listen to the podcasts.

Communication Role of Board
• They have to get along with each other. There is drama between individuals that has nothing to do with the schools. They rarely see Board members in the schools.
• Board members shouldn’t have a hidden agenda when visiting schools (i.e., asking specific questions of teachers).
• Get the politics out of Board visits.

Improving Board Communication
• They need to be transparent.

Opportunities to Give Input
• If changes are going to impact their school, they feel that there is too little information, too late, and they don’t feel they have a voice. They should be involved from the start or at least receive a heads up.
• Even if something doesn’t affect them directly, they need to know so they can answer questions.
• Most felt they don’t have opportunities.
• The group said they knew nothing about the superintendent search.
• Parents ask questions, but they have nothing to tell them. Then rumors start.
• They have to temper their reactions; people often know more than they do and then wonder why as a principal they don’t know something.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
• When asked for input, they never hear what happened or what was done with the input they gave.
• This goes to trust again, which over time generates apathy when nothing happens.
• People wonder why there’s not an internal candidate for superintendent.
• Who in the community is giving input? And for what purpose?
• They don’t see people from TAC in the schools, except maybe on the first day of school or when on appraisal.

Perceptions of Board
• The district’s credibility is hurt based on their dysfunction.
• Parents and community ask why they never see the Board in the buildings.
• People don’t understand the Board’s role. They think it is to call them with complaints.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• Share a vision of where we are going.
• It will take a long time to get acquainted with the community.
• Get out in the buildings and community to earn trust.
• Take time to know the district because of the diversity. It will be a difficult task.
• Connect with them so they can go back to their buildings with information.
• Ask them what they need in their buildings (they’ve never had an informal forum on their needs). Then come back and tell them what is happening. Share the rationale for decisions.
• Develop some influence with the Omaha World Herald and build relationships there.
Greatest Challenges Facing OPS

- NCLB. Research does a great job with that and in providing talking points, but that story isn’t put out by anyone but OPS.
- Internal strife, not having momentum, strong leadership.
- One principal noted that parents believe in the school, even when he has to send letters about poor performance; but the *Omaha World Herald* doesn’t.
- “Why has the *Omaha World Herald* made it their mission to step on OPS’ neck?”
- The mentality of “we can do more with less.”
- Lack of a voice for families in poverty.

Group: Elementary Principals (II)

OPS Image

- The public doesn’t really know OPS and how diverse it is.
- There is also a lot of poverty in OPS.
- The teachers in OPS “are amazing.”
- OPS is “misunderstood.”
- The state and the media always have OPS under the microscope.
- Students can get a very well-rounded education at OPS.
- The perception of OPS is that they don’t listen to families.

Changing Image

- Some felt that over the summer, the image of OPS did change due to negative publicity involving the superintendent that had been hired.
- The public attitude towards OPS is one of “what have you done lately?” The public is always critical and OPS “can’t seem to win for losing.”
- There were some issues with the Board and politics due to the changing of the superintendent.
- The former superintendent’s contract attracted a lot of media attention.
- The Board appears to be disjointed and they don’t trust each other.

5 Years from Now

- The hope is that five years from now OPS is thriving and succeeding, that it is unified and that the district is high achieving and appreciated.

Trust

- At the building level there is a lot of trust, but the group was not sure about whether the community trusts those at the district level.
- The One City, One School District campaign was promoted by the city’s power brokers.
- The group agreed that there is still a lot of mistrust within the school district.
- This group felt that the Board thinks promoting from within OPS is not palatable to the community.
Regaining Trust
- The group agreed that OPS needs to continue to improve test scores and give people a chance to be heard.
- The Board must show faith in the people leading the district from within.
- Care needs to be given that when district leaders ask for an opinion, it is truly wanted or needed. OPS can’t just pay lip service anymore.

Improvements Needed
- OPS needs a strategic planning committee.
- The former director of communications allowed the schools to market themselves.
- The news media has been allowed to tweet students directly to get insider information.
- There is no one within OPS right now to play defense against the negative media onslaught and counter inaccurate information.
- A media relations person must be always available and one person cannot be doing two jobs as it is now.
- OPS should start its own newspaper or publication.
- Put more information on the website.
- OPS should try to mend its relationship with the *Omaha World Herald*.
- Five years ago, news coverage was more balanced.
- OPS is more reactive now than proactive. Once reporters start reporting favorable news about OPS, they get reassigned.
- There is too much change and it is questionable whether TAC departments communicate with each other.
- There is a lot less site-based management.

