NSPRA’s Communication Audit Report for Omaha Public Schools June 2017
NSPRA’s Communication Audit Report

Prepared for

Omaha Public Schools

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Introduction

As a major urban school system and the third largest employer in the state of Nebraska, Omaha Public Schools (OPS) in many ways reflects the changing face of public education in the nation today. From the broad diversity of the students it serves, to the successes and challenges of meeting the comprehensive needs of all students who walk through the doors of the schools, OPS leaders and staff are committed to providing a high quality educational environment that offers a variety of unique and innovative program choices.

OPS has long had a solid communication program in place but is now re-examining current processes and programs to ensure they are based in sound public relations practice and that the variety of vehicles now available to communicate with both internal and external audiences are being used effectively. OPS is fortunate to have a talented and experienced team in the District Communications office who do a commendable job managing a complicated and complex program that must continually balance rapid response needs in crisis or breaking news situations with substantive, informational and timely ongoing communication with multiple audiences.

The goal of this communication audit was two-fold – to seek and use data, opinion and perceptions to assess the effectiveness and management of communication, public relations, marketing and engagement efforts across the school system; and then to provide recommendations on strategies that continue to build and enhance the overall communication program. This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the superintendent and Board of Education and demonstrates the willingness of OPS leaders to address communication challenges and strengthen the relationship between OPS and its key stakeholders.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of District Communications or any other department or individual school, they are intended to build effective communication in a school system that is committed to continuous improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all students and families to the best of its ability.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall. 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, however – including a communication program – is to determine whether it is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the assessors reviewed feedback received from focus groups and interviews, SCoPE Surveys and a variety of resource materials in light of OPS’ mission and strategic priorities.

The NSPRA communication audit process is predicated on taking a current “snapshot” of OPS’ total communication effort. This report is based primarily on the feedback and review materials submitted early in the audit process – the then current “snapshot” – and reflects the status of the communication program at that time.
**Opinion research as a foundation**

A communication audit of OPS provides an important foundation for continuing to implement and expand a strategic communication plan for the school system. The audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of current communication, engagement and branding efforts and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the overall communication program. The audit NSPRA conducted for OPS in 2012-13 provides a starting benchmark for continuing to measure the evolving communication program and current efforts are benchmarked against NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures in this report. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

**Scope and nature of the study**

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of 21 focus groups with internal and external audiences, SCOPE Surveys of Parents/Families, Faculty/Staff and Community, and interview sessions with OPS leaders. Participants in the focus groups were invited by officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Focus group sessions were held with the following audiences:

- Parents/PTA Leaders
- Parents (non-English speakers)
- Citizens Advisory Council Representatives
- Civic/Business/Ministerial Leaders/Elected Officials
- OPS Foundation/Learning Community/Higher Education Representatives
- News Media Representatives
- Teachers (three groups – elementary, middle and secondary)
- OEA Representatives
- School Secretaries
- TAC Secretaries
- Support Staff Representatives
- Student Leader Representatives
- Principals (two groups – elementary and secondary)
- Directors/Managers/Supervisors
- Superintendent’s Cabinet
- Board of Education (in three groups)

Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and not be directly attributed to them. Their responses are reported in the *Focus Group Summaries* section of this report.
Processes and procedures

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

The first step in the audit process involved District Communications submitting samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., publications, updates on initiatives, reports, program information, etc.) with various audiences. The auditors also reviewed websites and social media platforms. These materials and websites were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. In addition to the SCoPE Surveys of parents, staff and community, supplemental surveys were conducted with principals, central office administrators and District Communications staff.

The core of the communication audit is the onsite focus group component designed to gather perceptions from internal and external audiences. The auditors also met with the superintendent and District Communications staff.

This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of OPS’ current communication programming.
- Elicit 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.
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and improving the management of public relations, communication, marketing and engagement activities for the school system.

Following the review of materials, SCoPE Survey results and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies OPS can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible, improve and enhance overall communication practices and engage stakeholders in supporting the schools.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations, and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, 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
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 systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations and communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view the system and its work through the perspective of others, and that they would not undergo the process unless they were comfortable in doing so.

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of a communication audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, 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.

Some of the comments noted in the focus group summaries may reflect concerns that will not be included in our recommendations, but they may be issues OPS leaders will want to address to help resolve concerns. This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the District Communications office and to suggest options and considerations for expanding and improving the communication program.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this Communication Audit Report contains five major recommendation areas for improving communication, marketing and engagement with OPS’ primary stakeholders and becoming more strategic and effective with outreach and messaging efforts. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in school system communication programs across North America and benchmarked against NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures. OPS may choose to implement all or some of the recommendations, depending on factors including timing, budget and staffing capacity.
Supportive quotes

The auditors took notes in each focus group session. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and would not be directly attributed to them. The focus group summaries are a synopsis of what was said in the group.

Participant follow-up

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 across the system, especially with focus group participants.
Key Findings and Observations

The auditors identified a number of common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and were supported by the SCoPE Surveys data. In addition, the review of current materials and the assessment of what needs to be done to improve the communication effort led to the following key findings and observations.

Strengths

■ OPS internal and external stakeholders consistently value the diversity of the district as its foremost key strength. They felt attending school where so many different cultures are joined and celebrated is invaluable in the K-12 education experience. Many expressed pride in the work the district has done with a new and growing refugee population.

■ District strengths identified by participants include talented and dedicated teachers and staff who care about kids and a wide variety of program options designed to meet the comprehensive needs of students and support them at all levels. There was a general feeling that OPS is viewed much more positively by families with children in the district than it is by those who do not have students in OPS schools.

■ Focus group participants in general described the community as engaged and supportive of the schools, noting the “sense of community” that is shared across the district. Additionally, many participants praised the breadth and strength of community partnerships with OPS and the support of the Omaha Public Schools Foundation.

■ The many unique programs and opportunities provided for OPS students were noted consistently by participants as a major strength of the district. Families have many choices in OPS, covering a broad spectrum from magnet and alternative programs that include STEAM, dual language, law and global studies and more, to career academies and the first virtual school in the state.

■ Participants across the focus groups cited recent gains in academic achievement in many OPS schools as a strength in boosting positive perceptions of the district. A number of participants felt the passage of the most recent bond issue signaled a change in perception as well, and praised the district’s efforts to engage the public in its success. Some felt increased academic standards and holding students accountable help support the improved perceptions. Recent awards programs were also cited for helping to recognize and promote improvement.

■ OPS enjoys a long-standing presence in the community with multi-generations of families that are OPS graduates and who continue to support the district and enroll their children in the schools. Participants in almost every group acknowledged being alumni, with many sharing their history in the district and pride as former graduates as a rationale for continuing to be involved, employed, and/or enrolling their children.
Changes in Image

When asked whether perceptions about OPS have changed over the last couple of years, participants were split in their responses. Many believe it has improved because of more proactive outreach and a positive narrative under Superintendent Evans and Director of Communications Monique Farmer, APR, along with the increased achievement scores and successful bond. Others felt that disciplinary issues and the problems with bus transportation at the start of the school had a negative impact, compounded with what they believe is persistent negative coverage by local news media and the current political climate that is adverse to public schools.

The need to rebuild trust remains an issue both internally and externally and was cited by participants across the focus groups. Some progress has been made, but a commitment to openness and transparency by district leaders is critical to developing credibility and buy-in at all levels.

Communication Improvements Needed

Communication overall was described as highly reactive, especially when it comes to important, high profile issues. The perception held by many focus group participants is that the district does not release information about an issue or situation until after it is covered by the news media. They see this as the media forcing the district to communicate when it would prefer not to. Improving the timeliness and messaging and information dissemination was consistently cited as a needed improvement. Participants want to be told the whole story in a timely way along with the rationale for decisions and actions.

Staff participants in the internal focus groups reported they are often “left out of the loop” and want to be kept informed on important issues so that they feel equipped to communicate intelligently and share accurate information, good or bad. They feel strongly that information on district issues should be shared with staff first, before they hear about it from the news media. In both the SCoPE Survey and focus groups, staff gave the district low ratings for “communication that makes them feel valued as employees.” They noted that school-level communication is inconsistent building to building and for the most part dependent upon the principal.

Parents in the groups gave mixed reviews about communication at the school level, also noting that it is inconsistent school to school. Many expressed satisfaction with being kept informed about their child’s performance in school, school events, etc., but were dissatisfied with communication around bigger issues such as the new grading system, the new school café, and moving the sixth grade to middle school.

A consistent theme among non-English speaking families, as well as staff who work with diverse groups, was the need to increase the capacity for translation and interpretation services. Parents want to be involved and supportive in their children’s education, but often find their access to information is limited and their ability to engage at meetings and events is challenged when no interpreter is available.
The need to improve customer service at TAC was cited in both internal and external groups. Both employees and parents reported calling TAC seeking information and never receiving a call back or response to their requests for assistance.

Participants in the news media focus group expressed strong dissatisfaction over the district’s ability to respond to requests and provide them with timely and complete information. Many cited work-arounds they have developed for getting what they need. Their frustration spans both “issues” stories as well as “good news” features, noting that because of the delays and gaps in information, they are forced to move on to other stories due to deadlines. Some felt that the District Communications team does their best to accommodate them and recognize that there may be internal challenges that compromise their ability to turn around requests promptly. This challenge is increasingly significant given how many stakeholders are relying on the news media as their primary source of information.

Sources of Information

No district publication or the website emerged as a primary source of information for either the internal or external focus groups. For parents, their school newsletters were the most often cited source and for employees it was email and their principals or meetings. For both staff and parents, “word of mouth” and the Omaha World Herald were also cited as primary sources of news and information. While many participants acknowledged the district’s increased social media presence, they did not cite it as major source of information at present.

Opportunities for Input

In general, participants across all groups felt strongly that while they are asked for input, OPS leaders do not use or value their feedback. As examples, many shared their experiences completing surveys or participating in focus groups or advisory committees where no follow-up report on the findings was provided and no associated course of action communicated. Most felt that decisions are already made before their input is solicited and that leaders are just going through the motions with no intent of incorporating it into the decision-making process. Employee group participants felt they have more opportunities at the building level. Teachers and staff would like to be involved in decisions that directly impact them, but for the most part did not feel their voice is valued.

Representatives from the Citizens Advisory Council felt that this program is no longer effective and needs a complete overhaul. Rather than an opportunity to engage with district leaders, the meetings have become a means to deliver information with minimal interaction.

Website

Staff, parents and community members in the focus groups all consistently expressed frustration with the OPS district and school websites. With the exception of a few internal “super users,” all audiences described the sites as difficult to navigate, inconsistent and containing out of date
content. The school calendar – a central tool to the operating efficiency of the district – was often cited as being extremely limited and not regularly updated.

**Expectations for the Next Superintendent**

- There is strong consensus among focus group participants that the next superintendent must be someone who is skilled in working in a diverse community. They want a leader who will continue to leverage OPS’ diversity as a strength and be comfortable working and interacting with people from varied backgrounds and cultures.

- In addition, participants agreed that the next superintendent needs to be a strong advocate for OPS and public education in general, especially given the possible expansion of vouchers and charter schools in Nebraska with current legislative agendas. They want a leader who will continue to build on the district’s recent progress, particularly in student achievement.

- In all groups, participants expressed a preference for a superintendent who is visible and engaged, inclusive, collaborative, willing to listen, and accountable to all stakeholders. They believe transparency is important and that the superintendent should value and build relationships with the community and staff. Media representatives want someone who is open and comfortable with the media.

**Greatest Communication Challenges**

As part of the focus group process, participants were asked what they felt were the communication challenges facing OPS in the near future. Their responses touched on the following:

- Rebuilding trust in the district and OPS leaders.

- Moving from being reactive to proactive in sharing information.

- Improving customer service and response at TAC, in interactions with employees, parents and the public.

- Maintaining support of the district’s infrastructure through future bonds.

- Improving Board communications.

- Expanding translation/interpretation services for non-English speaking families.
**Recommendations**

OPS is fortunate to have skilled leadership and an experienced team in the District Communications department that provides a great deal of talent and expertise in managing the overall communication program. They are well-positioned to implement the recommendations provided here if adequate resources are allocated to support communication and marketing efforts. Allowing the team to focus their efforts on strategic, two-way communication will lead to better understanding, stronger relationships with diverse audiences, and increased community support. A strategic communication effort will support OPS in meeting Strategic Plan goals and build its reputation as a high-performing, student-focused school system.

The recommendations provided here are intended to expand and add support to the foundation already in place for acting on the communication commitments laid out in the Strategic Plan. It is the responsibility of District Communications to develop strategic, two-way communication and marketing strategies that will lead to better understanding, stronger relationships with staff, parents and key community audiences, and increased pride in and support for OPS schools. However, the department cannot accomplish this alone; every OPS employee is responsible for effective communication.

**Section A: Communication Planning and Branding**

**Recommendation – 1A**

**Continue working to become more strategic with communication.**

The district’s communication program under the current Director has been expanding rapidly and department staff have more to do than in the past. This is due in part to the increased focus on strategic communication but also because of changes that the use of digital and mobile technology has brought about in how people access information. As a result, staff capacity is stretched to the limit trying to support the communication needs of a large and diverse urban school system that receives intense media scrutiny.

District Communications developed a solid communication plan for the 2016-17 school year with six focus areas aligned to the OPS Strategic Plan. Good progress has been made in many of the planned action steps but it is time to take a small step back and to assess the overall plan and what is realistically feasible for a staff of four to accomplish effectively.

While the primary purpose of the communication effort is to advance the goals and initiatives set out in the Strategic Plan, the communication function also needs to deliver on:

1. Telling OPS’ story;
2. Improving the timeliness and consistency of communication with all audiences;
3. Ongoing crisis communication response/assistance;
4. Marketing OPS schools in an increasingly competitive education environment; and
5. Improving and strengthening local media relations.

That’s a lot of moving parts and a strategic communication plan serves as the glue and catalyst for making it all work. The plan should serve as the framework for determining communication priorities and driving the work of the team, and clearly demonstrate how projects, tasks, and responsibilities align with the major priorities of OPS. We recommend that the plan for 2017-18 include timelines, projected budgets and outline the related communication responsibilities for all administrators (not just District Communications) for every communication initiative planned for the year, similar to the plans prepared for the text messaging roll-out and changes to grading practices. Responsibilities can be broken down to primary or secondary, but the intent is to ensure deployment as well as highlight the role that all administrators play in ensuring the effective and efficient dissemination of information. The strategic communication plan should also guide the development and dissemination of key messages that are critical to OPS’ major initiatives and goals.

We also suggest that the plan include all ongoing communication tasks, such as the various publications, e-updates, recognitions, story research, etc., in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the scope of responsibilities that fall under District Communications. Routine, day-to-day communication tasks can have a major impact on the effectiveness of the strategic effort and understanding where they fit in supporting goals, how much time it takes to accomplish them and the level of value they add to the overall communication program will help determine what should be continued and what is no longer working.

Charting a clear course for current and future communication needs, as well as being responsive to the direction of OPS leadership will ensure that District Communications has the support needed to communicate the right message to the right constituency using the right communication tactics.

**Action Step**

**Continue to prepare and deploy individual communication plans for key initiatives and programs.**

As new initiatives unfold over the year, continue to prepare and support the consistent use of specific communication plans targeted to the desired outcomes. The plans District Communications developed this year for the Common Grading Practices Changes and the Text Messaging Communication Plan are excellent models that we encourage you to continue using. What is needed is better planning and deployment to ensure administrators are familiar with these tools, can readily access them and are trained to use the plans effectively in communicating with parents.

Consider providing an overview and training for administrators on the purpose and value of using the 4-step public relations process of research, planning, communication, and evaluation. Stress the importance of addressing the following questions for every action or activity the school system undertakes to build understanding of what the plan is trying to accomplish along with their role in it:
• Who needs to know?
• What do they need to know?
• Why do they need to know?
• 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 evaluate the outcomes?

Providing basic communication training can help and encourage administrators and principals to develop their own communication plans for special projects. District Communications should support their efforts with training, resources and advice. Developing the communication skills of the entire OPS administrative team can help lay the groundwork for OPS to become more proactive in telling its story and building strong support both internally and externally.

**Action Step**

*Continue to evaluate all communication strategies, tactics and activities.*

Especially important to an effective communication plan is the evaluation component. We commend District Communications for incorporating evaluation metrics and measurable outcomes into the communication plans that it prepares. This is a step that we find is often left out of many communication plans that we review. Being able to measure outcomes is a critical component when decisions must be made about continuing specific communication activities given limited resources and staff capacity. The focus group feedback for this audit and, in particular, the results of the SCoPE Surveys, offers a fresh perspective and a baseline of where the communication effort now stands.

OPS surveys staff and parents extensively on a variety of topics throughout the year, so finding ways to incorporate questions related to communication where possible will help to avoid audience survey burn-out and also connect the communication component to major initiatives under study by the district.

Some additional suggestions include:

- **“Soft soundings.”** Don’t underestimate the value of asking staff and parents’ opinions in informal conversations at meetings and social events, as a “by the way” at the end of phone call, and even in line at the coffee shop. Focus on a single topic or publication, and keep a running list of responses. Recruit other TAC administrators and Board members to do the same and provide them with a “question of the month.” This type of casual outreach can also increase engagement and goodwill while demonstrating that district leaders are approachable and willing to listen to input.
Short focus groups. Determining parents’ opinions also can be accomplished in short focus group sessions as part of school open house programs or PTA meetings. Questions should focus on one or two specific OPS/school communication vehicles and activities. Longer focus groups (such as those conducted for the communication audit) could be held as needed during the year as part of the ongoing planning process.

Regularly review website and social media analytics and track changes as content is updated, changed or added to in order to determine what is currently resonating with users.

Reader/user surveys of publications. We believe there is value in conducting specific reader surveys annually or biennially to determine reader expectations and desires and how well they are being met by district publications. Surveys can be conducted districtwide and also at the local school level. Input from focus group participants indicated that some of the district’s publications, such as OPS News, are not connecting with readers and more in-depth evaluation is needed to determine if some publications should be revised, combined with others or discontinued.

Recommendation – 2A

Create a culture of communication and service across the district.

As OPS moves forward with enhancing and expanding the communication program, it will be important to build a culture of openness. The goal should be to create a school system in which all staff members recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools, and a majority of stakeholders not only receive the information they desire but also are engaged with the district. Everyone – Board members, the superintendent, TAC administrators, principals, faculty, and support staff – needs to think about how communication can be improved in OPS.

Transparency and trust go hand-in-hand with information-sharing among colleagues and co-workers. In the SCoPE Surveys, staff, parents and community members all rated communication from the district low in terms of timeliness, transparency and trustworthiness. Ensuring that information cascades from the top down to staff at all levels of the district as well as to external stakeholders is key to a successful communication program. Seeking input from staff and stakeholders gives them a voice and builds support and ambassadorship. A school district where these functions routinely occur is a system that embraces a “culture of communication.”

Action Step

Establish communication expectations and protocols for OPS administrators at all levels, and support and evaluate their efforts.

A notable finding from the internal focus groups is the need to improve the communication infrastructure in OPS to ensure timely and consistent information delivery across the school system. While there is a basic recognition by senior leadership and administrators that communication is important and needs to be
improved, it was apparent to the auditors that a large gap exists between acknowledging the need and understanding their roles in affecting changes that improve communication effectiveness. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, instead of important information cascading throughout OPS in a timely manner, bottlenecks are created when administrators don’t know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered.

District Communications plays a critical role in planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information and messaging via the district’s primary communication channels. They also serve as the point on crisis response communication for OPS. As the district’s official communication arm, the District Communications team has a very specific role to play, but effective communication, both internally and externally, is built on trust, relationships, and face-to-face interactions, which requires the active communication leadership of administrators.

Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing, and distributed and discussed at leadership and administrative meetings so that there is no question about each team member’s communication role and responsibility. By expanding and better distributing the communication responsibilities of administrators, OPS can broaden its outreach, connect more directly with parents and community members, and create more internal trust and engagement among all employees. This will also provide District Communications with more time and capacity to focus on developing strategic communication initiatives.

In order to improve the communication infrastructure and ensure timely and consistent information delivery, clearly define guidelines that:

- Identify who is responsible for communicating with different departments, schools, employee and community groups;
- Outline procedures and timelines for how and when important information should be shared;
- Identify specific communication vehicles to maximize effectiveness and efficiency;
- Provide tips and strategies for improving communication between key stakeholder groups (i.e., TAC to employees/OEA, inter-department and department to school communication, principal to faculty/staff, and EDs to schools, etc.); and
- Provide forms and templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.
- Provide talking points on key issues to ensure message consistency.

In addition, it is incumbent upon OPS to provide the support administrators need to improve their communication skills. Focus group participants noted that some administrators are skilled in communication, but they also pointed to inconsistent communication across the district as an area in need of improvement. Providing regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans as well as new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, cultural competency, and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their important communication role.
By expanding the communication responsibilities of administrators and principals, OPS can significantly improve its connection to families and employees at all levels. To demonstrate the commitment to enhancing communication efforts and underscore its importance, we suggest a communication component be included in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria.

**Action Step**

**Refocus TAC on serving schools and families.**

A recurring complaint heard in both internal and external focus groups was the lack of responsiveness on the part of TAC departments. Participants shared multiple examples of calls not being returned, not being able to connect with the appropriate person or department to assist them, and not receiving needed information in a timely manner that met their needs. In the SCoPE Surveys, staff rated “communication about their ability to deliver effective customer service” as one of their “least satisfied” areas of communication. Both staff and parents rated the district low for “resolving questions/complaints/concerns to my satisfaction.” Many focus group participants felt that departments are not communicating with each other and there is no ownership of responsibilities or a directory of current contacts to provide some direction. Principals in particular said they have a difficult time getting the support and assistance they need on a daily basis.

Although “customer service” is most often referenced in relation to how an organization’s employees serve clients who use or purchase services, it should also be a component of internal operations, especially in a large district such as OPS. All TAC departments should be charged with improving service to schools and staff in the field and making that a priority mission. By providing high levels of support and service to faculty and staff in the classroom, administrative department employees also have a direct impact on student achievement.

The primary function of TAC should be to serve the needs of the schools and families. It may be time to review the priorities of department staff and refocus their efforts from a customer service perspective. When parents and employees seek assistance and their requests are perceived as being ignored, it has a major impact on the district’s image, and adds to the disconnect that is generating a “school vs. OPS” attitude.

**Action Step**

**Define and assess the customer service experience in OPS.**

Exemplary service is based on solid programs that meet customer expectations. What is the customer service experience for OPS families and employees? The level of quality service and support provided by TAC departments and in the schools should be assessed. For example, 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 administrators and staff from employees in the schools? Are all calls and emails answered within a reasonable time frame? How are
queries tracked, and by whom? How do you know when balls have been dropped or if consistent answers are being given to the same questions, especially if different departments are called? How long does it take from an initial request for information to an answer being provided?

These are all questions that need to be evaluated and addressed to determine where major disconnects exist and improvements need to be made. Where problem areas are identified, customer service training should be provided for staff to ensure they have the appropriate skills to rectify issues.

**Action Step**

**Foster a service-oriented attitude by setting service standards for all offices and departments.**

Staff in TAC departments should see their main focus as providing direct support to employees in the schools, as well as providing excellent service to families in the district. Encourage all departments to establish standards for their levels of service to schools and parents. 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 employees as it relates to the students, parents and communities they serve. Some standards should be common to all to ensure consistency across the system.

**Action Step**

**Develop an online contact directory and assign responsibility for updates.**

Staffing turnover is an unavoidable element in any large school system, so it is important to recognize that when there are changes in key personnel it makes it difficult for employees and families to connect with the correct staff member to provide answers to their questions. The lack of an up-to-date contact directory for key departments exacerbates the situation.

Developing and maintaining a current online directory and departmental organizational charts and posting them to the employee intranet will provide a starting point for queries while creating transparency and breaking down walls between TAC and the schools. This responsibility ideally resides in Human Resources, who should be tasked with keeping a complete and current employee directory available in an easily accessible format.

**Action Step**

**Provide professional development for staff in customer service and ambassadorship.**

Creating a culture of communication begins “at home,” with staff members who understand the importance of customer service and ambassadorship. Without an underlying commitment to excellent customer service, OPS’ branding efforts will not fully resonate with stakeholders. We urge OPS to
implement a training program that will enable all employees to become better customer service providers and ambassadors for the district. OPS needs a strong core of staff ambassadors, not only to strengthen its brand but also to help debunk myths and misperceptions about the schools and build support for student success. In the supplemental survey we conducted with principals as part of the audit process, a majority indicated that this is an area not currently being addressed and they would like to have customer service training offered for their staff.

- **Stress the importance of customer service.** By establishing standards of service and providing staff with training in phone etiquette, dealing with difficult people and general communication, OPS can provide the support they need to be effective brand ambassadors. Consider involving staff in designing the “standards of service” that all schools and departments would follow.

  NSPRA offers a flexible training product, *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for Tapping the People Power in Your Schools* that we be useful for OPS. Besides providing strategies and tactics along with templates for tip sheets, PowerPoint slides, etc., it offers a variety of options for delivering training – from meeting starters to hour- or day-long workshops. This offers options for training staff members who cannot be pulled away from their duties for lengthy in-service programs. It is available through the online product catalog at [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org).

- **Promote Ambassadorship.** Hand-in-hand with customer service is staff ambassadorship. Staff members can be invaluable as positive representatives of the schools, but they also can be image-breakers if they constantly voice complaints, focus on problems or repeat inaccurate information. Training in ambassadorship and advocacy can empower staff.

  Staff can be provided with an “OPS Ambassador” toolkit of basic facts and information, such as district and school enrollments, number of staff employed and revenue sources, a summary of goals and progress on the Strategic Plan, brief summaries of special initiatives and programs, “Points of Pride,” and other noteworthy OPS news.

**Recommendation – 3A**

**Strive to improve the timely release of news and information.**

A common theme that emerged across all focus groups, as well as in the surveys, was the need to significantly improve the timeliness of information dissemination. Across the board, both internally and externally, OPS stakeholders consistently said they hear about OPS-related news from major news outlets before receiving it directly from the district. At the same time, media representatives said they struggle to get answers to questions in time to meet their deadlines. OPS as a district is perceived as often operating in a reactive mode when it comes to responding to some high profile issues. As examples, participants cited the Fall 2016 problems with the contract transportation provider, and middle school discipline issues.
This was such a pervasive issue throughout the audit findings, that we strongly encourage OPS to review the existing policies and protocols on reporting and releasing information to determine how to correct the problem and get important information out to the public more quickly. Reviewing these guidelines with department administrators, Cabinet and the Board will help ensure accurate and consistent messaging. Major delays in disseminating information on big stories is having a negative impact on OPS leaders’ credibility and the public’s trust that they can provide a quality education for students, so it is imperative that the district try to rectify this issue.

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 is especially challenging for a large urban school system in close proximity to media outlets. Employee participants in all the internal focus groups (teachers, school staff and administrators) felt that the delivery of key messages and information is inconsistent across the system, making it difficult for them to respond knowledgeably to questions from parents on key initiatives.

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 OPS and its 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.

**Action Step**

**Communicate the rationale behind decisions, report the outcomes on all issues and provide progress updates on initiatives.**

While OPS leaders strive to make good decisions on behalf of students, there is a risk of being perceived negatively if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with staff, parents, students and community members. Explaining to stakeholders the genesis and rationale for specific actions and then reporting back to them on results will help to close the information loop and build trust in leadership. A critical component of a strategic communication program is ensuring that the rationale for decisions is presented, along with the outcomes.

This also extends to any advisory councils or committees created to address specific issues or tasks. These groups, as well as PTAs, should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that active 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. OPS leaders
may think they are explaining their decisions, but many staff members and parents in the focus groups did not perceive this to be the case. We recommend that OPS develop specific strategies and tactics to provide follow-up information about important decisions to address this disconnect with staff and parents.

**Recommendation – 4A**

**Continue to improve media relations and evolve from a reactive to proactive approach.**

As Omaha’s “city” school district, OPS already has the attention of the local news media on a regular basis. The district is also benefiting from the trained expertise of the current Director of Communications who brings experience in media relations to the position. However, opportunity exists to strengthen relations with the news media, particularly the *Omaha World Herald*, and improve the frequency and tone of news stories.

As noted in Recommendation 3A, news media representatives in the focus group are frustrated by what they perceive as the district’s lack of response or unwillingness to grant access to stories. Some participants felt District Communications is not planning adequately in order to get out in front of issues, but they also acknowledged that this may be due in part to internal roadblocks to gathering requested information along with a large volume of requests and limited staff capacity with a small team. Whatever is causing the delays, if OPS wants to reverse perceptions and become more proactive it is imperative that it determine the root causes and take action to change the dynamic.

It is particularly important to clarify the role of Board members as it relates to the media and who is designated to speak for the district and Board in an official capacity. When individual Board members bypass District Communications or the Superintendent and provide statements to the media on high profile issues without their knowledge, it can result in an altered message, missed opportunity to provide complete or new information, compromise the district’s ability to communicate with staff first, and add additional strain to responding to the news cycle efficiently.

Despite the media’s frustrations, their coverage of school events and issues carries significant weight in the district’s overall communications effort, as evidenced by:

- Staff and parents in the focus groups consistently reported hearing about news and events through the local media first, although their preference is to hear directly from the district. A number of focus group participants cited following the Twitter feed of an *Omaha World Herald* reporter in order to get real-time updates during school board meetings instead of waiting for updates from the district later in the week.

- In the SCoPE Surveys, key audiences reported their reliance on the news media for information (out of a total 5.0) as follows: Staff/Faculty: 2.5 (highest was 3.6)
Parents: 2.6 (highest was 3.8)
Community: 3.0 (highest was 3.8)

Based on the considerable impact media coverage currently has in OPS, coupled with challenges in the existing structure of media relations, the district can benefit from a revised, more proactive media relations program.

**Action Step**

**Develop and consistently enforce clear protocols for media relations for all staff, volunteers and Board of Education members.**

Essential to migrating to a more proactive media relations model and better control of the timing and flow of information, especially to staff and parents, OPS can benefit from strengthening its media infrastructure to prevent others from co-opting stories and framing issues to their advantage. Clear district protocols and policy need to be developed if not already in place and thoroughly communicated throughout the system. It should be covered in new staff orientation, reviewed annually with all administrators and principals, and included in Board member training sessions and retreats. Policy should be reinforced by holding individuals accountable for actions in violation, which could include disciplinary steps, Board sanctions, letters in personnel files, etc.

**Action Step**

**Expand the capacity for media outreach on “good news,” school activities and events through trained personnel at the building level.**

Because the demand exceeds the capacity for District Communications to handle all media inquiries given current staffing, the result is missed opportunities for coverage of positive news stories and activities. OPS should identify and train building-level personnel across the district to assist with routine media relations activities, similar to what is being done with the Brand Ambassadors. Personnel can be identified either through their job title and/or their propensity for this kind of work. Conduct training on media relations basics such as pitching success stories or photo opps, writing news releases, shooting photos and video clips, handling student releases, etc. Provide ongoing support with templates, how-to guides, and refreshers. These staff can also serve as liaisons to District Communications, keeping the department informed of newsworthy stories of interest beyond the local school audience.

**Action Step**

**Develop an editorial calendar of positive news stories that align with the district’s vision and mission.**

In the spirit of “what gets planned, gets done,” OPS can benefit from developing an ongoing editorial calendar (i.e., quarterly, semester or annual) of potential positive news stories that demonstrate the
The district’s vision, “Every Student. Every Day. Prepared for Success,” and mission, “OPS prepares all students to excel in college, career and life.” This approach can easily be folded into District Communications’ current PESO monthly calendar. These stories can be pitched by either District Communications staff or the building-level communication liaisons representatives as outlined in the preceding Action Step.

**Benchmarking against NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures**

As noted, OPS has an experienced, veteran team in District Communications that oversees a multi-layered and multi-channelled communication effort for the district. When we look at the various communication components of the overall program, it is clear that with the exception of a few areas, OPS’ comprehensive professional communication program sits strongly in the Established to Exemplary categories of the rubrics.

While we encourage District Communications to continue to expand and improve efforts that support the positive movement toward Exemplary practices, we also recommend that more attention be given to the following areas that are still in the Emerging category:

- **Establishing communication as a priority through district policy** – as noted in the preceding Action Step, communication protocols are not used consistently and need better articulation. Board Policy related to communication also needs review and/or revision or development.

- **Maximizing communication with trained leadership at the executive level** – for the most part, the district is doing a good job in this area. The one component we feel needs to be addressed is enhanced communications training for senior leaders.

- **Deploying multiple and varied communication strategies including for accommodations for diversity** – this rubric does not just refer to ethnic diversity but also to audiences with diverse needs, which relates closely to OPS families. Consideration of how to best target information and messages to specific audiences is needed, particularly in the area of translations and interpretation services.

- **Effectively managing communications through the news media** – as noted in the recommendation, this is an area that continues to challenge OPS due to long-standing issues and a history of adversarial relationships. While improvement has definitely been made, the district will need to continue its efforts to build and improve media relations.

- **Advancing identity/brand of the school district** – this is a new initiative for OPS, but it is moving forward strongly from Emerging into the Established category. Continuing efforts in this area should show positive returns in the coming year.
Recommendation – 5A

**Continue to enhance branding as #OPSProud and expand marketing efforts.**

Along with a strategic communication plan, a comprehensive branding/marketing plan is needed to ensure that both internal and external audiences are continually exposed to OPS’ wide variety of program offerings and can communicate the value of its brand. District Communications has made brand perception and reputation management one of its six focus areas. A branding guide and portal have been created to support the #OPSProud and OPS logo and tagline. Brand Ambassadors have been assigned to each school building to support the effort and ensure consistent practices. Integrating brand components into all OPS communications will be key to positioning OPS strongly in an increasingly competitive education market.

There are two key components in developing and reinforcing a brand: the brand promise and the resulting brand experience. District Communications has established a clear brand promise that is being incorporated cross-platform. The brand experience is the actual interaction that customers have with OPS, for example, the mission delivery in schools, student academic experiences, customer service, and quality of facilities.

Equally important to solidifying the brand, is for OPS to align the personal experience (or the brand experience) of employees and parents with the brand promise. If the OPS brand promise and subsequent brand experience do not align, then customers become confused about the district’s purpose and its ability to adequately serve its customers, which creates distrust and erodes confidence.

Focus group participants frequently observed that OPS’ image varies greatly between those whose children attend district schools and those in the community who only see it from the “outside.” Parents appreciate the district’s diversity and the many academic options available to students that provide a quality educational experience. Many felt OPS often suffers from the perception of being an urban school district, causing some families to look for other options without investigating available opportunities.

Among participants in the employee focus groups there was a great deal of pride and loyalty to their individual schools. However, administrators noted that morale is better at the schools than when employees talk about working for OPS. There was an evident disconnect between TAC and the schools, with employees expressing frustration in getting responses or assistance with their needs and agreeing there is limited opportunity for staff to provide meaningful input. In the SCoPE Survey, staff rated trustworthiness of communications from their worksite (school or department in which they work) 4.1 out of 5.0 as opposed to trustworthiness of communication from the district, which they rated 3.4.

Branding of OPS has to be grounded in authenticity or employees will perceive the new branding as hollow and meaningless. The new branding has to be accompanied by true employee engagement and meaningful two-way communication.

The goal for the OPS brand is to create a refreshed unified identity that will convey its brand promise, which is stated as “Every student. Every day. Prepared for success.” OPS’ brand promise is a value that
customers should consistently feel every time they interact with the district and schools, no matter if it is through the website, a school visit, a phone call, or a job interview for an OPS position. Customer service training is integral to developing a consistent brand experience. Employees should fully understand the power and influence that they personally and collectively hold over the perception of, and satisfaction with, OPS schools.

**Action Step**

**Continue to use targeted marketing campaigns to raise the visibility and identity of OPS as an innovative school system.**

District Communications has initiated a number of branding/marketing efforts designed to highlight successes and opportunities in OPS such as the banner on a Metro bus celebrating test scores and the marketing publication on the high schools, “Making An A+ Choice.” We encourage the team to continue to create simple, targeted campaigns like these that focus on substantive successes and create interest and pride in OPS schools. Whether it is a hashtag campaign on Twitter, collaborating with WoodmenLife to celebrate #OPSProudWeek, or a series of videos on YouTube, there are a variety of ways to engage stakeholders and generate excitement about what is happening in OPS today. It will be important to evaluate the success of each campaign in order to increase the effectiveness of future efforts.

**Action Step**

**Include orientation to the OPS brand in staff customer service training and new hire on-boarding programs.**

This will ensure existing employees are able to speak comfortably about OPS and be able to create their own “elevator speech” about the district’s mission. In addition, develop an orientation video on being “OPS Proud” to be used as part of an on-boarding process for new employees. This way, new employees will be oriented to the brand and understand how they play a role in communicating it. OPS needs a strong core of staff ambassadors to reinforce its brand with all the audiences they interact with on a regular basis. (See Recommendation 1B for customer service training suggestions.)

**Action Step**

**Highlight the successes of OPS students and staff with a “Points of Pride” program.**

Focus group participants were in general positive about OPS and the quality educational program it offers, but believe the district suffers unfairly from a negative image as an urban school system. They also feel OPS is not “telling its story” as well as it could be.

In accompaniment to the #OPSProud campaign already underway, another strategy for tackling the image issue is to create ongoing “Points of Pride” that clearly, consistently and frequently communicate successes. “Points of Pride” can be used by employees, key communicators, Board members and real
estate agents as they answer questions about the schools. They can serve as a reference for parents in deciding whether their children will attend OPS schools. While test scores are one measurement of success, there are many others that the district can focus on as well. These include: awards that students and staff have received; special recognitions bestowed on the district; graduates who have gone on to receive advanced degrees or achieve significant professional accomplishments; service projects students have completed; and business investment in the schools.

Key to this effort is sharing “Points of Pride” with internal audiences. Teachers and support staff all need to know positive information about the district and its schools so they are prepared to speak with pride and answer questions, whether they are on the job or in the supermarket checkout line. One way to involve staff in this effort is to conduct a brainstorming session with principals, teacher leaders, and other appropriate individuals on the topic “What’s Right with OPS Schools.” Focus on specific achievements by students and staff that can be supported with data that demonstrates the district’s successes. Develop as long a list as possible.