Timeliness of Information
- Information at the moment is not clearly communicated. The superintendent is too busy getting TAC organized.
- This group praised the cabinet for how they communicate.

OPS Website
- The website is useful and contains all the forms that employees need.
- Bus stop information was posted.
- Information is very user-friendly.
- Most in this group felt that the website is good.

School Websites
- If a school has someone capable to update their website, a school site can be very useful, for example, homework is posted online for students.

Improving Board Communication
- Those who attend Board meetings are mostly employees and they attend to show support for each other. When there is a controversial issue, that’s when meetings are well-attended by the public.
Communication Expectations of Next Superintendent

- That the next superintendent will understand the Omaha community and its struggles.
- That the new superintendent will promote the positives.
- The superintendent should understand funding and show evidence that they understand urban education.
- That the superintendent will promote from within.

Group: Directors/Manager/Supervisors

OPS Image

- Large; urban.
- Diverse.
- Dedicated staff.
- Students in need of public education.

Changing Image

- Some negative perceptions did not exist in the past. An effort is being made to turn it around, but it is difficult, like running after a wagon. It will require a more proactive effort with intense and organized communication externally. More internal communication is needed across and within departments so that everyone knows their importance to the district.
- One participant didn’t think OPS’ image changed. “People don’t understand us.”
- Retirees who don’t have kids in school have a different perspective – it’s about money.
- It seems there is a greater consensus and organized effort of negative folks to denigrate OPS.
- There has always been animosity toward OPS. It’s seen as big, arrogant, and gets all the money. OPS is subject to intense scrutiny, in terms of whether it is doing something wrong. The *Omaha World Herald* seems to have an agenda to portray OPS in a negative light; it is the foil to the suburban districts. That’s changing as other districts are experiencing some of same issues with ESL students and poverty.
- The group felt OPS has been portrayed in a persistent negative light; good things are wiped out with one story.
- “Most people will say we don’t have a prayer. Most people don’t understand the importance of public education.”
- Some change has been in an internal shift. Test scores are improving, the district is getting a handle on things that hit fast. Changes have to come internally. There are people who work here that bad mouth OPS. All it takes is one bad thing to destroy a good story; it keeps eating away at what is being built up.
- Changes need to be made public and there needs to be an energetic effort put forth.

Trust

- There is trust in pockets. It depends on the community.
- There are lots of doubters when it comes to education. Everyone is an expert.
There is good support from those who see the issues and the efforts put forth. Those with less experience with other school districts don’t know what OPS has here. Other districts may just be starting a program that OPS has had for years. The schools do a really good job here. The majority of people don’t know it because they have no basis of comparison.
If people haven’t had an opportunity to be involved with OPS first hand, they don’t have a clue about the hard work that takes place and the challenges faced. Those with no urban background don’t understand it.
There are always people who love to tell war stories.
If you talk to parents, they love their school. They don’t focus on OPS.
OPS grads are the best salespeople because they say they had a wonderful experience.
Some of biggest community leaders absolutely trust the district and have poured money into schools. OPS is very lucky they have people contributing to programs.
But some community leaders are getting worried due to the leadership issues OPS has had.
Community advisory groups in the Career Centers give incredible support. It’s a great sales vehicle.
We have high taxes, yet money still comes in from contributors, so why isn’t more being done?
People with money are showing faith in OPS.

Most Proud of in OPS

- That every child counts.
- “We don’t give up.”
- The staff.
- The diverse student body.
- “We persevere.”
- The great number of opportunities.
- Innovative programs.

Strengths of Communication

- TAC information sessions have been a plus.
- OPS does a good job with vehicles to carry communication out (i.e., the website, newsletters, etc.). The framework is there, though it may not always be effective. It is heartwarming to read about what kids are doing.
- Some buildings administrators do a good job in connecting with the community.
- Advisory groups are a good communication vehicle.

Communication Improvements

- District doesn’t do enough to reach out with new media tools, the Parent Portal, Facebook and Twitter. People text all the time, need to do that to get parents’ opinions.
- There is danger in not providing access.
- Is OPS doing the best it can do in getting success stories in the mainstream media? How hard are we pushing to get them out?
- OPS shouldn’t rely only on the media.
• Need to do a better job communicating internally across and within departments. Secretaries and tech support need to be included in meetings. They carry the message too.
• TAC is criticized as being just a bunch of silos. There needs to be an effort to put some windows in those silos. It is up to the administrator to make sure information goes beyond their department. Principals and supervisors need to think about including support staff in meetings. What you do and say impacts others. This needs to be instilled in administrators.
• Many groups not included (i.e., nutrition, custodial, etc.) and feel they aren’t considered part of the team. It seems OPS is always responding to news instead of being proactive. It looks like we are always on the defense.
• The nature of the news means we are always responding. We don’t have to play that game. The media is driven by sensationalism and salacious stories. Maybe we need to use another medium to get information out to parents first.
• HR and Staff Development get together but might not include Curriculum and Instruction; they need to work together. Some activities are disjointed and are not focused on the needs of everyone together.

Sources of Information
• *Omaha World Herald.*
• Meetings to discuss issues.
• Conference emails.

Timeliness/Accessibility of Information
• Information needs to be timely; don’t wait until an issue has ballooned to share it.
• This group said that sometimes they aren’t told about what has been done, for example, recoding for the state. If a new program is created, staff needs to discuss now to get kids there, how to feed them, if you don’t have a certified teacher, what can be done legally, etc. There is no recognition of that interrelationship.
• This group said they are not sure people realize that what they do affects others. How do we get that out understanding out there?
• Everyone needs to make a concerted effort to communicate.
• There are problems early on if departments are not working together.
• Those who do have information need to consider who else needs to know.

Best Way to Communicate
• Meeting time doesn’t lend itself to “horizon issues,” meetings are more ad hoc. It comes back to the supervisor or who calls the meeting to make sure the right people are there.
• TAC staff meetings are often held after decisions have already been made, i.e., if transportation is not included, logistics that could affect whether something will work or not are not considered. They are told, “Transportation doesn’t drive curriculum.”
• Any ad hoc meeting has to engage right people from day one.
• There should be a process for setting that up and getting the right people together.
• Sometimes top administrators have an idea that is tried as a pilot, but if it fails, schools aren’t told why it was discontinued.
Key Messages
- They aren’t receiving any right now.
- They read the newspaper to get them.
- Business Services provides key messages.
- They are getting more memos that they are asked to pass on.
- HR does a good job with messages.
- The Accountability task force has a representative from every department.

Communication Roles Defined
- There may be an assumption that roles are defined, but one participant said she defined her role.
- Within departments it’s been defined, but they are not sure outside of that.
- “If you’ve been around awhile, there’s an assumption that you know.”
- There has never been an organized delineation of communication responsibilities.
- Transportation shared a planned process.
- One participant said that when there was a fire at a school, nothing was written down on how to handle it.

Opportunities to Give Input
- Most seemed fairly comfortable that they have some opportunities to offer input.
- One participant said he can give input to his direct supervisor and feels his voice is heard. He’s asked his opinion, though it’s not always followed.
- This group sees the district in transition from site-based management to a district-wide focus. In the past, principals had more control over decisions at their site, now they are trying to transition because more pressure is being put on to bring them into alignment.
- Timely involvement doesn’t always happen.

 Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
- That initially the superintendent will learn about processes that are in place rather than assuming there aren’t any.
- Take a proactive approach, like Dr. Moon did, and learn what they do and what support they need.
- Show some interest in understanding OPS processes. Sit in on working groups and committees; listen to what’s going on.
- Be up front, clear and candid on their stance. Staff want to know if they are going to receive the superintendent’s support when they have to deal with an angry parent. Try to minimize the district “eating as much crow” as possible.
- Be visible and connect with staff. Show up at events. Walk by and ask how they are doing.
- Other assistant superintendents could take a page from that as well. There’s a buzz on the floor when an assistant superintendent appears.
- Connect and let staff know you care about them. Be approachable.
Greatest Challenges Facing OPS
- A frustration for long-time staff is the community perception and attitude that OPS spends too much money.

Group: Superintendent’s Cabinet

OPS Image
- Largest in Nebraska; most diverse.
- Quality teaching staff.
- Passion for belief in the success of all students.
- Supportive community for the most part.
- Legislatively targeted.
- Targeted by print media.
- Benefits from philanthropy.
- Experienced at the top level; has a history and legacy.