Also look back at OPS’ long history. Are there famous graduates of the schools that can be identified? Are their successful graduates from more recent years that could be highlighted? What special recognitions have the schools, staff or students earned? Highlight these in #OPSProud and also look for additional ways to communicate these “Points of Pride.” Using multiple channels is important because although social media use in OPS is growing, our findings indicate that is not yet a primary source of information for the majority of stakeholders. Replicate this brainstorming idea at each school. Consider doing this monthly and focus on different “points” each month.

Some ideas for communicating successes include:

- Develop a speech or presentation around “Points of Pride” that can be delivered to civic organizations, parent groups, and other appropriate audiences.
- Develop a “Points of Pride” section on the homepage of the website. Update the list monthly. Encourage schools to do the same on their individual websites.
- Develop a flyer or brochure on OPS “Points of Pride” and distribute it to real estate offices, elected officials, businesses and other key audiences. Use it as a handout for speeches and in information provided to new families and employees.
- Encourage schools to create a “Wall of Fame” in a visible campus location or on their websites. Include photos and short summaries of accomplishments of students, staff and alumni.
- Write an op-ed article for the Omaha World Herald on OPS “Points of Pride.”
- Ask alumni to submit testimonials on what an education in OPS has meant to them. Include these testimonials on websites and in publications and share them with key audiences. Create short video testimonials for use on social media.
- Post “Points of Pride” history items and photos on Facebook for Throwback Thursday.
- Highlight one or two “Points of Pride” at each Board of Education meeting.
Benchmarking against NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures

OPS’ branding and marketing efforts, with some exceptions, fall generally in the Emerging category, and are in the early stages of development. Good progress is being made in developing a strong branding initiative for the district and the recommendations and actions steps offer suggestions to continue building on the foundations being put into place. We encourage District Communications to use the rubrics as a reference to help move branding/marketing efforts from the Emerging category to Established.

- **Conducting thorough market research** – we were not provided with review materials to clarify what has been done in this area, but given the relative recent implementation of branding components, we encourage District Communication to incorporate research and assessments to drive continued efforts.

- **Developing the district’s brand position, attributes, points of pride, promise and traditions** – OPS is evolving quickly from Emerging to Established in this rubric and with a continued strategic focus and appropriate resource support should be able to move to Exemplary in short order.

- **Providing standards and guidelines for consistent use of adopted brand assets** – the district meets the rubrics for an Established program, with the exception of possibly additional staff training to ensure proper guidelines are followed.

Some additional suggestions include:

- **Undertake regular brand audits**, including a periodic review of district and school level communications (print, electronic, social media) for brand consistency.

- **Use the data gathered through the various surveys conducted by the district each year to create action plans** related to clarifying the brand promise and improving the brand experience.

- **Identify additional professional development training opportunities** beyond on-boarding and customer service training to improve the brand experience.

- **Integrate brand expectations into employee evaluations.**
Section B: Internal Communication and Employee Engagement

Make Internal Communication and Employee Engagement a Strategic Priority.

The most pressing need overshadowing all other aspects of OPS’ communication effort is to improve internal communication and focus on building trust and connections with employees at all levels. The first step in strengthening the communication program and increasing its effectiveness is to promote and continually reinforce the “culture of communication” so that all faculty and staff feel part of a team and recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for OPS schools and its mission.

Of the three key audiences participating in the SCoPE Surveys, overall satisfaction with communication was lowest for staff at 3.3 out of 5.0, compared to parents at 3.8 and community at 3.4. Feedback from employees at all levels in the focus groups pointed to the same problems and frustrations:

- Lack of a good system or standards for internal communication;
- No single, trusted information source;
- A lack of consistent, timely messaging across the school system;
- No opportunities for employees to engage and have an authentic voice in decisions;
- An ineffective and under-utilized employee intranet;
- A website platform unable to support the needs of the school system;
- Minimal support and no structured on-boarding procedures for new hires or transfers; and
- Limited or unclear communication systems and protocols to serve as a foundation for the communication effort.

Effectively addressing a number of these areas will require the support and collaboration of the IT and Human Resources departments, but all TAC offices need to be part of the solution.

OPS has an incredibly dedicated and talented teacher core that cares deeply about the students they serve. They are the district’s key ambassadors and as such it is imperative that they see themselves as integral members of the enormous team needed to provide quality education for every child in the district. Their passion for teaching, their willingness to serve in sometimes challenging environments and provide stability for students and their families, must be nurtured, praised and rewarded. They have a strong emotional connection to OPS, and they want to feel their work is meaningful and valued.

This is applies to OPS support staff and administrators as well, who are charged with providing the support needed to ensure that highly effective teaching and learning takes place in classrooms across the district.
When employees feel they have been left “out of the loop” and have no voice in the decisions that impact their jobs and schools, morale plummets and positive ambassadorship drops as well. Effective internal communication and a commitment to authentic employee engagement need to be integrated as strategic priorities into the Strategic Plan and expectations set for all administrators as part of their responsibilities.

**Action Step**

**Continue to share key messages and talking points on important topics and critical issues with all staff.**

Talking points are important to ensure that district employees as well as leaders speak in “one clear voice” on breaking news and important issues. District Communications regularly develops talking points around key initiatives and crisis situations. Providing timely information to frontline employees in school offices will allow them to clearly articulate actions being taken and respond to rumors and/or questions from parents. A simple one-page information sheet, in lay language, that provides basic facts can help fill the gap and ease concerns.

Identifying and framing key messages and talking points on strategic initiatives and other issues impacting the district, and ensuring that administrators and employees are able to articulate OPS’ position will help foster understanding, trust and transparency around leadership decisions.

**Action Step**

**Continue to create internal “toolkits” supporting new programs, initiatives and policies.**

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. District Communications is addressing this need by creating toolkits on the new grading practices and branding. This is a particularly valuable service for principals and it also helps ensure consistency across the schools. We encourage District Communications to evaluate how the toolkits are deployed in order to increase awareness of their availability and use in the schools. We understand that they are posted in the employee intranet, but that requires principals and staff to go find them and they may not be fully aware of what is there to access or how to use them.

**Recommendation – 2B**

**Improve internal communication systems and processes.**

Based on focus group feedback, there are not enough systems and processes in place across OPS to ensure consistent, collaborative, ongoing internal communication that helps employees more effectively do their jobs and serve students, and that builds a sense of ownership and trust in leadership. In addition to establishing communication systems and processes, the Superintendent’s Cabinet needs to review how decisions are made, how input is sought, how information is shared and how feedback is given in order to
move from a one-way communication model of pushing information out to a two-way model designed to foster dialogue and engagement with employees (see Recommendation 2A.)

**Action Step**

**“Close the loop” on communication.**

As is the case in most large school systems, internal communication is one of the more critical components of improving communication and image overall. Everyone wants to feel that they are a part of “something bigger” and have a sense of purpose and a valued role in realizing the district’s mission. An intentional communication effort is needed to inspire employee buy-in and ownership of strategic priorities. At present, the internal communication effort in OPS is inconsistent at best and is not designed to provide staff with the information they need to serve as ambassadors and help communicate important messages about education and the opportunities available to students in OPS schools.

Improving internal communication should be a top priority of OPS’ communication planning. A strong internal communication program should focus on creating a culture of employee engagement and empowerment, which is associated with highly effective organizations.

In the focus groups, staff talked about inconsistent messaging and noted that information is not always shared effectively with all schools and throughout all levels of the district. This is no doubt partly the result of busy administrators assuming that employees already know the outcomes of decisions and they also may be simply forgetting to share information. Whatever the reason, it is important that OPS leaders become more transparent by “closing the information loop” and explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives and then keeping them informed about progress and results.

Employees are frontline communicators who should receive important information before the media and parents. When an issue emerges or when OPS begins to address an initiative or concern, it is essential that senior leaders and school administrators incorporate a “staff first” focus into strategic communication efforts. When employees rely on the “grapevine” or other second-hand sources to get information, it hampers the district’s efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. Employees are considered by parents 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.

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

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 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. Some suggestions for improving internal communications include the following:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** One of the biggest complaints heard in staff focus groups was that they too often learn about significant news from the media or other sources before hearing it directly from the district. It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to parents and the public. Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the news media. Ensure that department employees who provide support to the schools are informed of communication being sent out that may require their involvement.

- **Use multiple vehicles to communicate.** Communicate messages to staff via meetings, publications, email and social media updates, video, voice/text notifications (for critical or time-sensitive communications or incidents of concern involving students), etc.

- **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.

- **Cultivate “key communicators” across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department has team members that colleagues consider to be “in the know” and trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put this to work by identifying these individuals and engaging them in helping to share key messages. Provide these staff members, along with advisory committees, union/association leaders and PTA officers, with regular news updates and key messages and ask their support as “key communicators” in disseminating information.

**Action Step**

**Strive to improve Board relations and interactions.**

The manner in which the Board conducts itself and how members interact with each other significantly impacts the public’s perception of OPS as well as the morale of employees. We encourage Board members to move forward with plans for strategic retreats to tackle the issues that are limiting their effectiveness as a governing body and rebuild bridges and trust in their leadership. This is especially important in this transition year as the Board prepares for another superintendent search and addresses the need for a second bond phase and additional new initiatives and budget priorities. We also recommend that communication protocols be reviewed and approved so that all Board members are in sync with the
superintendent and District Communications on messaging and the timing of information release in ensure everyone speaks in “one clear voice.”

**Action Step**

**Develop a formal “on-boarding” orientation program for new employees.**

While on-boarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of District Communications, they have a significant impact on the internal communication effort. Focus group participants advised that more effort must be placed on training new hires and those who are promoted into new jobs or transfer from other schools or regions. 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. They must reach out to office personnel in other schools to find a mentor or figure it out on their own. This approach to job orientation is inefficient and can lead to a less-than-productive and negative atmosphere for those new to OPS.

Seek out veteran staff in key positions (that hold the “institutional knowledge” of the district) who are respected and credible among their peers to assist in developing a training syllabus as well as job tip sheets and resources for specific functions. The goal should be to create a positive on-boarding experience that goes beyond simple review of HR forms and documents and that actually offers a solid grounding designed to help new hires get off to a successful start. By developing a structured on-boarding orientation program and content syllabus with presentation tools, each department and school can hold an orientation meeting and deliver content that is standard across the entire system. Some suggestions for addressing new employee needs include:

- **Consider a combination of in-person and online training.** While many school systems are now using webinars for new staff orientation, particularly for support staff, we believe online orientation training alone is not sufficient to address the needs of new hires and make them feel welcomed as members of the OPS team. Face-to-face meetings are an important component in promoting connection and relationships and creating a comfort zone that helps new hires find their “sea legs” in an education work environment. It also allows them to meet others going through the same experience and facilitates them finding a “buddy” and new friends to establish a support system. Hold initial orientation meetings in person, and then supplement with webinars (either live or on demand) for training in special topic areas. The key is ensuring that all opportunities allow employees to ask questions and get answers and directions that help them do their jobs.

- **Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with OPS operations, culture, history and procedures.** Provide new hires with an orientation package that includes:
  - An employee handbook and a current contact directory for all OPS departments;
  - General information about OPS, its schools and unique programs;
- An overview of its history as a school system;
- A copy of the Strategic Plan and information about key initiatives such as bonds, grading practices, etc.;
- A list of all communication vehicles (i.e., publications, website, intranet, social media, etc.), their purpose and when information or new issues are published/posted;
- 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.

**Have the Superintendent or a designated senior administrator welcome the staff** and talk briefly about the strategic priorities and accomplishments to date. Making an immediate connection with top leadership demonstrates they are valued in their role and helps build trust and confidence.

**Share a status update about the Strategic Plan and any major initiatives.** The focus should be on generating excitement about the innovative programs going on across the system and providing talking points and support that taps into the enthusiasm of new employees and empowers them to become positive messengers and ambassadors for OPS.

**TAC departments should each present a brief overview of the services they provide**, along with a “who does what” handout. Where possible this should be done with an in-person representative, but could also be prepared as a short information video to show during the orientation. This would help new employees better understand how TAC functions and assist them in the future when they have to make contact with various departments.

**Include a communications component to emphasize the important role of staff as communicators and ambassadors.** New hires should learn the sources of information and what it means to be #OPSProud. Emphasize that they have a responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their school. Review guidelines and expectations related to news media relations and social media so that staff clearly understand protocols.

They should also be given guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests. Consider preparing a summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” to distribute to all employees. Including a communication component in orientation offers an opportunity to stress the importance of being an ambassador for the schools and of relating accurate information and facts to parents and others. Encourage staff to keep District Communications apprised of newsworthy events happening in their classrooms.

Consider developing a *Communications Handbook* to be used as an in-service framework for new staff orientation or communication workshops. The handbook could be shared and reviewed annually with principals and administrators, and sections could be highlighted as communication tips in staff publications. When all staff members are provided with training and the resources to
answer questions and share information with parents, it will create a strong foundation that instills trust and confidence, help to counter misinformation, and promote transparency.

- **Offer on-boarding orientation sessions throughout the year depending on the need and number of new hires.** An alternative is to capture the meeting in a video format and post it in the staff intranet to be reviewed by new employees and others as needed.

- **Improve job-specific orientation.** When employees are hired or assume a new job, their supervisor or a designee should spend time training the employee on their new position (this applies to all levels of employment). Focus group participants cited the lack of overlap training or initial assistance as a major gap that needs to be addressed. This could be an opportunity to tap the expertise of veteran staff to serve as coaches and mentors. 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. Develop standards for site-based orientation, to ensure a consistent experience for employees new to OPS or new to their job. This attention to helping employees succeed in their jobs will help build morale by demonstrating the district’s concern for staff as valued team members.

### Recommendation – 3B

**Offer authentic employee engagement opportunities that build trust.**

In order to create a culture of communication that builds trust, engagement and pride among employees, a deliberate and focused effort is needed along with a commitment to fostering authentic engagement opportunities. Across the focus groups, participants expressed a desire for more “bottom up” lines of communication that allow for input and feedback on changes being made. By making a deliberate effort to engage employees in meaningful ways, OPS can significantly improve current perceptions and climate and create new energy and higher levels of internal support for accomplishing strategic priorities.

### Action Step

**Undertake a formal employee engagement program.**

The connection between high levels of employee engagement and organizational effectiveness has been well proven with more than three decades of research. Most large organizations measure employee engagement annually or bi-annually and have formal employee engagement programs. In the corporate sector, the engagement scores of an executive’s team is normally one performance indicator. Based on the feedback from focus group participants and survey respondents, we believe OPS would benefit from undertaking a formal employee engagement program.

OPS is fortunate to have highly dedicated employees who are committed to the mission and to the students and families they serve. What appears to be lacking is strong sense of interconnectedness and ownership of the strategic priorities and goals that have been set for the district. While many focus group
participants believe OPS has become more open during Mr. Evan’s tenure, it is still perceived in many ways to be a closed system that is not open to collaboration. Department silos at TAC, along with a disconnect to the schools, fosters distrust rather than a climate of service and collegiality. The cabinet, department directors and principals need to work together to develop an internal change management process to begin to address this issue.

Action Step

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 and survey feedback) shows employees prefer face-to-face communication from direct supervisors to emails, memos and newsletters. Administrators and supervisors who plan and run meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. Whether opportunities are offered on-site or via virtual connections, providing a space for open dialogue and Q &A promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the system and schools.

- **Use special focus teams to engage staff.** Maintaining productive working relationships between administration and employees in the schools is by nature challenging in a large school system. But much valuable input can be obtained for improving operations by developing direct lines of communication with “boots on the ground” staff tasked with implementing initiatives and programs. It was clear from our findings that OPS employees want access to leaders and feel they have ideas and hands-on experiences to share that can impact the success of the new initiatives underway. The function of these teams or other special advisory groups should be different from current technical work groups, such as those developing curriculum, and focus on dialogue, reporting perspectives from the field and idea-sharing as a more systematic way to surface information relevant to decision-making.

  We suggest that OPS consider convening advisory teams of employees with a special focus (i.e., instructional support specialists, principals, webmasters, special education teachers or math teachers, etc.) who can share practical insights on what is working and what is challenging them in the field. These groups can meet with cabinet members and directors with oversight responsibility of specific programs. Develop a system for capturing input from meetings, such as an action grid, to share with all OPS leaders as well as the advisory group members so valuable information is not lost. NSPRA can share samples on request.

- **Include all employees assigned to a school in faculty meetings.** Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important OPS updates and share key messages at faculty meetings. Since students and their parents rely on teachers as their main information source, it is essential that staff have the information they need to fulfill this communication role. Include support staff whenever possible. Share information relevant to them at the top of their meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related to instruction are discussed.
- **Increase senior administrators’ face time with staff on school visits.** Employees notice when the Superintendent or other Cabinet members make time to visit schools. While they recognize that this requires a huge time commitment and is typically for a specific purpose, they also are disappointed when time is not allocated to meet with the entire school staff given the limited opportunities for face time to occur. Whenever possible, we encourage OPS leaders to allow some time in their schedules to make that direct connection with staff to share brief updates and personally express appreciation for their work. An opportunity for employees to engage in dialogue and ask questions promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the schools. We encourage the Cabinet to take this on as a planned activity for the coming school year.

- **Hold staff breakfast or lunch meetings.** This strategy can be applied at TAC or held at individual schools. Invite a random group of 10-15 staff members to meet informally with an OPS leader (i.e., Superintendent, Cabinet member, principal, etc.). The goal should be to solicit feedback from staff members on what is going well at the schools or in their departments and what areas need to be improved. Staff members have a chance to provide input, and leaders gain valuable insight into challenges and successes around the system. By keeping the group relatively small, it ensures that everyone has a chance to comment, and no one is intimidated by speaking in front of a larger group. The meetings should be held to one hour and someone should be assigned to take notes so the hosting administrator can focus on listening to and interacting with the participants, while ensuring their input is captured for review and consideration.

- **Create opportunities for TAC employees to interact with the Superintendent, Cabinet and each other.** To better integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a “big picture” view of employee issues and concerns, consider holding regular meetings of TAC staff. As a large multi-level building, TAC by nature causes departments to operate in silos, and interviews with staff indicated that employees who work on different floors have limited interaction with each other or don’t know each other at all.

  Holding an “all hands on deck” meeting quarterly or once a semester would provide valuable face time with the Superintendent and Cabinet and provide TAC 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.

  Improving communication and interaction between departments and employees can help head off conflicting communications, overlapping deadlines and other operational disconnects that ultimately create issues for schools. Improved collegiality and collaboration between departments can directly impact message consistency and also improve customer service.

- **Create a department advisory council.** This group could be composed of an employee representative from each department (not the supervisory administrator). The group would meet regularly with the Superintendent and other Cabinet members to provide input on topics or new resource tools under consideration in OPS. This would give each 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.

**Action Step**

**Provide employees with opportunities to play an active role in decision-making.**

The majority of participants in the employee focus groups said that they have limited to no opportunities to provide input on decisions related to their jobs or schools, and in the SCoPE Survey, rated “feeling their input is welcomed and valued” among the lowest scoring areas. When input is solicited, for example via the multiple surveys conducted by the district, they reported that they rarely hear back on the results and what is done with the input. These scenarios lead them to believe that their expertise and feedback is not respected and valued and that “nobody is listening.”

In order to improve trust and morale, we believe it will be important to build a sense of personal responsibility and ownership among all employee groups so that #OPSProud is more than just a hashtag. For this to happen, OPS staff need be directly involved in decision-making beyond just being charged with implementation – they need to play an active role in generating creative ideas for effective implementation and marketing as well as in creating tools and resources.