Changing Image
- It is constantly changing, for good and bad.
- Image is negative right now, both externally and internally.
- Given all that’s transpired, from the Board down, “It’s not pretty.”
- Board divisiveness reflects negatively on the district.
- Board decision-making gives an appearance that isn’t factual, because the reality is, the buildings are running fine. The negative impression is caused by embarrassing Board snafus made in public and OPS is labeled in response.
- Much depends on the media’s portrayal of the district.
- It’s not unique to Omaha, but it reflects a movement to dismantle public education.

Trust
- Not at this time.
- This group believes the vast majority of the community believes in and trusts OPS, but it is a silent majority.
- People believe in their local schools, but when they look at the district they see controversy and OPS gets painted by that. The superintendent’s buyout looked bad.
- Majority of principals and teachers trust OPS and students feel safe, but there are some politicians and partners who create problems by portraying the students as poor and violent.

Most Proud of in OPS
- They pride themselves in educating all students.
- Staff are passionate about the work and care about all students.
- Decisions are sound and right for all kids.
- OPS is recognized for many processes and programs.
- Quality teachers, with scores on the way up, are making a difference academically.
• “When districts send difficult kids to OPS, we’ll take them and work with them, and people know it.”
• OPS is recognized nationally though not locally. People don’t know we are beating the odds.
• We believe in each other and parents believe in us.

Improvements Needed
• A pattern of declining test scores has turned and are now moving up, but the public may not know it.
• Lack of diversity among teaching staff.
• OPS uses too much legal counsel and counsel is too powerful.

Strengths of Communication
• There is a great internal communication process set up in terms of educating kids.
• They feel they do a good job communicating with the principals, and with their teams, but there need to be key messages or themes determined that are shared with everyone and restated consistently.

Communication Improvements
• There is a need to communicate between departments, as well as with principals. They have been trying to have regular TAC information sessions. All TAC staff are strongly encouraged to attend, but they are not required.
• There used to be separate silos in TAC. They are trying hard to get rid of them. but it’s been a recent shift.
• Several in the group said that they struggled with how to navigate at TAC when they started.
• The local media paints OPS differently than it does other districts.
• OPS needs a new brand, motto, and position statement, which is consistent every year.
• They are not trained to communicate outside and are not required to do more than what they were trained to do.
• OPS needs to get the story out, and brand the district the way we want to.
• HR needs more ways to communicate with external candidates. They are behind in recruitment and in using virtual and social media.
• Curriculum and Instruction could use technology more. They are still doing face-to-face presentations instead of using video or podcasts for some key things, such as the grading system. Now they count on principals and deans to present important information to teachers.
• Embrace all different avenues of communication because today’s workforce has people using all different mediums.
• OPS needs common language on issues most critical to the district.
• Need a continuity of message.
• Consistently tell people how things are connected to the improvement plan.
• Need to change how we get messages to the staff. Now they get messages via the media.
• Also need to address email.
• District still sends out the green sheet to custodial staff for updates on operations at buildings.
• They are buried by email. “If you get behind, then you aren’t communicating.”

Sources of Information
• Meetings with the superintendent.
• State department.
• National educational resources.

Key Messaging
• They are working together to develop messages and stay on topic.
• It would be helpful to know what are the five things they need to line up behind. They should be able to stand up and say what is being done in teacher recruitment or whatever area needs to be addressed. But they don’t feel they can speak to what other departments are doing right now.

Communication Roles Defined
• Some did not think so.
• “When we walk out of a room, we should all be telling the same story.”
• No one is telling them, “Here’s how you are going to communicate this.”
• They did not feel their communication roles have been clearly defined. How do they learn the best strategies for approaching the media?
• No crisis responsibilities have been defined.
• At the building-level, in a crisis they know what to do and have a plan.
• This group was unsure whether a district crisis plan exists.

OPS Website/Portal
• They would like help with the website. There should be a tab to explain the grading system. They are to update the website, but staff is not responsive.
• Curriculum and Learning needs a webmaster.
• There are problems with updating the site.
• They can’t get support to get things updated and added.
• There are no personnel available for support.

Assistance Needed to Improve School/Dept Communication
• Marketing strategies for recruitment; talking points for initiatives.
• Print and electronic communication materials they can access.
• Website support.
• When there is a big proposal, such as the early childhood expansion, it would be good to have assistance with marketing.
• Need an FTE on social media monitoring.