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 a particularly important consideration for OPS administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in the schools.

To demonstrate that OPS leaders value faculty and staff input, it is essential to create open feedback loops and allow sufficient time and advanced notice for employees to give input, offer various ways of for them to give input, act on their feedback when possible, and explain why suggestions were not implemented if the input is not acted on.

Strive to create more internal feedback opportunities, and provide more communication regarding existing opportunities. Make sure there are a variety of ways to provide input – not every staff member will feel comfortable serving on a committee. Also ensure there are opportunities for employees in all departments and schools – support staff as well as teachers, TAC staff as well as school staff. Look for particular employee groups who seem less connected and make a special effort to ensure they are included.

When feedback is received, make sure to close the communication loop, so that staff (and parents and students) know what has happened to the input they provided. Once input is requested and offered, silence becomes its own message to those who chose to participate – even a negative response is better than no response at all.
An example of an award-winning internal employee engagement plan that would be an excellent model for OPS to investigate is Minnetonka Public Schools’ Gold Medallion Award-winning “Minnetonka Innovates Campaign.”

Although gathering employee input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in helping to improve operations and build morale and pride in job performance.

**Action Step**

**Celebrate employee contributions and successes.**

Of 14 key areas of staff communication assessed by the SCoPE Survey, OPS staff ranked “communication that makes me feel valued as an employee” as the second lowest. Low morale and weak employee engagement not only has a negative impact on employee performance, it can also affect student performance. OPS can begin to address this through a combination of formal and informal acknowledgments and expressions of appreciation for employee efforts. These should be integrated into daily operations in a mindful and authentic manner. Personal acknowledgement of successes – large and small – helps to build a positive culture by adding a human touch.

District Communications does an excellent job showcasing the successes of schools and students across its communication platforms. A powerful way that OPS can expand employee recognition is to highlight how individual employees are supporting strategic goals and helping prepare students for the future. Acknowledging the daily work contributions of employees is often more meaningful than reporting on awards received. Feature success and recognition stories in *OPS News*, on websites and on social media, provide commendations at staff meetings, and send notes or make personal thank you calls. Acknowledging the role employees play in the day-to-day success of students, as well as in raising OPS’ image, is key to building morale and fostering ownership.

Employee wellness, reducing workplace stress, and ensuring that staff members have a healthy work/life balance also should be taken into consideration. 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.

**Benchmarking against NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures**

There is no denying that a significant amount of communication flows from District Communications and TAC on a daily basis in addition to the communication that takes place in schools across the system. What is lacking is a coordinated plan and systematic process for ensuring communication is an integrated component aligned with strategic priorities and designed to promote two-way dialogue, collaboration and engagement.

Our assessment of OPS’ current internal communications is that it is primarily one-way in nature and consistency of both message and delivery is an issue across the system. For the most part, it is designed as an information feed – that is often delayed – and lacks components that promote active employee
engagement and opportunities for dialogue with leaders at various levels. Key to improving internal communication at OPS is a focus on standardizing leadership and management communications across the district and schools. Research shows that effective internal communication leads to positive relationships with employees and increased job satisfaction, morale, trust and productivity.

When compared against NSPRA’s benchmarking rubrics for internal communication, OPS is in general functioning in the Emerging category, with some practices in or starting to move into Established. These include:

- Frequent employee communication through email messages.
- An employee intranet portal.
- Automated messaging capability (email, voice messaging) to support swift and accurate crisis communication with employees.
- Prepared talking points for administrators, principals and others to use to support initiative or throughout a crisis.
- Regular employee publications (OPS News, Board Digest, District Postings).
- Messaging, branding and success stories that support the district’s vision, mission and goals.
- Regular reporting on the bond issue (which can serve as a model for other initiatives).
- Us of social media, video and podcasts.
- Employee association/union representatives meet with school system leaders (though more two-way dialogue is needed)

As noted in the introduction to this section, Internal Communication is the number one area in need of improvement across OPS. We believe that a planned, dedicated effort to move the needle on these rubrics from Emerging to Established, and eventually to Exemplary, will have a significant and positive impact on communication at all levels that will translate to enhanced support and satisfaction among employees and the families and students served across the district.

**Section C: External Communications and Engagement**

**Recommendation – 1C**

**Strengthen direct communication with parents and families.**

Excellent parent and family communications are integral to a student’s success and ultimately, should support the engagement of parents and families to value their children’s education and support student achievement. OPS’ parent and family communications efforts are largely driven by the local school and PTA, which can lead to inconsistencies in practices and confusion of the OPS brand. It is on the frontlines
of OPS schools that the most important communication takes place – and that is between a parent and a child’s teacher or school principal. Ultimately, the school communications program fosters a collaborative partnership and shared responsibility for student success between parents/families and the district.

**Action Step**

**Use school newsletters and websites as part of OPS’ overall communication effort.**

Using multiple means of communicating OPS key messages and operational information is important to ensuring that parents receive the messages. Most schools produce a building-based newsletter, typically on a monthly basis. A review of a random sample of OPS school newsletters revealed wide variations in the formatting and content, with heavy, if not exclusive emphasis, on building-level information only.

Because school newsletters are heavily relied upon by parents, they can be leveraged to help deliver key messages and important information about the district and simultaneously connect parents to the OPS brand and identity. Including a short “OPS News for Parents” section in school newsletters and on school websites is an effective way of getting important information in front of parents. Information that is relevant to all schools should be added to school publications and websites so that parents don’t have to go to multiple sites to find it. Parents typically want to be able to use a single source, be it the school website or a parent portal, to obtain all the information they need. Some information can be customized for certain information for different grade levels (elementary, middle, and high) for quick access.

**Action Step**

**Offer inservice for teachers on best practices in parent communications.**

In addition to offering communication training for principals (see Recommendation 2A) teachers need training on how to consistently use the existing tools OPS has provided for communicating with parents about student progress, assignment completion, grades, and other important academic information. As with principals, teachers should have a clear understanding of and expectations for their role in communicating with parents. NSPRA also has a helpful resource, *Making Parent Communication Effective and Easy*, which OPS may want to consider using.

**Action Step**

**Be more purposeful about using advisory councils as Key Communicators and plan to formalize a program.**

This is a continuing recommendation from the 2013 audit, but given the nature of Omaha’s community, we believe a formal Key Communicator program would benefit OPS and help address some negative perceptions about the district. OPS has a number of advisory councils in place, both internal and external, targeted to specific initiatives, such as the bond, brand ambassadors, social media and a general Citizens Advisory Council. However, their effectiveness as communication conduits varies greatly. It is not
enough to say that you have a variety of advisory groups and assume that the information shared with them is filtering to the constituencies they represent. A more systematic process needs to be defined and shared broadly with audiences represented if these groups are to be an effective communication tool.

Many districts utilize the power created by Key Communicator Networks to create knowledge, understanding, and prepare both internal and external participants as ambassadors to deliver the district’s key messages. We recommend that in addition to engaging the existing advisory councils in their specific charges and tasks, OPS also use them as the foundation for a more formal Key Communicator Network. These groups should receive updates and key messages about important initiatives, crisis situations, and progress on the district’s Strategic Plan on a regular basis. Share talking points about specific issues with these groups and include opportunities during their regular meetings for them to meet and ask questions of the Superintendent, Board members and other district leaders. By helping these key stakeholders become effective advocates for OPS, you can tap into a powerful resource for expanding key messages to the broader community.

NSPRA offers a step-by-step guide for creating a Key Communicator Network, *A Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Key Communicator Programs*, which may be helpful. It is available in the NSPRA online store at [www.nspra.org/products](http://www.nspra.org/products).

**Action Step**

**Review and clarify the role and function of the Citizens Advisory Council.**

The Citizens Advisory Council (CAC) was originally intended to provide parents and community members with an opportunity to share input and dialogue with district leaders on important decisions and initiatives. However, its role and function appears to have eroded over time and it is no longer providing the meaningful engagement opportunity parents and community members are interested in. Representatives in the CAC focus group emphatically agreed that it needs a complete overhaul if it is to remain relevant and of value, both to citizens and the district. Specific issues shared by participants included:

- The group is too large to have any useful discussions; consider segmenting by areas of the district.

- Meetings are primarily one-way information dissemination via PowerPoint presentations, with CAC members asked to take the information back to their schools, but no materials are provided to assist them and ensure consistent messaging across the district.

- The process of sending questions to the district in advance for screening results in many of their issues going unaddressed and doesn’t provide time for authentic discussion.

- Information about meetings is often sent out too late to submit questions.
Several felt that it is no longer worth their time to attend CAC meetings because senior administration does not attend anymore and they aren’t getting answers to questions.

Another telling comment came from an OPS alum who shared that she and her husband chose to get involved “because the future of our kids and our community depend on it.” As alumni, they are at a point in their lives where they are in a position to provide support – time, money, etc., “but nobody calls and asks for our help.”

This clearly indicates a need for the district to more succinctly define the role of the CAC, and we would suggest that it do the same for any other advisory groups and PTA/PTOs operating in the system. Principals and administrators should be able to articulate what the groups do and help identify people to serve who can bring value and expertise to the group and are willing to serve as a communication conduit to the community.

The CAC has the potential to be 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. Parent organizations and advisory 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 their role is well-defined and supported by the district.

Articulating the charge and scope of responsibility at the outset for any group convened by the district or individual school will help define how their work fits into the OPS Strategic Plan and minimize unrealistic expectations.

Recommendation – 2C

Maximize the distribution of district publications to external audiences.

District Communications currently produces several e-publications OPS News, Board Digest and the weekly District Postings that are primarily internal news vehicles. The magazine-style OPS News includes information on district programs and initiatives, school and student successes, finances, etc. and is emailed in PDF format to the CAC, OPS retirees, non-profit organizations, and school PTA/PTOs. It is also posted to the website and shared on social media. (It was unclear how frequently OPS News is published, with the most recent edition posted to the website being Fall 2016). Board Digest, an update after each Board meeting, is emailed to all staff and also posted on the district website.

The “real time” nature of social media is forcing a rethinking of how to effectively use print and electronic newsletters/magazines in the communication mix. There is still a need and a role for more structured news delivery, especially as a vehicle for providing substantive information about important topics and district initiatives. Newsletter content should include more than just a repeat of what has already been distributed in other formats or readers will not open it. It is important to consider how to target vehicles for maximum impact and reach.
While stakeholders want to hear the “good news” stories about the schools, they also want to receive issues-related information such as how budgets and bond funds are being expended, the rationale behind Board and administrative decisions, and how state and federal legislation will impact students’ education. Social media lends itself to the sharing of more “soft news” and positive success stories on the district and school Facebook pages. This opens the door for OPS News to take on a harder-hitting approach that informs stakeholders about the work driving the Strategic Plan and what is being done to ensure students succeed. Social media can be used to drive audiences to the publication.

Parents in the focus groups expressed a heavy reliance on getting important information from their child’s school as opposed to from any district sources. As to be expected, this drives their overall impression of OPS, especially when there is not a strong branding connection at the building-level. Community members who are involved with the district through the Foundation or other formal partnerships or relationships feel informed, but noted that for those who do not have a child in school or a direct connection, their only source of information is the news media. A number of focus group participants said they follow the Twitter account of an Omaha World Herald reporter to stay informed about Board of Education meetings.

This qualitative data was further supported through the SCoPE Survey results where neither parents nor community members ranked newsletters/e-newsletters as primary sources of information. Parents did, however, rank building-based newsletters/e-newsletters among their top three most-relied upon sources. In addition to all of this evidence, non-English speaking parents voiced their preference for written communications translated to their native language.

Because of the resources required to produce and distribute newsletters, OPS can benefit from strengthening the current newsletter/e-newsletter system through the following actions:

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**Publish with regularity and expand the proactive distribution of OPS News.**

As a well-designed and attractive publication, OPS News reinforces the new district brand and aligns to the vision, mission and Strategic Plan principles. However, we found it had a low recognition factor among focus group participants so strongly recommend further evaluation be conducted via a reader survey or focus group to determine how to more effectively push the publication out to stakeholders and ensure content is relevant and of interest to them.

District Communications could consider shortening the content and moving to a monthly or bi-monthly distribution to address the timeliness of communication that key audiences found lacking. More frequent release will also breed consistency and reinforcement of the district’s key messages. Additionally, and more importantly, distribution of the publication should expand to include all staff, all parents (including translated versions), and all community residents, including key groups such as community and civic leaders, Realtors, parents of pre-school age students, etc., through any and all communication channels available. Give current issues a more prominent place on the OPS website home page, accompanied by a
compelling link to motivate readers to open it. Offer a way for parents and the public to subscribe online to build awareness and distribution.

**Action Step**

**Publish the Board Digest immediately following Board of Education meetings and expand distribution.**

Because the local news reporter is co-opting messaging of Board actions by tweeting during school meetings, OPS has placed itself in an unfortunate default position of reacting to news media interpretation of events (see Recommendation 3A). Since sharing information via mobile devices as events are happening has become the “new normal,” OPS can narrow the reactionary gap through more timely and expanded release of this valuable publication. Because Board Agendas are distributed in advance, much of the publication can be pre-formatted and quickly updated during or immediately following the meeting for turnkey distribution. We recommend expanding distribution to include all staff, all parents, and key community leaders, at a minimum, and posting it on the district website in an easy-to-access position for others wanting to download.

**Recommendation – 3C**

**Provide additional opportunities for parent/citizen engagement.**

To solicit greater participation from parents and community members, consider offering additional opportunities for stakeholders to express their opinions and thoughts about critical issues in addition to speaking at a Board meeting or advisory council. Some suggestions to consider include:

- **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, choice options, decision-making processes, budget challenges, accountability, policy development, and the challenges of educating a diverse population of students.

  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 designed to build leadership traits. Include a component in the program that seeks participants’ thoughts and feedback on what they learned to tap into their wisdom and resources. Regular reports by graduates of this program should be featured at Board meetings. Not only will this serve as a recruitment tool for the program, but will allow the Board to feature aspects of district operations not necessarily discussed on a regular basis at the Board table. It also has the potential to serve as a pipeline for knowledgeable, engaged candidates for the Board. When OPS creates advocates and ambassadors through programs such as this, it should
utilize them to put a personal face on public education. A district with a Magna Award-winning Board Leadership Academy program worth investigating is Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD in Texas.

- **Consider developing an Alumni Association of OPS graduates.** Omaha is a well-connected community with families that have long, multi-generational roots and value their “sense of place.” While the district’s high schools have more traditional individual alumni associations that plan activities such as reunions, we believe that OPS is missing the opportunity to tap into a deeper well of notable graduates who are waiting to be asked to share their pride and support and give back to the district. A district-wide Alumni Association could be housed under the Omaha Public Schools Foundation and tasked with developing more impactful programs, such as scholarship initiatives, internships for students and teachers, and other activities and events designed to support the Strategic Plan. This type of overarching alumni group also offers a resource of success stories and expands the public’s connection to the district.

- **Investigate opportunities for parent input that do not require attending a meeting.** OPS may want to consider the use of technology that allows stakeholders to submit comments on issues via email or the website. Mail-in comment cards are also an option. Offer online opportunities that allow constituents to record their comments or reactions to a specific question, issue or proposal under consideration. Another option is to provide comment cards at Board meetings and in schools that ask a specific question about an issue OPS is dealing with that patrons can write a response on and return to District Communications.

- **Hold “Coffee and Conversation” sessions** in the schools to give small groups of parents an opportunity to talk with principals, district administrators, and Board members. These sessions should be designed to let people express concerns and ask questions in an informal setting about current issues and changes being considered. They are also an opportunity to share key messages about OPS initiatives and issues, as well as provide explanations for decisions made by school system leaders. These can be open sessions that interested staff and parents can sign up for, or they could be structured as “by invitation” sessions with invites sent to randomly selected people or to individuals identified by school and parent leaders. Times should be set to accommodate working parents and we encourage school leaders to consider some Saturday opportunities.

| Recommendation – 4C |

**Create an inclusive culture for non-English speaking families.**

Research is clear about the importance of family involvement in a child’s education. However, families cannot be fully engaged and supportive of their child’s academic progress if they do not understand the language that the school system uses to communicate. While OPS has made some improvements in this area, this is a continuing recommendation from the last audit as there is still more that needs to be done to meet the needs of families.

Here are some suggestions for increasing the focus on diversity and inclusion:
Ensure that every communication plan has a diversity/inclusion component. Set clear measurable objectives for increasing diversity communication and measure success on achieving these objectives.

Expand translation/interpretation services. Parents in the focus group of non-English speakers said this is their biggest challenge. The want to be engaged, but said they often don’t attend meetings or events when invited because no language assistance is available. Of particular concern was the lack of sufficient translators during parent-teacher conferences, a critical opportunity for parents to be informed of and support their child’s success in school. A number of participants also referenced how automated phone messages delivered only in English does not work for them. Their preference is for written communications that they can save and have translated if no translated version is provided by the district. Many were not aware of the translation feature on the website.

Conduct cultural competency training with all staff so that they are comfortable and have a better understanding of the students and families they will be interacting with in the schools. This was an area that principals indicated was a need in the supplemental survey conducted.

Expand 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.

Conduct formal research with the district’s 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.

Note: NSPRA’s Diversity Communication Toolkit, available as a free download to NSPRA members, could be a helpful resource in expanding communication to diverse audiences and building cultural competency. It is available in the NSPRA online store at www.nspra.org/products.

**Action Step**

Provide a centralized source for translations and interpretation.

With such a diverse population, OPS needs to ensure that all families are receiving the same information at the same time. If this doesn’t occur, the district unwittingly creates a divide between the families who regularly receive information and those that don’t. While it may not be possible for every different language speaker to be served, it’s imperative that materials be translated into the predominant languages spoken. Translations should routinely be made for districtwide publications, special alerts and important information about student achievement that is sent home either from TAC or school campuses.
When feasible, we recommend that OPS commit resources to creating a centralized source for translations and interpreters to provide more quality control and consistency and allow all district and school staff can access this service. When materials and messages are translated, it is important to ensure that translations are accurate and grammatically correct.

This type of service also can be outsourced to a professional translation company that offers translations in multiple languages and has the flexibility to add different languages as immigration trends change. For example, as OPS experiences an influx of families with who speak a unique dialect, a translation service would be able to locate translators who could assist the district in serving these families, rather than the school district trying to find interpreters/translators.

On-site interpretation is another challenge in serving families who don’t speak English. It is critical for on-site interpreters to be present for family meetings that involve discussions about a child’s academic progress, including IEP meetings. Larger school meetings at which non-English-speaking families will be present should have on-site interpreters who can use special audio equipment to provide real-time translation for meeting attendees. For those non-English speaking families who unexpectedly come to the district office or school offices and need assistance, a language line service allows office staff to pick up the phone and request an interpreter in the family's language who can serve as an over-the-phone interpreter on the spot.

Finally, OPS also can investigate developing a district resource team of bilingual staff who can participate in a Skype or Facetime call to provide on-the-spot interpretation when needed by a school.

**Action Step**

**Continue to plan for adding translated pages to the district and school websites when the platform allows.**

As a long-range goal, OPS should investigate ways it can communicate with non-English speaking constituents through the website beyond the Google translate feature. In addition to Spanish, OPS should strive to expand available translations to additional priority audiences as possible.