Improving Board Communication
• The Board needs to look at their role and responsibilities.
• There is a process in place via committees; they take recommendations that come from community and staff and act on them.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
• This group felt the Board hears but doesn’t listen.

Perceptions of Board
• The Board’s actions make the district look bad.
• The public perceives the Board’s dysfunction as the district’s dysfunction.
• The district isn’t broken; this administrative team knows how to lead.

Communication Expectations for Next Superintendent
• Communicate often.
• Face-to-face is best. Be approachable, sit down with people and be a good listener.
• Be visionary.
• They need their cabinet meetings.
• Redirect and guide them in meetings; support them in public and empower them to lead.
• Encourage feedback and consultation; allow cabinet to have more interaction with Board members outside of committee meetings.

Group: Board of Education

OPS Image
• Unsettled.
• Transitioning.
• Moving forward.
• Unfocused.

How Others Describe OPS
• They don’t know what they don’t know. People could be more aware of what happens in the district.
• They think OPS is top heavy.
• Bureaucratic.
• Too many levels to get an answer.
• From a service provider perspective, OPS is hard to work with.
• Parents perceive OPS as being traditional in education, which they like, but it also means district is not seen as innovative, forward-thinking or cutting edge.
• Younger parents do not see OPS as progressive.
• There is a perception that there are definite “pockets” in the district where the district doesn’t spend money on the schools or have good teachers in the schools.
• Lots of parents are very grateful for what they get from OPS.
Changing Image
- Based on what they have heard from staff, some members said they are surprised at how smoothly things are running; they thought there would be issues with the transition. There are more open lines of communication.
- One member said she has heard the “same old, same old.”
- It depends on who you are talking to. Those who are more involved are more informed.
- People don’t take advantage of reading notices or information on the website, even though the district puts it out there.

5 Years from Now
- Would like OPS to be seen as progressive, innovative, and using technology.
- Cutting-edge.
- An education leader.
- Strong academic program.
- Have something for everyone; meet everyone’s needs.
- Open. End the perception that we are closed.

Trust
- The community trusts their schools and teachers; not sure how they feel about the Board and district. It’s not overwhelmingly negative, because they don’t show up at Board meetings in mass. Schools get things done in spite of the Board.
- They don’t hesitate to send their kids, so there is some trust.
- People trust their own schools (tracks with the PDK/Gallup survey).
- Not everyone wants to send their kids to OPS. They haven’t even seen the schools and yet they think they have to go elsewhere, especially at the middle level.
- Some don’t want to believe the schools are good.

Regaining Trust
- Improve test scores. There is a huge population that doesn’t take tests seriously.
- Align decisions with clear, overall district goals and then communicate that to parents. For example, the transportation plan makes parents crazy. Why can two kids on her block take the bus to the high school but her daughter can? Staff had a justification for it that made no sense. Parents want common sense solutions or people just think it is bureaucratic nonsense.
- Explanations are so long for why the district does things, need to be more succinct.
- The Board doesn’t go out and talk to the public a lot. When the Board makes a decision, people learn about it from the newspaper or TV.
- Parents trust the principals and teachers who will get answers for them. Principals do a good job of seeing parents as partners.

Strengths of Communication
- *OPS News* for staff.
- Kindergarten registration.
- Back-to-school letters; good basic communication.
• SchoolMessenger calls. System was just updated to allow for more use than just emergencies.
• They do a good job of identifying info to share story ideas with media.

Communication Improvements/Being Proactive

• Do more with technology.
• More face-to-face contact; reach out personally.
• Hold a “state of the district” report meeting. Get community leaders there. They need to hear about all the pieces.
• The superintendent’s advisory council meets four times yearly, but it’s not a way to get feedback. There is no dialogue about issues. It’s off-putting jargon used in meetings. We used to go out and talk to public.
• Too often staff will respond by saying “We’re doing [it] because the Board says…” The phone hold message is “the Board says…”
• Send a simple bulletin to parents that is consistent and recognizable.
• We don’t tell our own story effectively, so we become easy targets. The newspaper lifts sections of information from reports, which changes how people perceive what is compared and tracked.
• OPS needs additional ways to get messages out, maybe billboards.
• Response is too reactive. We need to get information out in several ways.
• Our market has to be our parents. Add a sheet to the back of a newsletter with exciting district information. Add test scores. We are missing inexpensive ways to get the message out.