Two districts that do an excellent job providing translation support on their websites are Peel School Board in Ontario, Canada, and Minneapolis (Minn.) Public Schools. Speakers of languages other than English can now find information about their schools in one click from their website homepages. Webpages 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.peelsb.com](http://www.peelsb.com) and [www.mpls.k12.mn.us](http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us) for ideas on how to use the website for multilingual communication.
Benchmarking against NSPRA’s *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

OPS’ parent and family communication efforts are in general Established, although there is definitely room for improvement in order to move into the Exemplary category, in particular when it comes to engaging parents in decision-making. A proactive parent and family communication program directly supports student success in school and keeps parents informed about and involved in their children’s education by building collaboration and trust. We encourage OPS to strive to move beyond traditional parent communication models to facilitate meaningful interaction and engagement that promotes shared responsibility and connects parents as partners in their children’s education.

The recommendations in this section are targeted at moving OPS’ external communication efforts to a more strategic and proactive approach, and ground it in the Established category. Then, for continuing improvement, OPS should consider implementing the following:

- Professional development programs for faculty and staff on effective parent/family engagement strategies that support student learning, improve customer service and promote cultural competency.

- Comprehensive parent/family communication plans for each school based on researched preferences of parents/families at that school.

- A comprehensive, integrated and aligned plan for communication with all parents/families about choice opportunities, extra- and co-curricular offerings and requirements.

- Ongoing involvement from parents/families on preferred communications about academic programs and expectations.

- Policy for updating online gradebooks with assignments and grades across all schools/teachers.

- Regular evaluation of the effectiveness of problem-solving protocols and complaint resolution.

- Multiple communication strategies that accommodate the diversity of families.

**Section D: Website and Digital Communications**

**Recommendation – 1D**

**Plan for transitioning the OPS website to a CMS platform to improve navigability, relevance and expand capabilities.**

The OPS website should function as the district’s virtual front door and as such, it is the primary marketing tool potential employees and families use to learn about the school system. It should also serve as a credible source of news and information for current employees, families and community members. Overall, focus group feedback from both parents and employees indicate that the OPS website is not
serving this purpose as effectively as it should. At the core of the problem is the very real need for OPS to upgrade the website and invest in a CMS platform that will allow it to develop a sustainable model and expand capabilities to maximize communication.

Websites and social media platforms are part of the “tool chest” of vehicles necessary today for an effective multi-channel communication program that reaches all stakeholders. As such, they must be incorporated as part of an overall strategic communication plan and not simply addressed as “stand alone” tactics. Tools such as websites and social media are now moving from simple “broadcasting” to using an engagement approach designed to build relationships, curate content and build a community. The key is to integrate the tools into a comprehensive strategy that will provide OPS stakeholders with authentic and trusted methods of two-way communications, which are currently limited.

Based on the auditors’ review together with input from key audiences through the SCoPE Surveys, focus groups, and discussions with the District Communications team, it is clear that OPS can benefit from a major overhaul of its district and school websites. While frequent users expressed less dissatisfaction and a few participants noted some improvements compared to prior versions of the site, most described the website as extremely difficult to navigate, with inconsistent design from one department or school to the next and a great deal of out-of-date content.

Some specific feedback included:

- In the SCoPE Surveys, none of the staff, parents or community members rated the OPS website as among their most relied upon sources for information. In fact, parents rated “teacher webpages” as their second least relied upon source from teachers (1.9 average rating out of 5.0) and “school websites” as their second least relied upon source from their child’s school (2.6 out of 5.0).

- Auditors’ review of the site revealed significant inconsistencies in page formats, menu listings, and links opening to new vs. same window. Some links appear to be misnamed or misrouted, taking the visitor to a place other than what the link implies, and the navigation in some places appears illogical, e.g., “Map Resources” is placed under the “Assessment and Statistics” page and not the “District Maps” page. A number of pages are outdated and the auditors experienced freezing of the calendar pages when clicking the link for more details on an event.

- Most focus group participants expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the OPS website. They described it as extremely cumbersome and frustrating to find information. One participant noted how she writes down how she finds something each time so she can refer to it when she revisits the site, noting, “It needs a major overhaul by someone from this century.”

- Participants in the support staff and some teacher focus groups expressed less dissatisfaction than others with the website. Because they spend significant time on the site, they were more familiar with the content and how to find it.
At the school level, participants noted that there is considerable inconsistency among individual school websites in keeping content updated and noted differences in teacher commitments to maintaining current information on their websites.

Non-English speaking parents in the focus group were unaware that the website is available in multiple languages. They reported not using the site at all to access information, explaining that their children know how to use it, but they do not.

We understand that the district is aware there are numerous deficiencies with the website, and we also recognize that there is a significant cost investment to conducting a major upgrade. But in order to position and market OPS as an innovative educational leader, the website must reflect this and meet the needs of today’s savvy and connected young parents. We are not experts in the technical aspects of website design, so this recommendation is not intended to offer advice in that arena. From a basic user perspective however, we offer the following suggestions:

- **Evaluate all pages for consistency with the OPS brand.** As OPS’ virtual front door, the website is the prime opportunity to clearly communicate the recently defined OPS brand as well as the brand promise. Because different users migrate to different sites across the district, OPS can benefit from ensuring consistency across all pages with the brand guide.

- **Continue to track site analytics.** Tracking analytics of most the frequently visited pages together with input from representative users can help inform more user-friendly navigation of both the district and school pages.

- **Add a TAC directory to the website.** Employees and parents expressed a strong desire to have access to a comprehensive staff directory in order to contact the appropriate OPS personnel with questions or concerns. The OPS website search engine will pull up directories for specific departments, but there is no single directory and it takes several steps to locate directories in the departments.

- **Develop standard templates and guidelines on web publishing and management for department pages, school sites, teacher pages, and any pages maintained by staff publishers. Provide training and support to ensure compliance.** Consistency in formatting, nomenclature and navigation breeds familiarity and supports user-friendliness for parents as their children progress through the district as well as for other visitors to the site. It is critical that department and school webmasters are informed of the OPS guidelines on content and best practices for web management and are trained in the skills required to effect those guidelines. This will ensure that all department and school webmasters have the knowledge to post consistent content throughout OPS so they don’t unknowingly violate rules.

- **Expand the online district calendar to include all events and meetings happening within the district, filterable to school and department.** Currently, calendars on the website are limited to a district-wide scroll on the homepage that includes only high level events and a page of two-page (in English and Spanish) pdf documents of annual calendars dating back to 1999.
Participants in both staff and parent focus groups asked for a more comprehensive, filterable calendar where they can not only see all events at one time but can also personalize it for their individual needs.

- **Mobilize the OPS website.** The OPS site needs a responsive design to be accessible as more parents and employees use mobile devices for reading news and information. This will allow greater ease of finding and accessing news and information on the website when it’s convenient for parents and employees to do so, and also better support a district app.

  **Action Step**

**Move primary responsibility for website content and format under District Communications.**

While keeping a website up and running efficiently requires skilled IT personnel, ensuring the website is delivering the right messages and providing appropriate content on all levels – visual, informational, experiential – requires the skills of a trained communications professional. In today’s fast-paced environment, a website must be current to be credible. We believe OPS can benefit from a restructuring of responsibilities for deployment of the website to ensure the website is being used effectively as a critical communication component. However, this will require the addition of a dedicated FTE web/digital communications specialist in order for District Communications to have the capacity to assume major responsibility for the website.

  **Action Step**

**Develop a digital communication plan.**

A digital communication plan helps to promote awareness of, drive traffic to, and encourage interaction with OPS’ website, the school websites and social media sites. Incorporate social media micro-campaigns to help news and events go viral. Use social media and website analytics to set objectives for increased awareness, reach and interaction.

  **Action Step**

**Begin live tweeting from Board Meetings.**

The *Omaha World Herald’s* education reporter, Erin Duffy, has gained a substantial following of OPS staff and stakeholders by live tweeting actions during Board meetings. The district now has to play “catch up” after the fact with the delay in distributing the *Board Digest* and posting meeting minutes. If OPS wants to be able to frame its message and tell its own story, then it is time to create an official board meeting Twitter hashtag and designate a staff member to post updates during meetings.
Benchmarking against NSPRA’s *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

Although NSPRA does not have a specific component area on web and digital communication at this time, related benchmarks are woven throughout the component rubrics. OPS’ digital communication efforts are evolving and while some basic components are for the most part Established, there is much that needs to be done to improve capacity and better align digital strategies to district goals and the Strategic Plan. This will be driven in large part by capacity issues, both in terms of the appropriate personnel and in acquiring the technology and web platform needed to move digital communications to the Exemplary level.

For continuing improvement, OPS should consider the following:

- Support communications through sufficient digital resources, including the district website platform and design, to create easier access and navigation.
- Ensure social media and other digital communication efforts (videos, podcasts, etc.) are incorporated into an overall strategic communication plan aligned with OPS’ goals and objectives.
- Implement strategies to drive readers to the website or web-based information sources.
- Use digital communication vehicles to promote two-way communication, dialogue and engagement with employees and parents.
- Provide regular updates for employees and families on best practices and internet safety while using social media channels.
- Regularly review established goals for social media content posting and adjust according to stakeholder preferences and needs.
- Continue to track analytics and adjust digital strategies as warranted.

**Section E: Superintendent Communications**

**Recommendation – 1E**

*Provide regular updates on the status of the Superintendent Search.*

One of the challenges OPS has in rebuilding trust and confidence in district leadership is the recent turmoil over the Superintendent Search process. While the Board has now opted for stability by accepting current Superintendent Mark Evans’ offer to delay his retirement for a year, ongoing communication around what this means for OPS is important to ease concerns of staff and parents and refocus the agenda on preparing for a new school year.
We strongly encourage the Board and district to remain very transparent as next steps are decided and implemented in the year ahead. The Superintendent Search page on the website should include some rationale for the decisions that have been made, beyond a simple action report. Although some podcasts by the Board president were created, they are buried so deep in the website even the auditors almost missed them. They need to be linked on the Superintendent Search web page and also on the home page.

The most informative background the auditors could find on how the recent decision to rehire Superintendent Evans as interim evolved were articles reported by the *Omaha World Herald*. We believe OPS leaders need to take control of the story or risk the Board being viewed as incapable of making important business decisions that impact the district’s future.

This recommendation is especially significant given the challenges OPS experienced with busing at the start of the 2016-17 school year. It is imperative that 2017-18 get off on a strong, positive start to allay concerns and rally staff and parent support to continue advancing student achievement. Updates should be shared regularly to prevent rumors and misinformation and reassure everyone that teaching and learning will continue to be the priority in OPS.

Once the Board determines the appropriate time to reinitiate the search process, OPS must develop a robust communication plan to support it, ensuring transparency and openness from start to finish.

**Action Step**

**Update the Superintendent’s webpage.**

It appears the Superintendent’s webpage has not been updated in well over a year. To keep it more vibrant and interesting, include links to his Twitter account and podcasts, and use videos and photos from Facebook and YouTube on the page that highlight his activities around the district. We encourage Mr. Evans to consider posting a monthly message that shares from a leadership perspective how the district is moving forward on key initiatives such as the new grading scale and the second phase of the bond referendum. A new issue that will need to be communicated about regularly, particularly to staff, is the status of the district’s pension fund. By keeping the webpage current and sharing key messages with constituents through the digital media tools available OPS can maximize Superintendent Evans’ value as a trusted leader and spokesman during a time of transition.

**Action Step**

**Increase awareness and positioning of Superintendent Evans’ podcasts.**

A podcast or vlog is an excellent way to personalize the superintendent and deliver quick messages and updates and highlight teaching and learning in the schools. Superintendent Evans has done a number of these, but again, finding them is not intuitive as they are buried under the District Communications webpage (which is also difficult to find). These podcasts should be linked on the Superintendent’s webpage for easy access and also on the homepage.
Recommendation – 2E

Use the introduction of a new Superintendent to increase the visibility and accessibility of district leaders in the schools and community.

Once the next search process is completed and a new superintendent hired, there is an exceptional opportunity to build on the introduction of a new leader and strengthen connections with staff and the community.

When asked about their expectations for the next superintendent, focus group participants said they want a leader who is visible and engaged, able to build relationships and share a vision that everyone can embrace. Staff wants a superintendent who is approachable, inclusive and truly collaborative; someone who “walks the talk.”

It is always challenging for a new superintendent, whether they take over from a respected leader or are tasked with rebuilding after a time of discord. A solid entry plan can help mark the shift and put a fresh face on the district as it moves forward. We recommend that District Communications begin drafting plans for the introduction of the next superintendent so that a timeline and calendar of events and activities is ready to implement when the time is appropriate. Arlington (Va.) Public Schools has developed a series of excellent leadership entry plans for administrators that can serve as examples. They can be accessed at www.apsva.us/entryplans.

Action Step

Plan activities to introduce the next Superintendent to the schools and community.

Whenever a new leader joins an organization, it is important to connect that person with the staff and community as soon as possible in order to establish a solid foundation for future interactions. Some suggestions to consider for introducing a new superintendent:

- **Schedule a series of individual meetings with community leaders** such as elected officials, major employers in the district, business and civic partners, newspaper editors, Chamber of Commerce directors, social service agencies, faith and ethnic community leaders, higher education chancellors, etc. These leaders can then be cultivated as allies and key communicators. Omaha has a very unique and influential power base, and it is imperative that the next superintendent be quickly introduced to its complexities and major players.

- **Schedule meetings with key district groups** such as the CAC, PTAs, booster clubs, OEA leaders, etc. This not only provides an opportunity for community and staff members to meet the superintendent but also for him/her to interview them and learn about their expectations for him/her and for the future of the district. Facilitating face-to-face meetings will help establish a foundation for building trust and open communication.
- **Invite patrons to attend a “Meet the Superintendent” reception** before or after a regular Board of Education meeting.

- **Schedule short introductory meetings with staff at each school and at TAC** 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 positive momentum for change. While this is challenging in a large system, superintendents who have made this level of commitment receive high praise from staff and immediately set a positive tone for their administration. In the short term, creating a video message from the new superintendent outlining his/her vision and initial plans would help to set the tone and facilitate a timely and consistent introduction to staff at all buildings. Don’t forget the support staff such as maintenance and food service workers who may need special sessions at different times.

- **Report out on the meetings and feedback** that the new superintendent garners as part of the process. While it is clear that the superintendent cannot be in all places at all times, it is important to connect him/her to critical communication venues that will have the most impact. 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 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.

OPS has a talented and capable administrative team able to support the next superintendent in accomplishing the Board’s goals, so we believe once that individual has been introduced to the community it will be important for him/her to assume a high public profile. Research shows that strong, stable leadership is a critical component in school systems with high student achievement, and establishing the next superintendent as the “voice” and “face” of OPS will help to renew and build the foundation of support the school system deserves.

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**Action Step**

**Encourage all district leaders to visit schools, attend parent group meetings and participate in community organizations.**

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 will 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 should be made to visit support service departments as well. 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, cabinet 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, websites and social media 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 “Who’s Where This Week” box on the website or in OPS News that lists the dates and sites 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.

While strong support and involvement from community and business leaders is critical for the schools, it is equally important for district and school leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the community at large by taking an active role in various civic and service organizations or philanthropic boards. This also provides ongoing opportunities to share information about OPS with influential community leaders and ensure it is well-represented with important community groups.
Considerations for Staffing and Implementing Recommendations

OPS is a school system where leaders and employees are truly dedicated to serving the comprehensive needs of all students to ensure their success in school. OPS faces the same communication challenges all school systems face in today’s complex education environment. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and district leaders understand that effective communication is critical if the school system is to move forward.

Given the scope of OPS’ current initiatives and operations, the recommendations covered in this report focus on what we have identified as priority areas for improving the strategic communication effort. They offer strategies and tactics designed to address immediate needs, as well as some that may require future consideration as part of long-range planning. **There is certainly more here than can be accomplished immediately** and it would be unreasonable to expect District Communications to undertake more than two or three of the major communication recommendations in a year while maintaining existing programs.

The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping OPS to not only enhance and expand current efforts, but to continue incorporating new components that allow it to take the communication program to a premier level that serves as a model for other school districts in Nebraska. This report is intended to serve as a “roadmap” for the future and a compendium of best practices in school communication that the school system can use as a resource to build and expand its communication and marketing program and help keep the work on track. New communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem unmanageable or overwhelming. District Communications has made significant strides in developing a solid communication program that is based in good public relations practice and is effectively building the use of new communication technology. As we have noted throughout this report, the recommendations presented are not intended for District Communications alone. While they certainly have primary responsibility for critical communication tasks, all OPS departments and school administrators must be accountable for improving communication and taking 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 administrative teams.

OPS is fortunate to have a talented and respected veteran communicator in Director of Communications Monique Farmer, APR. She and her dedicated team do an outstanding job managing a multi-faceted program. In order to support their efforts to implement a strategic communication plan, budgetary and personnel resources should be considered annually. This is important to sustaining the current communication effort along with identifying how it must evolve as OPS’ community and communication needs continue to grow and change.

Strategic communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. It is important that
all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. OPS has a dedicated and experienced leadership team that is well-positioned to build on the foundation of the existing communication program to ensure it meets the needs of a 21st Century school district committed to “Every student. Every day. Prepared for success.”

**Build capacity in District Communications to focus on strategic communication needs.**

Since 2013, OPS has wisely invested in a professional communications office staffed with skilled personnel who can assist district leaders and administrators at all levels in integrating solid communication components into major programs and initiatives. We encourage OPS to take advantage of the wealth of talent and resources it has available to maximize the strategic value of communications by supporting the department with the appropriate level of resources and personnel needed to excel.

As OPS’ communication needs have evolved with the advent of advanced communication technology and increased engagement activities, District Communications has attempted to keep pace by reorganizing and adding positions such as the Coordinator of Marketing and Visual Communication. As communication needs grow and change, consideration must be given to how District Communications can continue to build the capacity needed to expand its marketing efforts and focus on communication strategies that are aligned with the Strategic Plan and designed to meet the expectations of parents, staff and community members.

As Omaha’s population becomes increasingly diverse, in culture, ethnicity and socio-economics, it is increasingly important to consider how best to target messages and delivery vehicles in order to meet the communication needs of these varied audiences, as a “one size fits all” approach doesn’t work anymore.

In addition, it is time for OPS to step into the spotlight and raise its profile as an education leader in Nebraska by raising its visibility through positive success stories and innovative programs, elevating its brand and marketing its value proposition to families seeking a quality education program for their children. This will require a full-blown branding/marketing effort in order to compete in a future that will likely include competition from charter schools and vouchers.

Changes in communication technology and consumer use of mobile devices to access information are also changing the nature of web/tech positions and their function in school systems as well as in the corporate world. As noted in Recommendation 1D, we believe OPS should consider moving the oversight of the website content and function under District Communications. This will require a new position as at present District Communications does not have the staff capacity to assume full responsibility.

We also feel that the nature of OPS, and its position and reputation in the greater Omaha community, warrants ongoing, high level strategic communication counsel in order to begin shifting long-standing attitudes and perceptions about the district. The district is fortunate to have a skilled communication professional in place in Director of Communications Monique Farmer, APR, who has the expertise and experience to serve OPS leaders in this capacity. However, given current staffing, the team is already functioning beyond capacity just to stay on top of the myriad communication demands that must be
addressed daily. As a result she is not able to dedicate the optimum amount of time to strategic communication planning and counsel that we believe is paramount to OPS making a major shift in its image.

To this end, we are recommending that OPS consider the addition of two positions to District Communications when the budget allows in order to build capacity to accomplish its major communication and marketing goals:

- **Media Relations Coordinator** – While the District Communications team all assist as needed with day-to-day media response, the Director is handling the high profile calls and inquiries in addition to directing the response to any breaking incidents in the schools or that are district-related. As a result, it is difficult for her to block the time needed to focus on high-level communication strategy development as her day is continually interrupted given the size of the district. As the largest school district in the state and centered in Omaha’s urban hub, OPS will always be a convenient resource of education-related stories. Most large urban school systems have a full-time media relations coordinator on staff to handle the volume of inquiries that comes hand-in-hand with close proximity to local media outlets.

Adding a dedicated position would also help to alleviate the complaints we heard from media reps in the focus group about the lack of timely response to their requests and help to rebuild and forge better working relationships. We strongly encourage OPS to consider adding a media relations coordinator position when possible. With a number of critical issues on the horizon, from the roll-out of grading changes, to concerns about the pension plan and a renewed superintendent search, a strong media program will be integral to controlling the narrative and instilling trust and confidence in leadership.

- **Website/Digital Communication Manager** – As outlined in Section D on Website and Digital Communications, there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to get OPS’ website and digital communication efforts up to speed in meeting its current and future needs. In order to improve the alignment with and focus on strategic communication, moving oversight of content and function under District Communications will ensure this occurs. To this end, we recommend adding a Website/Digital Communication Manager whose responsibilities would include working with IT on the migration to a new web platform, developing and updating web content, integrating social and digital communication components, assisting the schools with website management, adding digital engagement features, evaluating programs, and other related tasks.

**Action Step**

**Turn a critical eye on communication tasks and ask the hard questions.**

We also urge District Communications to take a hard look at all functions and ask how current projects and tasks fit into the Strategic Plan. Some questions to ask include:

- What would happen if a specific program, task or service were eliminated?
■ What goal does the program, task or service fall under?

■ How critical are the ramifications of the program, task or service to Strategic Plan goals? If eliminated, how will they be impacted?

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

District Communications 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. The cuts may even include a sacred cow or two that may be upsetting to those who feel some personal ownership. However, now is the time to make room for new, critical, strategic measures that support OPS’ desire to be seen as a leading school district.

**Action Step**

**Evaluate and track time on task.**

The District Communications team is involved in a variety of different projects related to the communication effort at both the district and school level. In order to ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful to record the actual time spent on each task. This would allow the Director of Communications to evaluate efficiency and determine if there are tasks that take time away from communication priorities that could be shifted to other departments or that could be managed differently.

Create a workflow plan to track each ongoing task or special project (i.e., e-newsletters, marketing activities, special events, crisis communications, media response, website updates, social media posts, Board and policy tasks, etc.). This will allow for a quick assessment of the status of the workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary. Sharing this information with Cabinet members can also build awareness and understanding of the communication function and help set priorities for the year.

**Action Step**

**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 marketing materials, website content and updates, news releases, etc., for magnet school registration is an “output.” An increase in the number of inquiries and registrations 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.
Focus Group Summaries

The following is an overview of perceptions and comments offered by participants in the focus group sessions held during the onsite visit December 5-7, 2016. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the auditors’ questions. Rather, it summarizes what they 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.* Input from the focus groups, in conjunction with results from the SCoPE Surveys, led to many of the recommendations in this Communication Audit Report. Other comments may be helpful to OPS leaders in addressing staff and community concerns in areas indirectly related to communications.

**Group: Parents/PTA leaders**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**

- I think it depends on the school. Unfortunately, they want to have set standards but they do not exist across the district for all schools. There are things I loved about elementary school and even middle school. But then you hear how things are done in the other schools, so it’s hard to give a blanket statement.
- The open lines of communication I had with the high school teachers were very effective.
- Good sense of community. A lot of the schools try to develop a strong level of community with students, parents and teachers.
- We had our son in a Montessori program which was horrible. Came home and said he was not a learning kid so we pulled him out. I had concerns about placing him in OPS but it has been the best experience we’ve had. I think it largely has to do with the principal who is so welcoming. I can’t say enough good things about it. It’s been phenomenal.
- We’ve enjoyed the diversity of the student population, too. I grew up in D66 and went to Westside. We didn’t have that in school. I love that my kids have such a wide range of friends. It’s more “real world” than the experiences that I had going to school. Seems like people are very committed to the school.
- I agree. My son is now exposed to so many different experiences.

**Changed Perceptions**

- Yes, it has. For worse. I went to Benson when I was growing up. We didn’t have as much competition or negativity. I have never in my life seen where so many schools don’t bond together and help one another do better. My kids go to Northwest, which is known as the drop-off school. It has a bad image and the district just settles for that. When I was in school, we didn’t have open enrollment.
- Part of it is the suburban ideal – a preloaded image of what a metro school is and it’s not true. People look at you and say “good luck.” The perception is that if you take them to a suburban district, it will be better and that may or may not be true.
- I believe the media is partly responsible. When something bad happens at OPS, it’s all over the news. But that’s not the case with the suburban schools.
- I’ve talked to kids who’ve said they had the same problems in the suburban schools that they have here. Maybe it’s how involved you are as a parent. The teachers know me and we talk to one another. We have that dialogue, so I know he is safe.
• It’s different for OPS (having gone to Westside). There are so many more schools. It’s more difficult to manage and the population feeding into the district is so different.

Quality Education Provided
• I wouldn’t say that trust is improving. I would say that parent involvement is decreasing. I’ve served in many different ways and it is just horrible. It’s very hard to make progress when you don’t have parent involvement.

Communication Improvements Needed
• One family had no idea a school was being torn down until they drove by it and saw it. Did not know where their child was going to attend school. Family was Spanish-speaking – we can do better than that.

Sources of News and Information
• School newsletter.
• Twitter and Facebook.
• We get a lot of school information. Don’t get a lot of district information except for snow days.
• Some of the school newsletters include district information and some do not.
• Some schools have PTO information in it; some schools have the PTO’s produce the newsletter.

Communication Vehicles

Websites
• Amazing, a lot of information there, but can be overwhelming for some parents, especially if you are not sure of exactly what you are looking for.
• Very difficult to navigate. Trying to find home zone areas took forever.

OPS News
• (No one knew about it.)

Facebook/Twitter
• Mostly they follow the schools.
• Some watch the Board meetings on livestream. “They get a little boring.”

Portals
• Don’t use it that much in elementary.
• It’s the best thing they could have created. At middle and high school they love it.

Information on Child’s Progress
• Not all teachers keep me informed.
• Absolutely. During parent-teacher conference, I discussed with the teacher how I can better know what my son is getting done and what he isn’t. We worked out a great system.
• Depends on the teacher.
Receive Needed Information On Events, Decisions, etc.

- Regarding policy decisions, only when it’s things that make the news. They are not volunteering it. You have to dig for it.
- Like the sixth grade issue, I don’t think they wanted us to know about it.
- If you are not involved, you really don’t know.
- If I didn’t work at the school, I really wouldn’t know.

Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)

- When we rolled out the new school café, it was awful. The balances don’t show for certain schools. I’m paying and I know my children are eating, but my balances are not going down. Elementary system is not going to be up until next year. Someone should have had the forethought to communicate about something so big to so many parents.
- I felt the same way when they were planning to move the sixth grade to middle school. I attended a lot of meetings and felt that we were not being told everything, that they had plans and information they were withholding. Even the principals did not have the information. Parents were very upset about it.
- It seems like, internally, people don’t talk with one another. For example, the people who are setting up the programs are not telling the people in the programs.
- The new grading system. We got emails and handouts with the report cards. It’s hard when they keep changing it. My kids are in high school and have had three different grading systems while they were in school.
- GPA requirement for sports was also a big deal. They do have academic support.

Expectations for Next Superintendent

- I feel like I don’t really have a grasp on what the relationship with the superintendent should be. I don’t know what he does on a day-to-day basis.
- I think it’s more about listening than what he can communicate to us. He needs to really listen to everyone before making any changes and not rely on what’s been done for the past 30 years.
- He needs to build relationships with people first and find out what the issues are before they start surveying.

Opportunities for Input

- We have a quarterly forum I attend as a representative from my school. All of these people are there and we have opportunities to present our input. It’s by invite only but still valuable.
- Not really. You could always go to the OPS Board meeting. I feel like the few times we’ve had an issue, it’s already been in motion.
- Principals have meetings and we can go to them and share our concerns, but we don’t get the feedback.
- The principal meetings are hard because they don’t always get the information.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- I feel like the superintendent has sent out a lot of surveys and then they don’t really listen to what people are saying.
- Some of the surveys don’t make any sense. Transportation survey didn’t ask real questions.
- We never get the outcomes of the surveys. We just get the decision but not how it relates to the survey results.
- Have had tons of surveys on transportation and it just keeps getting worse.

**Ways to Improve Engagement**
- The question is why people are not engaged? Many work and have kids in multiple schools. Some just don’t care.
- Parent teacher conferences are scheduled on different weekends to accommodate families with kids in more than one school. It still can be hard based on how the schedule falls for some families. At my school we have kids coming from all over the city. Parents don’t drive and the closest bus stop to us is not easy to access.
- Some people don’t come to parent teacher conferences because everything they need to know is on the Portal.
- Some of the kids in my son’s class, you don’t see their parents often. It’s hard for them to get there.
- There are also some language challenges. Many immigrant and ESL families. One family came to our PTO meeting that spoke Spanish only and none of us did. We all felt so bad.
- It kind of depends on the makeup of your school. I’m in a school with a lot of moms who have flexible hours and I work 40+ hours a week so I can’t come to the 2:00 p.m. meetings. The same five people end of doing everything and then they get burned out.

**Group: Non-English Speaking Parents** (with two interpreters)

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
- Information is fast from the school.
- Many programs, like the after school programs, are very good for the children.
- Appreciate that we are informed quickly about issues.
- For some parents who don’t have medical coverage for their children, the school helps them to get Medicaid.
- Can the school give parents updates on their student’s progress every two months?
- They feel their children are getting a very good education, but would like to see more help with problems such as transportation or when they are struggling with certain subjects.

**Quality Education Provided**
- Yes, we have faith that OPS can provide a good education for our students.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- If important information could be translated, it would be much better.
- Provide more professional development for teachers so that they can improve their teaching and better understand the different cultures and backgrounds of their students.
- There is a big gap between our immigrant community and the greater OPS. There could be more professional development among leaders to bridge the gap, help them better understand who they are working with.
Some schools have interpreters and some schools don’t. If they could have interpreters in every school, that would be better.

The children are learning English since they are in school, but for parents during teacher/parent conferences; we need interpreters because we don’t understand the teacher.

Sources of News and Information
- Phone messages and letters from the school.
- Teacher parent conferences.
- Sometimes by mail, sometimes children bring home flyers and notes.
- Sometimes email.

Best Way to Communicate
- Email may be the best, but some parents may don’t understand it, so maybe a phone call would be better.
- Interpreters.
- If the information is written in our language, they can understand it.
- Prefer something written. On the telephone, if we don’t understand, then it is gone. When it’s written, we can take it to someone to be interpreted.

Communication Vehicles

Websites
- Don’t use it at all. Our children know how, but we don’t.

News Media
- We see things on TV but don’t know what is going on.

Facebook/Twitter
- Some are on Facebook but not for the schools. No one in this group is on Twitter.

Information on Child’s Progress
- Would like to know more about how my child is doing in school, grades and behavior, etc.
- Would like to have more information as well, i.e., does he follow the rules, is he doing excellent in school, is he obedient?
- Sometimes people call from the school and we don’t understand them. The school needs to have an interpreter for phone calls. Otherwise send a written note.

Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)
- Most of the time, we receive what we need.
- Sometimes we get calls from different telephone numbers and don’t know who to respond to or who called. It is confusing.
- One parent said her children go to three different schools but only one gets to ride a bus. They don’t understand why some students are bused and others are not.
Expectations for Next Superintendent

- The former superintendent and others came and met with Title I families, which they liked.
- New superintendent must be a person who understands about refugees and how we don’t understand anything about the U.S.
- Somebody who is really committed to his job. Who is concerned about the immigrant students at OPS?
- More ESL classes for our children.

Opportunities for Input

- It does not happen so often where we come from.
- We feel like we can speak up at parent-teacher conferences. Sometimes they have an interpreter and sometimes they don’t.
- Also when we go to the school, we need an interpreter every time.
- The teacher needs to communicate with the principal if there is a problem so the whole school is on board with an issue.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- Yes, the principal and teachers pay attention to what we say, but the problem is that they can’t talk to us in English.
- Yes, during conferences so we can follow up with our children at home.

Ways to Improve Engagement

- There are lots of programs already, cannot follow all of them.
- If teachers can better communicate with parents to remind us to check students’ homework, check their backpack, sign notes, etc.
- For the migrant program, there is only opportunity for parents who work in the meat industry. They receive a lot of services that are not provided to other families such as July summer school, home tutoring, etc. They would like to see those programs available for all migrant families.
- The school does have a lot of functions that we are invited to, but many times the families don’t go because we don’t think we will have the interpretation help we need.
- Many times the families don’t know how to participate. The schools could be better at helping them get involved.
- Classes for parents on what the students are learning should be in every school but it might only be helpful at the elementary level. At the higher levels, it may be beyond what many parents can grasp.
- Really appreciate the parenting classes here. From what we learn here, we can then help the children.

Greatest Communication Challenge

- Received mail inviting parents of Title I schools and were not sure if that was us. Do not know what Title I is.
- Language. That is the reason we are here.
- Transportation because only the students who live farthest away qualify. Especially in the winter, it is difficult for the parents who don’t drive. The bus stops are also very far from our home.
- Language and interpreters, even for the Spanish-speaking parents.
- Sometimes we have to use our children to interpret and that is a big no-no at parent teacher conferences. Sometimes kids will lie.

**Group: Citizen Advisory Committee Representatives**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
- Hard to answer, so much is based on your own perspective, where you live, and the schools your kids go to. I personally am very proud of OPS. I think they are great. I love the diversity. All my friends and neighbors send their kids to private schools. OPS does a good job accommodating students outside of the average range, both those that need support and the gifted and talented, whereas private schools may not necessarily be able to do that.
- Families that have kids in the system generally have a very good impression of the schools.
- It depends on what school you are in. Overall, impressions are based on the individual school and not necessarily the district itself. Depends on the leadership of the school.

**Changed Perceptions**
- Some participants felt it is going in the opposite direction, less positive.
- As the population gets more diverse with so many languages, we are moving in the wrong direction. We are constantly putting fires out. District only reacts when people scream loudly. When we come to the table with calm voices, there is a disconnect.
- One thing that is better is that 70+ schools now have active Twitter accounts. The schools are communicating actively and regularly. That same activity is not happening at the district level.
- Parents are not given the full story of what is going on. I will visit the school to see if what I hear is true. I want it to be positive, but sometimes I get let down.
- When we look at north, south, west, there are differences of opinion from one place to the next.

**Quality Education Provided**
- Right now there is not a lot of trust in TAC. Why do we have to always come here? Why aren’t they trying to come to us?
- I feel the Board thinks they are “over and above us.”
- The leadership of the schools is the issue. Some are prepared and have the resources and some do not. We lack an equitable solution. Until we get that part right, we can’t talk about performance and achievement gaps.
- The district sees everything as a whole. Each area should have their own focus group as the needs may be very different. Can’t use the same solutions for every school. The populations are very different.

**Strengths of Communication**
- It’s hit or miss. We do get some good things sometimes.
- It depends on the building, the principal, the day of the week.
Communication Improvements Needed

- Number one complaint you will hear is about communication; it’s very reactive. We received this email two days ago asking us to come. A lot of information comes out late.
- Parents, teachers and administrators talk about problems and are probably talking with TAC on some levels, but won’t talk about it again until it’s covered in the paper.
- Need to be using technology better, such as sending out texts during Board meetings.
- Need more handholding for the parents who don’t come to these kinds of groups. They may need more assistance.
- Calls to the TAC building are not returned or the switchboard transfers it to voice mail. It’s usually a 50-50 chance of getting an answer.
- When parents call TAC, they need to be more welcoming and helpful.
- Make sure email addresses are available for administrators. Principals’ emails should be posted on the website so parents can contact them.
- Push test scores out to each school along with what is important for them to look at. Include the demographics with the data and be transparent. Don’t be afraid to tell the whole story. Stop shying away from the things that are uncomfortable. We need to know what is happening and the reasons why.
- For Board meetings, the newspaper reporter tweets about things as they are happening, but you wait forever for the actual data and documents from the district.
- Stop holding parent meetings at 2:00 p.m. when people who have to work can’t get there.

Communication Vehicles

Websites

- Platform has not been updated in years. Principals have to find a team in their schools to do the updates, but they don’t have the time or training.
- It’s not engaging, too text heavy. We don’t live in that society any longer.
- Hard to navigate, hard to search.
- It is not user-friendly. They are overwhelmed with what’s on there.
- Sometimes it’s impossible to find things; can search forever and still not find the information you need.

Facebook/Twitter

- There needs to be a dedicated person at each school to update social media.

Portals

- Students’ grades are not updated.
- Huge lack of consistency in communication from one teacher to the next. Grades are not available on the Portal on a regular basis. It’s never updated so bad grades stay up there. Don’t put out a phone app if every teacher isn’t updating their page. There should be a mandate to keep it current.

Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)

- Updated calendars of events and activities.
- Programs and activities. Information is often shared late or even after the fact.
I had to drop something else to be here. Coordination of events and activities is a problem, often conflicting with each other.

Lack of digital communications. I get so many papers that come home in backpacks. I don’t have time to go through it all. If I could get an email, it would be so much more efficient. I know it’s a problem with families that don’t have the resources to get things digitally.

Opportunities for Input
- The district brings people together, but they never provide an update of what happened as a result. They never receive a report on what has changed. Parent will stop coming to meetings if they don’t hear back about the outcomes.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
- Don’t ask for their input just to appease them. Parents can add value to the decision-making process.
- Send follow-up information after meetings.
- “The last time we did this, we never received one word about it.”
- “If you are asking these questions because you really care, that’s one thing. But if you are asking just because it’s protocol, don’t waste my time.”
- There is not a lot of trust in administration right now. TAC administrators should go out to the schools instead of always asking people to come there.
- To be successful, OPS needs all family members to feel listened to and valued. They want to be advocates, but are often dismayed at what is going on.

CAC Improvements Needed
- The participants in this group felt strongly that the Citizen Advisory Council needs a complete overhaul. Some concerns shared included:
  - Administrators at the meeting are not informed about the needs.
  - Person in charge of parent engagement doesn’t know the difference between a PTA and a PTO.
  - Some of the specific questions submitted in advance of meetings aren’t discussed anymore because they are considered to be “heated.”
  - Meetings involve sitting through a PowerPoint with answers to non-relevant questions and never getting through the entire agenda.
  - They are asked to take information back to their schools, but aren’t given anything to do that, such as fact sheets or a copy of the PowerPoint.
  - Sometimes the information is mailed out too late and many questions are not answered.
- They also noted that the group is too big and one group for the entire district does not work. Needs to be convened by areas to hone in on specific needs and information. Or consider a town hall format like the mayor is using.
- One participant noted that when it was the Superintendent’s Advisory Council, at least they got some answers. Since it’s changed, the superintendent doesn’t attend anymore. “I might as well stay home.”
- One participant who graduated from OPS said, “We are choosing to do this because the future of our kids and our community depend on it. I’m not sure my kids will graduate here college or career ready. The other districts are looking for our kids; they want them. As alumni, nobody
calls and asks my husband and me for help. We are at the point in our lives where we are in a position to provide support – time, money, etc., but no one ever asks.”