OPS Website/Portal

• Hard to use.
• Some people don’t have internet access.
• It is not smartphone or tablet friendly.
• It is also hard to access the Parent Portal from a smartphone.
• One member noted that if her child’s school had a decent website, she would access it.
• The website is not intuitive and is hard to use. “It’s six layers thick.”
• School websites are not good. Some haven’t posted anything new all year; they still have last year’s information up. There should be a uniform template so all schools can have the same thing.

Social Media

• District has place holders for Facebook and Twitter but is not using them yet.
• Some Board members were uncomfortable with the district using social media.
• Kids get everything via social media, so OPS has to be there as they grow up and become parents. “The ship has sailed, so we need to use it responsibly.”
• Need a social media policy.
• Grandparents can get involved via Facebook.
Improving Board Communication
- The vast majority of people don’t know who is on the Board or what the Board does.
- People don’t make the connection between the Board and academics, they think the Board just handles policy and spends money.
- Get facts out about the Board.
- One member said she uses social media in her sub-district and visits the schools. She has a Facebook page and Twitter account just for Board-related information.
- The Board President is out in the community a lot.
- One member said she communicates with her principals, and has attended staff meetings, PTA meetings, and special events.
- One member said she is cautious about using email, because there have been numerous leaks. She can’t take the risk.
- One member said she doesn’t give out any information.
- Some Board members, if not on the prevailing side of a vote, are not respecting that the Board speaks as one voice. Some members don’t want to be part of the group because they disagree. You don’t fight against the Board.

Perceptions of Board
- The Board is not taken seriously because it is comprised of 11 women and only one man.
- Individually, they are respected.
- The Omaha World Herald endorsed all three male candidates for the Board. If the Board had 11 men, there would never have been a question.

Internal Board communications
- Because some on the Board don’t want others to have information they will misuse, no one has information, which means they aren’t solid on what they are doing when decisions need to be made.
- There needs be an internal Board communication policy.
- There is a lack of trust among Board members. Instead of expressing Board policy, they will say, “The Board said this, but I think…”

Communication Expectations of Next Superintendent
- That they will be apprised of everything before it hits the news.
- Would like to know in a general sense what direction the superintendent is taking things (i.e., with transportation). They don’t need details, but want to know the philosophy and where the district is headed.
- Need a strategic plan for the district.
- They keep hearing about ‘stretch goals,’ but the Board has no details.
- What’s the plan for meeting student targets that aren’t met?
- Where is the superintendent going and who is he/she seeing and meeting with?
- Continue to get daily information on what’s happening at the schools.
- Tell them when a principal is removed or there is an issue.
- The district is afraid to say what is wrong and what needs fixing. They would prefer to deal with it.
Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions
- What is NSPRA?
- Auditors’ Vitae
Focus Group Discussion Questions
for Public and Staff

1. When I say “Omaha Public Schools,” what image immediately comes to mind?

2. Do you think the district’s image in the community is changing?
   - How would you like to be able to describe OPS 5 years from now?

3. Do you believe the community trusts district leaders to provide a quality education for all students?
   - If not, what can OPS do to regain the community’s trust?

4. What do you value most about the educational program offered by OPS?
   - Where does it most need to improve?

5. When it comes to communication, what does OPS do well?
   - Where does it most need to improve communication?

6. Where do you get most of your information about the schools and the district?
   - Is the information you need about OPS and the schools easy to find and access?

7. What information would you like to receive that you don’t get now?
   - Is important information delivered in a timely manner?

8. (for staff) As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?

9. What is the best way for the district and schools to communicate important information?
   - What communication vehicles are most accessible/effective for you?
   - If the district had a Facebook page would you use it to access current news and information?
   - Would you be interested in receiving information via Twitter?
   - Are there other social networking tools or apps that you would like the district to consider including in its communication effort?

10. What information do you typically go to the main OPS website to find?
    - Are you able to easily find what you are looking for?
    - Do you check the OPS website for news updates about the district and schools?
    - What other information would be helpful to include on the website?
    - What information do you most often seek on your child’s school website?
    - Are you familiar with the Parent Portal?
    - Is the Parent Portal a helpful tool?
    - How can your school website be improved?

My next questions pertain specifically to the OPS Board of Education.
1. Do you feel you are kept informed of Board of Education business and actions?

2. What communication role is most appropriate for the OPS Board of Education?
   • How can the Board improve its communication and outreach to the public?