**Group: Civic/Business/Ministerial Leaders/Elected Officials**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**

- I don’t live here but I grew up here, taught here and send my kids here. The diversity of the district is so important. Other districts are not as diverse. Different perspectives and cultures are lacking.
- Another agreed. “I live here, I’m a graduate, and my children have gone here. The dedication of the teachers is my biggest sense of pride. My two sons have had a terrific experience here. My son won a full ride to mechanical engineering school.”
- I like the fact that they are trying to meet the needs of all of the students. They do try and put their best foot forward.
- Diversity is huge. Something no other district in the state can offer.

**Changed Perceptions**

- Changed so much since I went here. The outreach to the community is so much better. I see the differences.
- Depends on what part of the community you are talking about. If it’s having students be a part of people who don’t look like them, then yes. When I went here it was even more segregated than now. My sons have friends from all over the world. I did not have that when I was in school.
- The changes in the district are due to the changes in our city.
- Elephant in the room is that there is this misperception that OPS does not do well and we are an urban jungle. We have more poverty than the suburban districts. People don’t know how to separate poverty from anything else.
- They have made great strides in communication and the academic program over these past few years. I hope the new superintendent will continue. Perception is just starting to move.
- Board has taken on a lot in two years. Don’t agree with all of their fighting, but they have taken on the tough issues.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**

- For the most part, people who have experience with the district are happy with it. People on the outskirts believe it is not a place to send their children. We have significant numbers of people who send their kids outside as they see it not delivering what they want.
- Some people I know are truly adamant about not sending kids to OPS. Depends on who you are talking to. Some people like certain aspects of some programs but not other parts of it.

**Strengths of Communication**

- They’ve gotten into the digital age of using technology to communicate with parents. I get no fewer than five different forms of messaging – email, phone, and now text. Frustrates me when parents now complain that the district doesn’t communicate enough. The parents don’t take the time to know how to get information or don’t pay attention.
- District is getting plenty of information out there. Need more education for parents.
Communication Improvements Needed

- Nathan Hale behavior issues – TV station only highlighted the negative. OPS did not communicate strongly enough all that they did to address the issue. Felt they got punished for it when they did all of the things they needed to do.
- Not sure they were prepared for what it meant to have all those new students in the building.
- The district gets more bad press than positive. Unless you are connected to the district in some positive way, you don’t see all of the good things that are happening here. The newspaper likes stories that get people to buy papers.
- We have a group of people in the district who are very vocal when they are unhappy. They go right to the media. They badmouth us in public. In Millard, parents will try and protect the reputation of the district. Here, they want to expose us and the media feeds off of that.
- Story about raising student performance and students getting to sign the bus got hardly any coverage. Some of the kids worked so hard on it. It was so positive and it was so lost to the Nathan Hale controversy.
- Inconsistency from one school to the next.
- Parents on free and reduced lunch may not have a computer at home. Not sure they are getting the same information as the middle class.
- Parents who are not as involved don’t know what to do with the information they are getting. Test scores, calendar dates, etc.
- As a non-parent, the news media hits me with negative things first.

Sources of News and Information

- (Everyone in this group was either a parent or part time employee. Only one is a former parent.) Folks who are not connected to the district get it mostly through the news media.
- Newspaper has a dedicated reporter for OPS. She comes to things but tends to lean towards the negative.
- If you are not connected to the district, the only source is the news.

Communication Vehicles

Websites

- Very hard to navigate. The information is there but so hard to find.
- Needs a major overhaul by someone from this century.
- Seems like it was just added to and added to and added to.
- I have to write down how I got to places so I can remember for the next time.
- On the bond site, it says to sign up for notices. I did and have never gotten anything.

OPS News

- One person got it. The others were not sure.
- Also get school-based newsletters. Inconsistent from one school to the next.

Facebook/Twitter

- Don’t rely on it, but some people do.
- I don’t. I’m on both of them but don’t use it for school stuff.
Westside information comes up much more than OPS. They must be doing it differently.
I got more stuff from Central High School than I did from Burke. Central was terrific on communication. Burke was not as strong.
The new principal at Burke is terrific. On Twitter all of the time.

**Receive Needed Information On Events, Decisions, etc.**
- Last bond issue, we got lots and lots of information. Supported by outside funding source.

**Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)**
- Information about what is being done with the bond funds now.
- Important for economic development to have good public schools.
- Fiscal responsibility – the idea out there is that we are not responsible. Need to communicate when we stay within budget.
- Handling of Nathan Hale was viewed as irresponsible.
- How much we do with the lower PPE.

**Expectations for Next Superintendent**
- Listening is important.
- I’d like to see a superintendent who is really about coaching and training staff, especially around social and emotional development. New teachers don’t get a full class on behavior management. We lose them before their three year mark because they don’t have the skill sets to work with the high poverty youths. Tenured teachers get to choose where they want to go, new teachers do not.
- Support for policies. Nathan Hale is an example. We do not have an alternative middle school program. We need that.
- Someone who understands that these are all our kids. We are not West Omaha vs. OPS. We have that on our Board. We all need to be invested for all of our students. We need a strong civic leader who provides the support on the inside.
- Teacher retention has to be a priority.
- The new superintendent has to have the backbone to get rid of principals who do not support teachers.
- Needs to communicate well with the other districts that have washed their hands of our challenges. They do not want to help. Our city will continue to struggle if we don’t get this rectified.

**Opportunities for Input**
- If people are not connected, they come to Board meetings and rant so their voices are heard. Perhaps if they were getting the information they need, it would forestall some of it.
- District has done a very good job over the past two years of trying to get input from the community on the bond issue. Lots of forums that were very well publicized. The opportunities are there, but don’t know if people always take advantage of them.

**Leaders Listen and Consider Input**
- Based on who is providing the input. There are some crazies out there. The leaders are receptive to the people who are receptive to them.
Reproductive health issue was a perfect example. People literally came on a bus. Made the newspaper – further supported a bad image.
I hear from the inside that they think the leaders listen too much to the people on the outside.
Some Board members have no interest in the school district. They are only there for their personal agendas.
We need a Board that can communicate with each other. The antics are videotaped and everyone can see it.
I would like to see more parents on the Board.

Greatest Communication Challenge
- Overcoming negative news media.
- The Board provides the biggest opportunity to be positive or negative and they focus too much on the negative.
- We need more Board training. Not just a consultant who comes in and leaves, but someone working with them over the year. And when they have the training, they need to show up. Only the ones who really don’t need it are there. The ones who need it don’t bother to come.

Group: OPS Foundation/Learning Community/Higher Education Reps

Strengths/Points of Pride
- Impressive how relevancy is being pulled into the classroom. Bringing some of the real world problems into the classroom, at all levels.
- One of the great aspects that is gaining strength is the career academies for kids who don’t do well in the traditional classroom that allow them to become qualified for decent employment when they leave the program.
- The partnership we have with the district. We build on it each year and it keeps growing.
- The support of diversity across so many categories. Also like the way some of the schools have allowed students to exercise their civil rights recently. They were supported and not squashed at the beginning of their adult lives. Also, there are tremendous professionals working in every school. It is a big district, so it is hard to define, but there are dedicated true professionals who really love kids. They are there for the right reason.
- I appreciate the partnerships in early childhood and the attention it is given in their planning. Also the adolescent health project and human growth and development curriculum was very courageous.
- Ability to accommodate different learning levels across all grades. All schools seem to be able to handle the different achievement levels of the students and offer opportunities for all.
- I appreciate how they’ve been deepening the partnerships as we’ve identified new challenges. Better preparing students for post high school into college.
- Work with the refugee populations. Do an amazing job with new families moving in.

Changed Perceptions
- It’s gotten more positive. The positive things the district is doing are becoming better publicized than the negative, especially the front pages of the editorials. Small gains are being noticed
- Sometimes, we get so entrenched at TAC and lose sight of all the great things that are happening in the schools. For example, some students are in Hawaii today for the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. I’m also so appreciative of what the bond has done for the district. Sadness at the loss of the superintendent. There was a great deal of hope for a second bond. With him leaving, now we are not so sure. We don’t want to go backwards. There’s been so much momentum with the strategic plan and the bond. Hope the momentum can continue moving forward.

- Concerns about the unknown and the construct of the new OPS Board.

**Quality Education Provided**

- I can only respond from an internal perspective and, internally, it is very mixed among teachers and professionals. Mr. Evans has been terrific with us but not everyone feels that way. We hear principals are overwhelmed with the coaching structure. With the new Executive Director structure, there’s a new level of sheriffs in town. Some have warmed up and some have not. Some of the principals appreciate it and some don’t.

- I think they’ve taken a measured approach. I’d like them to go farther faster. More ambitious. I understand the need for caution. It’s a large district and to ensure the entire network of buildings and staff is on board takes time.

- Mr. Evans has definitely evolved in his role. He is not the same leader he was when he got here. He was very reactionary and was following on the heels of a very strong long-tenured superintendent. He now has a sense of self-confidence because he has gotten a lot accomplished.

- He became more innovative and willing to try things.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**

- Social workers in the buildings supporting families.
- The counselors of the district have not historically represented the population of students. There’s an education program available now funded through the Foundation to attract counselors that represent the students. That is a positive change.
- Is there a dashboard with movement on key indicators? Can they direct the public there? And also have a “Did You Know?” feature on the website.
- OPS is the district you want your children to go to if you want them to learn how to live and work in a diverse community. Some families may fear that.
- If you hear some of these great things, that’s good. But if you don’t, why would you send your children here?
- The dual language program is excellent and it would be good to get the word out about it more.
- The diversity and how many different languages are spoken here. That needs to be out there so everyone understands the challenges and how we are overcoming it.
- I think we used to have the only Native American early childhood or kindergarten program in the US. Also, we have a lot of programs to help urban natives, like family nights where we help families accomplish goals to help them in the community.
- School based health centers are tremendous.

**Strengths of Communication**

- I think the district is working hard to improve internal communications. We’ve been around for 32 years and I would say there’s been a diligent effort to keep us informed about everything, not just when they need money. We are also working with them now on their brand stabilization.
They are working on stabilizing their image in the community. Everyone comes out for the issues. District Communications is going a great job. They always have.

- There was a time when the former communication director spent the majority of her day on defense. Fortunately, we haven’t been in that kind of environment. It provides an opportunity to do things differently.
- From the Foundation’s perspective, we are thrilled that they are engaging us to get the good stories out. Our Foundation is number 3 in the country. When you go around the country, people are so impressed with the things we are doing.

**Communication Improvements Needed**

- I’d like to hear more about the positives and celebrations. The excellence awards were not covered enough this time or I missed it. It was so positive – the number of buildings that qualified.
- Most participants in the group felt the community doesn’t know about the excellence awards.
- I think it is a celebration. You are showing how that building is working for all kids. I went to one of them this year and it was incredible. It needs to be out more. From the Twitter feed, I know there are a lot of good things that are happening that are not getting out. You also don’t see a lot about all of the great partnerships.
- Externally, I don’t think any information reaches me unless I’m looking for it.
- I think the information needs to get to the staff about the partnerships. A lot of people who work in the district that don’t even know what we do as a district.

**Sources of News and Information**

- *Omaha World Herald* and local television.
- Twitter and social media.

**Communication Vehicles**

**Websites**

- So much better than it used to be. It’s evolving. Always room to improve.
- Would like to see the Foundation link on every school site. We really don’t know who doesn’t know about us.

**Facebook/Twitter**

- Twitter from OPS and teachers.
- Principals are doing a nice job. A good third of them are using it.

**Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)**

- Positive stories about the good things.
- As a partner, I find I’m doing a lot of digging. Have to call people up and do a lot of asking.
- In the last several years, you can get data a lot easier on the website. There is interesting stuff there, if you are willing to look.
- Would be good to include benchmarks with the results so you have a perspective on how good the achievement really is.
- District has a ton of partners that are doing a lot of things. When there is a policy or practice change decision, get that out to the partners so we can make adjustments.
Expectations for Next Superintendent

- For someone coming in to build on what’s been accomplished. Not someone to change just for the sake of change. Be a thoughtful leader to build on what we’ve done so far. Courage and ambition to lead the change on the next steps.
- New superintendent will have a certain amount of challenges. Will be interesting to get to know the new Board. If the new person comes from outside the district, there’s a big learning curve with the legislature and their support for vouchers and charter schools. We need to have a really strong person to advocate for the best interests of the kids in the district.
- Someone who is willing to look at other districts, even international, for best practices, and be willing to try them here. There are amazing things being done in other places and no reason why they can’t be tried here.
- Someone who is experienced and equipped to work within our diverse community. Charter schools will be one of the biggest challenges.

Opportunities for Input

- Being invited to this focus group is one example of allowing people to be heard. Board meetings are open. Questions are answered when we call. Good to work with District Communications.
- As a parent, I have an even stronger connection with the schools my kids attend.

Greatest Communication Challenge

- Validity of sixth grade in the middle schools. It is a big issue. All you are hearing is the negatives. And you have a super sleuth of a Board member who only wants you to hear the negative. I hope the next Board has a better relationship with the district than this one has.
- I don’t think they were adequately prepared for this. The planning, the parent communication, preparing the kids for the transition. Not a universal success story. Talk about reactionary – everything at Nathan Hale is reactionary.
- Why does it work in other districts and not here?
- There are some schools where it’s going okay.
- I think it’s great you are asking. Not unusual – we had a big survey at our college and the biggest challenge was communication.

Group: News Media Representatives

Current Image of District/Changed Perceptions

- I don’t think so. There’s still a very split image in the community of the poor schools vs. the affluent schools.
- I feel it is a little more nuanced. They’ve done a pretty good job of talking about academics in recent years. Have been undercut by discipline problems.
- It’s always the media’s fault when there’s a problem. They don’t realize the staff came to us because they weren’t getting answers from the administration.
- Academically, OPS is doing better, but not sure about overall.
- From a media standpoint, I think it’s much more closed off to the media. I’m a news director and I have no idea what goes on in the schools. We try to talk to principals but they direct us to the communications office. Now we have a form we have to fill out. We end up doing negative
stories because when we try and cover good stories we’re closed out. Hard for us to plan a week ahead. I have a lot of relatives who work here so I find out what’s going on from them.

- I think the closed off observation is a good one. They never get out in front of anything. They are always catching it from behind. Often the answer is then compromised.
- Many years ago when I was a reporter I could call a principal and just ask what’s going on. I understand they need to clear it with District Communications when it’s something serious or significant. But is it really necessary for a routine good news story?
- When I try and do that I get tattled on because I’m not supposed to be calling them directly. It’s a basic access issue.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**

- Let the media inside the schools, stop being afraid. That’s what the other districts do.
- Some parents feel just as out of the loop as we do.
- As a parent, when I hear about something important from Erin Duffy’s Twitter feed before I hear it from the district, it concerns me. The sex education program – there were some efforts to communicate, but for parents there was not a clear explanation of what our options were. A one-page simple overview would have been ideal.
- We all have sales people in our businesses. Who is selling at OPS? There doesn’t seem to be someone who has that responsibility.
- At some point, someone will do the story about how many OPS staff have their kids in other districts.

**Improvements Needed**

- They are still operating on the model of beat reporters and don’t realize that most of us are not operating that way.
- The new requirement that we fill out an electronic form when we’ve already emailed our request seems redundant and odd. I know the Director of Communications and she does a good job. It seems like a bureaucratic hurdle and not necessary. That extra step will eliminate a lot of people who won’t go to the trouble.
- We’ve had to move on to other stories because it takes a long time for them to get back to us.
- Sometimes even if we allow a certain amount of time to get the data and statistics we need, it takes even longer than what works for us.
- For example, I gave a request on a Tuesday for something I needed to write for the weekend and didn’t get it until the following Monday after it was already done. Cardinal sin in this business is not getting back to a reporter.
- Sometimes it’s other people in the district that don’t get back to us. I’ve had to ask three times for a contract amount. I’m sure Monique Farmer and her staff are having to ask their staff multiple times.
- There should have been a briefing paper following the Nathan Hale story. Takes a lot of front end work but it could cut off a lot of crisis.
- Targeted texts for parents would make a difference. School based texts regarding incidents.
- Some organizations have invited us in to their media training where we explain our role to the principals and other leaders.
- We’ve had privileged access being on the editorial board. They would do themselves a lot of favors by empowering more people to speak. Look at the police for the model. Who are the
sergeants at OPS who are ready and trained to speak? Having us help and participate would make a huge difference.

**Relationship with District Communications**

- I believe there have been small attempts to invite the media in to a parent meeting and a teacher training meeting, but it didn’t have anything to do with discipline. It was about technology. We were just told it was a teacher training, without the context. Felt like they were trying to distract us with something to get us off their backs.
- Don’t get us wrong, the current Director is better than what we had before.
- She’s inconsistent. She’s better in some areas than others. One step forward, three steps back.
- A lot of us worked with her when she was at the Army Corps of Engineers in 2011. The scope of what she has to handle here is overwhelming. It’s much more wide-ranging here and there is greater volume.
- Seems like she is always getting pulled in different directions.
- With all respect, District Communications is staffed like a small suburban district.
- When you are reactive all of the time, you are never prepared for what makes your job easier.
- Every time they keep us away from the issues, it feeds the “wackadoles” who fill the voids with inaccuracies.
- Our days are filled with planning. It seems like they never have a plan so it leads us to have to go in all different directions.
- Very frustrated because it takes so much longer than it should. We don’t like it but sometimes it impacts our approach. When someone is antagonistic, it can affect our attitude even though we don’t want it to.

**Sources of News and Information**

- Since I work in the building, they send a digest each week. Would be great if the media got that announcement as well.
- Facebook and social media – comments from parents. When you try and find out from staff, they are unaware.
- When my kids were in the schools, I had access to parents, teachers and disgruntled former employees.
- For example, the story about the protests, we found out through students and parents commenting on social media. They could have turned down the reaction to that a bit if the administrators actually knew the media’s rights. They didn’t know what to do. They were standing in front of the cameras and putting their hands up. It was a public sidewalk. We are allowed to be there. They were communicating with the Director, who was offsite and there was a lot of confusion. It was a planned protest, loud and visible. At this point, give it up. It’s going to be a story.

**Information Is Easy to Find and Accessible**

- Take the busing situation for example. It’s like pulling teeth to get any information. All of us were writing five stories instead of two because every day there was a trickle of information.
- The reasons we are doing this is because parents are calling us. Frustrating for us when we cannot help them.
Information Is Timely
- On the TB issue, it was a shock to us that we were actually given it ahead of time. *(Another’s Response: It actually came from the health department that released it and then OPS fell in line.)*
- For the TB story, there were expected questions they should have anticipated. They should do their homework around planning for likely questions.

Best Way to Communicate
- Email preferred for notifications, heads up, simple answers to questions.
- Not email interviews – I don’t want to send you my questions and then you send me the answers in an email.
- Being proactive on the top stories by having fact sheets on them before they are occurring. They probably have it somewhere on the website.