3. Do you feel that the OPS Board of Education provides adequate opportunities for you to express your views and have input into important decisions?
   • If not, how can the Board best provide opportunities for you to have a voice?
   • Do you feel Board members listen to input from the community and staff and consider it before making decisions?
   • How might the Board better engage parents, staff and community in helping address issues and challenges facing the district and schools?

4. How do public perceptions of the Board and its actions as a governing body impact OPS?
   • What does the Board need to do to improve its image in the greater Omaha community?

My final questions refer again to overall district communication.

11. The district is currently conducting a search for a new superintendent. What are your expectations for how the next superintendent should communicate with staff, parents and the public?

12. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing OPS today?

Focus Group Questions for Principals and Administrators

1. When I say “Omaha Public Schools,” what image immediately comes to mind?

2. Do you think the district’s image in the community is changing?
   • How would you like to be able to describe OPS 5 years from now?

3. Do you believe the community trusts district leaders to provide a quality education for all students?
   • If not, what can OPS do to regain the community’s trust?

4. What are you most proud of as an administrator in OPS?
   • Where does OPS most need to improve?

5. When it comes to communication, what does OPS do well?
   • Where does it most need to improve communication?

6. What is your primary source of news and information about major decisions and happenings around the district and in the schools?
7. As an administrator, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
   ▪ What information would you like to receive that you don’t get now?
   ▪ What is the best way for district leaders to communicate with you?
   ▪ Are there social media or other tech tools that you would like the district to consider for its communication effort (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps)?

8. Do the superintendent and Cabinet clearly communicate key messages so that you feel comfortable in sharing information with your staff and parents?
   ▪ Is your communication role clearly defined?

9. What information do you typically go to the main OPS website to find?
   ▪ Are you able to easily find what you are looking for?
   ▪ What other information would be helpful to include on the website?

10. How effective are the school websites in providing important information for parents and staff?
    ▪ How can they be improved?

11. What assistance do you need to help you improve communication at your school or in your department?

My next questions pertain specifically to the OPS Board of Education.

1. Do you feel you are kept informed of Board of Education business and actions?

2. What communication role is most appropriate for the OPS Board of Education?
   ▪ How can the Board improve its communication and outreach to the public?

3. Do you feel that the OPS Board of Education provides adequate opportunities for you as administrators to express your views and have input into important decisions?
   ▪ Do you feel Board members listen to input from the community and staff and consider it before making decisions?
   ▪ How might the Board better engage parents, staff and community in helping address issues and challenges facing the district and schools?

4. How do public perceptions of the Board and its actions as a governing body impact OPS?
   ▪ What does the Board need to do to improve its image in the greater Omaha community?

My final questions refer again to overall district communication.

12. The district is currently conducting a search for a new superintendent. What are your expectations for how the next superintendent should communicate with staff, parents and the public?

13. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing OPS today?
Focus Group Discussion Questions
for OPS Board of Education Members

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe OPS today?
   ▪ How do you think parents and others in the community would describe it?

2. Do you think the district’s image in the community is changing?
   ▪ How would you like to be able to describe OPS 5 years from now?

3. Do you believe the community trusts the Board and district leaders to provide a quality education for all students?
   ▪ If not, what can OPS do to regain the community’s trust?

4. What are you most proud of as a Board member of OPS?
   ▪ What one thing do you believe is most in need of improvement?

5. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does OPS do well?
   ▪ How can it be more proactive with communication?
   ▪ How else can communication be improved?

6. Which of the district’s current communication vehicles (i.e., the website, or publications) do you think are most effective in delivering OPS’ message? Why?
   ▪ Are there social media or other tech tools that you believe the district should consider including or expanding use of in its communication effort (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps)?

7. What communication role do you believe is most appropriate for the Board of Education?
   ▪ How can the Board improve its communication and outreach to the public?

8. How might the Board and OPS better engage parents, staff and community in helping address issues and challenges facing the district and schools?
   ▪ Do you feel adequate opportunities are now provided for people to have input and express their views on important decisions?

9. How do public perceptions of the Board and its actions as a governing body impact OPS?
   ▪ What does the Board need to do to improve its image in the greater Omaha community?

10. What other communication challenges do you see OPS facing in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions
for OPS Student Leaders

1. What do you like most about your school?

2. What has been the best part of your high school experience so far?
3. What could the school do better to improve your high school experience?

4. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?

5. How do you learn about academics, activities, and social events at school?

6. What is the best way for your school and the school district to communicate with students?

7. As a student, what information is most important for you to receive from the school and the district?

8. Do you ever visit your school website? The OPS website? Are they helpful to you?
   - How could they be improved for student use?

9. Do you have opportunities at school to provide input and express your views about decisions that impact students?

10. What does OPS need to tell people in the community about students and your high school?
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 Schools worldwide. NSPRA’s mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

With over 75 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files, and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Karen H. Kleinz, APR, associate executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has over 30 years experience in public relations, working in the private sector as well as public education. She has won numerous state and national awards for her work. She is also accredited in public relations (APR).

Since joining NSPRA in 1998, Karen has led the Association’s public engagement efforts and has represented NSPRA in collaborative partnerships with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Everyday Democracy, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the Kettering Foundation. She directed NSPRA’s learning contract with the Kettering Foundation to develop a community audit process designed to help school systems and communities assess their ability to successfully engage each other in supporting student achievement and building public ownership of schools. She has also been very involved in the issue of school violence and in helping schools and educators communicate with their publics in a crisis situation, including providing on-site assistance to the Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools communication department in the aftermath of the Columbine High School tragedy.

Karen is responsible for coordinating NSPRA’s communication audit service for school districts. She serves as lead auditor on numerous communication audits each year in addition to serving as primary editor and contributing auditor on all audits conducted by NSPRA’s cadre of consultants. Karen coordinates session programming for the NSPRA National Seminar each year and also oversees chapter and member relations for the Association. In addition, she serves as NSPRA’s liaison to the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., and the National School Safety Coalition in Yonkers, N.Y.

Karen has developed and managed school public relations programs for diverse school districts, from small, semi-rural districts with large non-English speaking minority populations to the largest elementary district in Arizona, serving suburban Phoenix. As director of district public relations she was responsible for internal and external communications, including serving as spokesperson in crisis situations. She also was responsible for media relations, overseeing district publications, training administrators and teachers in effective communications, promoting community involvement and volunteerism in the schools, coordinating bond election campaigns and engaging the public in deliberative discussions about education through study circles and community forums.

Her district experience includes operating as a one-person office to supervising a communications staff that included a full service print shop. She has created award winning public relations offices in districts that had none, and expanded programs in districts with established departments. Karen also operated a public relations consulting business in Arizona specializing in school communications. As a consultant she assisted schools and districts in developing a positive image and work environment through improved communications. She is the co-author of NSPRA’s best selling professional development CD, Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for tapping the people power in your schools.

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

Joseph Ortiz is director of public and community relations for the Roosevelt School District in Phoenix, Ariz. Joseph has over 20 years of experience in public relations including media relations, crisis communication, program promotion, public relations/communications planning and development. Prior to this he served as Communications Director for the Arizona Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Joseph spent 13 years in the public relations department of the Phoenix Union High School District, the nation’s fourth largest high school district. He worked on a daily basis with news media and beat reporters dealing with the tough issues of an inner-city urban school district. During his tenure at Phoenix Union, he helped plan a year-long centennial celebration for the district, assisted in promoting the district’s Magnet programs, and coordinated publicity for the opening of a brand new school in 2000, the first new school in the district since 1972. Issues such as overcrowding, state-mandated testing, charter schools and low test scores were also constant challenges that were met and dealt with.

While serving as the Communication Director for the City of Tempe, he continued to work closely with that city’s three school districts. He found ways to collaborate with the schools to promote their needs and activities through the city’s communication channels.

As part of his professional commitment to public relations and education, he has served as president of the Arizona School Public Relations Association in addition to serving on the board of the Tempe Impact Education Foundation, an organization that promotes and supports Tempe, Arizona elementary schools. He was chair of the City of Phoenix’s Educational Access Governing Board, the governing body of Phoenix’s education cable channel. Joseph also served on the National School Public Relations Association’s (NSPRA) executive board as At Large Minority Vice President.

He has presented at the NSPRA annual conference and served as a counselor on-call, mentoring other school PR professionals on various issues. In addition, he has written articles for the NSPRA’s member newsletter, eNetwork, was an NSPRA Frontrunner and won several NSPRA awards for various school PR programs. Joseph is also fluent in Spanish and has served as co-auditor on a number of NSPRA communication audits.