Communication Vehicles

Websites
- It is absolutely horrible. Almost never use it.
- I use the research page occasionally. There is some decent info there, but the previous reporter had to take me step-by-step in how to go through it.
- An At-A-Glance page would be great for the questions they get asked most often.

Expectations for Next Superintendent
- Openness to the media. I will come to him or her and meet them when they take over the job. Somebody who is going to sell the district, speak for the schools.
- Not someone who says the Board president speaks for them. Be out there, be visible.
- Have a crisis team that can swoop in on an issue and handle it right away.
- Someone who plans to stay here long-term.
- Someone comfortable talking to the media, also having off the record chats.
- Don’t be afraid of the media. If bad things happen, we are going to cover it. If you are not afraid of being out there in front, it makes our jobs easier.

Opportunities for Input
- We had one meeting last spring when they came to the station for an initiative we were working on. That was the first time in five years.
- Monique Farmer came when she was first hired, but since then, she has reached out one other time.
- I met her for coffee a while back where she asked for my input and I did appreciate it. I get that there’s always going to be a fundamental friction.
- I will say that they don’t nitpick about coverage after the fact.
- We never hear anything good or bad, so I’m not sure they are even tracking it.

Greatest Communication Challenge
- Be proactive and not reactive.
- More access. Empower more people to talk and prepare them to talk.
Give me more substantive pitches about how policy is working in schools, not just soft fluff with cute kids in front of a camera. For example, around the extended school day – how is that time being used? How do complicated policies play out?

Some of this problem is the Board’s problem. The Board is spending so much time on political issues and not the actual issues. Too much time is spent on who gets suspended and not on why.

Board dynamics is an issue. A while back, I pitched a story to do a year-long immersion in a school. Didn’t work out for various reasons. There was a new principal who was nervous. One of the concerns was the Board hearing about something through a news story before the district is able to tell them.

Communication to their own staff. Lots of times, the Board adopts policy and the district tries to deploy it. It gets told to them but they are not trained to deploy it. Right now the new discipline system is an issue. A lot of teachers didn’t like it. The administration and Board are telling me the problem is not there, even though I’m hearing it from a lot of teachers.

Only other thing I would add, when I ask about a story they often say that the Board hasn’t been informed about it. That’s not my problem, that’s an OPS problem if the story is happening now.

Let’s be honest, the Board is more likely to read Erin Duffy’s story than the briefing book.

**Group: Elementary Teachers**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**

- Diversity. We have a wide range of socio-economic groups and cultures.
- Having enough support staff for younger learners especially. They really try to funnel enough resources across the three different schools I’ve worked in – early childhood up to second grade.
- Up to date with technology. Always keeping OPS in the loop of what’s coming out and providing it to teachers.
- Good amount of professional development.
- Have been working very hard to increase their scores pulling out anything and everything they can.
- Feel they are highlighting more how teachers and schools are going above and beyond.

**Changed Perceptions**

- I think OPS tends to get a bad rap whether they deserve it or not. Things happen in all districts but OPS is the first to make the headlines, whether or not it’s true.
- That was true of the bus issue. Was not just an OPS issue. They compared us to other districts that don’t have as many students or have to bus them as far.
- Nathan Hale hit the news and now everyone says that is reflective of the district and it is not. I was at a meeting the other day and people were saying they would never send their kids to public schools and I had to say that is where they are wrong.
- We’ve had a lot of things happen this year and it’s not even winter break.
- I went to school here and wanted to come back and work here and I don’t feel it’s gotten worse even though our population has gotten more challenging.
- My sisters both moved out to small towns to raise their kids and they are adamant that I should move also. They didn’t push me for my older kids but they are now with my younger ones.
I feel the people I know who always avoided cities still do and others have not. I’m not sure if it’s been worse or not.

**Quality Education Provided**

- Yes, but I also think it needs to be evaluated more closely as the community changes. I think they view teachers the same way they view police officers – with a lot of disrespect. Administration needs to focus on how our students are changing and what additional resources do we need to support them.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**

- I think they do a good job with the magnet schools. They should make every school just as important. Advertise the class sizes if you compare us to parochial schools.
- That’s a hard thing. I think some of it is where people prefer to live.
- A lot of people very much generalize OPS and they have in their mind one school and think that’s OPS. It’s very connected to the socio-economic situation. People hone in on one school or neighborhood when in reality we are a large and varied district.
- Use the community partnerships as a way to sell the school. We used to do a better job with our partnerships.

**Strengths of Communication**

- I love the automated system for the staff and the parents.
- Especially for the snow closings and emergencies – no more phone chains.
- We get a lot of communication via email – Wavelengths, IMS.
- Superintendent’s podcasts.

**Communication Improvements Needed**

- Sometimes we find out things on the news first before they’ve informed us. Grading policy and extended school day were all over the news before we heard about it.
- The big issues seem to be grabbed by the media first and then they have to tell us.

**Sources of News and Information**

- We know about the day-to-day happenings in district *Postings* from District Communications.

**Communication Vehicles**

**Websites**

- Useful for day to day operations, calendar.
- Feels like there are too many things for us to look at. It keeps changing and you can’t get to all of them from the home page.
- School websites probably are not updated as much as they should be because they just changed how they are set up. Depends on who your tech person is.

**OPS News**

- The group wasn’t sure they get this publication.
Facebook/Twitter
- Not so much for teachers. They can’t use it during the day.

Portals
- Elementary teachers and parents don’t use it. Bigger push is in middle and high school.

Information is Timely and Accessible
- Depends on the building. Some principals prefer to save it for a staff meeting; some put it in an email.
- My principal is really good.

Expectations for Next Superintendent
- Actual hands-on classroom experience and not from 20 years ago.
- Somebody who comes from an area with high poverty.
- Someone who realizes a district our size is not going to be the same across the board, be able to differentiate.
- Be present at the buildings, visit our classrooms and see what is going on.
- Someone who really does understand curriculum and assessment well.
- More worldly view – not just American education centered ideals.
- Someone who knows how to work with community partnerships to get us more support.

Opportunities for Input
- At the building level more so than the district level. For example, our school did a two-year program a bit back. They decided arbitrarily to just end the program without asking us.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
- I think we are given the opportunity but they do not use it. It seems they have already made up their minds.
- At the building level for professional development, a large number of us make certain suggestions and they say it was unanimous to do something completely different.
- Same thing happens with curriculum when they ask us what is best and end up going with what is the cheapest. I’d rather they not pretend my input counts and waste my time.
- I feel like we’ve gotten a lot of surveys in the recent past and I take them all but I never know what becomes of them. I’ve never seen the results printed or what is done with it.
- The teacher engagement survey was very long and we never saw the results.

Ways to Improve Engagement
- A lot of things change often. They should be able to get that together by now. Need more stabilization.

Greatest Communication Challenge
- Language – we need more interpreters.
- We have five different languages in my classroom alone, so anything I create I have to have translated.
There are so many different schools that when they try and send something out, consistency is a problem as well as timing.

**Group: Middle School Teachers**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
- Diversity, refugee population. Students are reflective of everything. Other districts may be seen as higher income. OPS has a wider view of the world.
- Coworkers. The quality of teachers here is amazing or better than in other districts. Need to reflect on where students were and where they are now.
- Dedication of teachers.
- Principals are very supportive. They have more autonomy than teachers in some other districts may have.

**Changed Perceptions**
- For the worse. Lack of communication in terms of input on big decisions like the extended school day. Parents and teachers realize they aren’t being asked for input. Lots of misinformation out there on the sex ed curriculum. The district was scared of standing up to people who were upset about it.
- Has changed for the worse in the grading system implementation. They are trying to spin it that it’s great.
- Another major problem was the behavior issues at Nathan Hale. OEA leadership has been there trying to help. Administration is telling them they aren’t allowed to talk to the media. There is a history of trying to save face and protect image.
- OPS does a decent job of celebrating diversity but it doesn’t do anything to address the underlying problems. District addresses the public image instead of the issues. Nathan Hale situation is not isolated to them, it happens at any middle school. Treating it as such isn’t addressing the problem.
- As a positive, they have seen the school bus ad banners celebrating the test score improvements.
- Passing the bond shows there is faith in the district.
- Ready to talk about the positives but not address the negatives and answer them.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- Shouldn’t be just top down.
- Communicate about things that directly affect them, such as extended time. The fact that they were blindsided is a communication issue.
- Don’t just address something because it was a “whoopsi.”
- Send an email or survey teachers about changes first. Leaders’ minds were made up. Timing was shifty in the middle of the summer.
- It never was about the time, it was about how it was done.
- District glorifies something and then stabs you in the back.
- One participant came from another district and felt he understood the content standards direction better there than he does in OPS. Still working on trying to align with standards.
No one communicated with him about the content. No one provided direction, feels he has been treading water for two years.

- Based on current politics with the new U.S. Secretary of Education, it’s crucial to have the voices of teachers with possible privatization of education in the wings.

**Sources of News and Information**

- OEA.
- School Board meetings. Sometimes go to the meetings or watch the streaming video.
- Association reps who take information back to buildings from OEA meetings.
- *Board Wrap* and *Digest*.
- Podcasts.
- Depends on the personality of the principal if they are willing to give them any insight.

**Best Way to Communicate**

- Be collaborative with OEA and let them trickle information down. Best way to keep teachers informed is to have them at the table.
- So many decisions made at TAC are without input from the buildings, which impacts trust.
- The farther away you are from TAC, the farther away decisions feel.
- Focus groups are good and so is talking to teachers. Teachers are tired of having information relayed to them instead of being part of the process.
- There’s a balance. Strategically invite a cross section of people for input. It can’t always be the same people.
- This was the first time these participants were invited to a focus group.
- Teaching is very demanding job and if they aren’t motivated to participate they may just complain.
- Need someone to represent you to get in the door. They go through OEA and branch out from there. It’s too hard to let the district pick and choose.
- With certain policies and procedures there is a lack of transparency if you go to TAC or your principal with a formal complaint. One said he asked what they outcomes are if a teacher is reprimanded, but they wouldn’t answer the question. He just wanted to know how the district deals with those things.
- It’s one of the negative perceptions.
- No avenue for grade level collaboration like they had with First Class. They would like that again.
- Want a way to communicate and share information.
- When you have so many avenues of communication, more is not always better.
- With the technology initiative, it gets overwhelming.
- Incredible how long it takes to find a piece of information. It takes multiple steps to find one document.

**Communication Vehicles**

**Best Vehicle**

- Email (they like the *Board Digest*).
Wavelength e-news from Technology Department.

**Websites**
- Use for the calendar.
- Not user-friendly; hard to find things.
- District is very secretive about some information. Like free and reduced lunch numbers.

**Postings**
- Some delete it.
- Need a way to target it so they open.
- Some read through the list.
- One doesn’t think she gets it.
- Another said it goes to “clutter.”

**Expectations for Next Superintendent**
- Truly collaborate with teachers, not just say they are doing it. Include teachers at the table. Don’t ask them after the fact how they feel about something.
- Involve teachers in conversations.
- Don’t be afraid to discuss weaknesses and negatives.
- Teachers want to improve as a district.

**Group: Secondary Teachers**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
- “Love my coworkers.”
- “We teach everybody and send kids to Ivy League schools. We get them graduated and into job programs.”
- Great specialization programs such as IT and other programs that are not offered everywhere.
- Diversity.
- Teachers are diverse as well, and understand the diversity and the types of students in OPS.
- Proud of success stories of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who don’t let that guide their futures.
- Provide resources for families.
- Good job involving other agencies to help the kids, such as trips to visit colleges.
- Programs that offer kids certifications when they graduate if they go straight to work.

**Changed Perceptions**
- Hard to say from the inside, “My perceptions as a parent have changed. If you never have contact with the district it’s stagnant. Not worse, but recent stories haven’t helped.”
- Positive stories are overshadowed by the negative ones.
- The grading changes were not favorable. It looked bad. No one has gone back to see what worked. The district seems to be afraid to communicate about it.
- Info was sent out to parents, but it was confusing to explain how a different grading system is used for those going to college vs. all the rest of the students.
- The turmoil gets the attention.
- Failures are big and exposed and successes are hidden.
- When mistakes (i.e., the bus situation) are made, it’s easy to point a finger but hard to show success.
- Busing – the district has never acknowledged that they changed the school day and cut 15 minutes from the day. That caused the problem. The district didn’t look at how the change affected high school activities.
- Press grabs the negative, not the positive.
- People need to buy into the idea that 20 years from now Omaha won’t be successful without OPS being successful.

**Strengths of Communication**
- Individual schools do a better job than the district overall does.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- Be more proactive than reactive. Get ahead of the story and the press. Try to control that better.
- Create stronger sense of trust between teachers and district.
- Seems like a game. When the heat is turned up on the district, then they let the teachers know.
- Take advantage of some of the demographics. Highlight all we do well as an urban district.
- In terms of external communication, OPS tries to hide things. Internal – when switched to Office 365, we got a system with bells and whistles, but no one knows how to use it.
- Add bullet points at the top of long emails so they know what’s in the link before clicking on it and whether it’s relevant to them.
- Be clear about what district is trying to share with them.
- Categorize the news stories instead of putting everything in one email. They don’t have time to read it all.
- Need to triage information, but have to push it to them or they won’t read it.
- District is making positive steps.
- The handling of extended day was sneaky and disrespectful.
- That did major damage to teacher trust.

**Sources of News and Information**
- Students (who read news and report to them).
- Better this year. They are trying with updates.
- Evening news. Media is getting it to them sooner than the district.
- Erin Duffy on Twitter. She tweets from the Board meetings and gives more than the Board wrap up, which isn’t very detailed. They follow her.
- Principal and colleagues.
- Learn it on the news.
- “If you hear something, you go to the news first, not the website or the district. Nowhere to go there.”
• The website is not a major source of news.
• The district always will be vulnerable to things getting in print.
• Don’t know what technology is required for an intranet. More than half of emails go to “clutter.” They shouldn’t have to check clutter to find important messages.
• To hear about the extended day plan from a source other than OPS (as an employer) is inexcusable.
• Yammer is awful.
• Sharepoint isn’t looked at.
• Meet them where they are with information.
• If it’s a significant issue, it should be addressed with staff first.
• One participant working at a school with a TB case, heard about it first from a student.
• Communication at the schools is not consistent across the district.

**Best Way to Communicate**

• Email for important issues.
• Social media on fun facts.
• Email, but it needs to be more specific and timely.
• Need to prioritize email topics (don’t need the lunch menu first).
• With First Class they had specific folders, which was more efficient than Office 365 because it was sorted by topic. Feedback wasn’t solicited on what was working and what wasn’t before the change was made.

**Communication Vehicles**

**Website**

• Use it for calendars, finding a sub.
• Several said they use the website more as a parent than as an employee.
• Use the department page a lot.

**OPS News**

• One participant said she doesn’t get it anymore.
• Several liked the celebrations section on the back and read that because it had fun information.
• No one could remember seeing a recent issue.
• One thought it is buried in Sharepoint. “But no one is going to dig for it.”

**Receive Needed Information On Events, Decisions, etc.**

• They get a weekly email from District Communications with a message to “Click on the link for District Postings.” But it doesn’t indicate what’s in it.
• They rely on building leadership to get what they need to know.
• To find something in Sharepoint takes so long that they just give up.
• Don’t use Sharepoint if they can help it. “It’s a waste of time.”
Expectations for Next Superintendent

- If there is information the superintendent needs them to know, send out a staff message or share it through the principals.
- Dissemination system should be from the superintendent to the principals and down to staff.
- There is a hierarchy, and all that happens at TAC doesn’t impact them so they don’t need to know everything.
- Should be visible and engaged in the community.
- Should be a good spokesperson for district.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- Many principals do a pretty good job, but some don’t, so it’s hit and miss.

Group: OEA Representatives

Strengths/Points of Pride

- Our teachers. We have excellent teachers and we serve all students.
- Our teachers are very dedicated to whatever student walks into their room or building.
- The Office 365 and the way technology is going with access to the home.

Changed Perceptions

- My experience just in the past several months is that OPS is a mess. The perception out there is that it is a mess. I think there are messes to be cleaned up. Overall, I think we have a great system that the teachers are working hard to maintain. The mess perception stems from the violence in the city and most of them are OPS kids.
- The busing at the beginning of the school year had a negative impact.

Quality Education Provided

- Absolutely do not trust the Board and administration to provide a quality education. They appear not to value the opinions of the teachers in the district.
- There seems to be a reluctance to have the discussions. To acknowledge even that there is a problem and then to have the discussion once it’s been identified.
- With our former superintendent, we met with the administration more regularly. With the current superintendent, can remember only one or two times since he arrived.

Strengths of Communication

- Now have automated messaging for snow closings instead of a phone chain.
- We have gotten into Facebook and Twitter. It’s one way of getting good news about OPS.

Communication Improvements Needed

- We can do a better job of getting the good stories out. The Omaha World Herald does a school column on Saturdays that rarely features OPS. Usually has the suburban districts and the Catholic schools. We have to jump through hoops to get good coverage.
- If there’s an emergency, make it a priority to inform the OEA so we can help with the messaging. Finding about something on the news first and then trying to call District Communications to find
out what happened, is a missed opportunity. They say they were going to tell us when they told the parents. We want to be part of the solution and are more than willing to help.

- While it’s true there may be areas where we disagree, in a crisis situation there should be trust that we all get the information we need to deal with it.
- My impression is that there is a preference to not communicate, to be secretive, that comes from the administration. To be fair, OPS is criticized more frequently than any other district which may be why they are being so secretive.

**Sources of News and Information**
- Twitter feed from Erin Duffy at the *Omaha World Herald*.
- News media.
- *Board Digest* after each Board meeting. Not sure how widely read it is.
- Weekly email *Postings*. Sometimes it’s hard to access the links.
- I attend Board meetings for the association. Even there, you don’t always get information because they go into executive session for most things.
- I live outside of the city limits so can’t see the Board meetings on TV. I have to livestream it on my phone.
- I’m surprised of the number of texts I get from people during the Board meeting who are watching it.

**Best Way to Communicate**
- Email: easy to access, convenient, can access it from home.
- I love technology, but sometimes a hard copy is nice.

**Expectations for Next Superintendent**
- Someone who values the teachers and what the teachers have to say.
- Important that the new superintendent understand the needs of a really diverse population and especially the minority populations in the district. We have a high percentage of poverty families and we are culturally very diverse. We need to teach our teachers how to work in a diverse organization.
- Look at the structure of what is happening at TAC and get rid of some of the dead weight. For example, we’ve done some great things in technology, but still have some work to do.
- Technology does not seem equitable across the district.
- Not sure how well the Executive Directors are working. Is that the right structure for our district? It’s not clear what they are supposed to do.

**Opportunities for Input**
- It seems that teachers are the last people whose opinions are sought as to what is going on in the schools. Trust that the teachers know what they are talking about.
- Not at all. I attend almost every Board meeting and the Board knows that. A question will come up about teachers and they turn to OPS administrators for the answer while OEA board members are sitting right there. I’ve seen them call principals up to answer questions so I know Robert’s Rules allow for that. When you don’t do the same for the OEA leadership, it says very clearly that you don’t value the teachers’ voice.
- The only time the Board recognizes us is when we attend a meeting in force.
- We meet with curriculum instruction and support monthly and as the years have progressed, they’ve gotten more collaborative in their approach. At one point it was antagonistic, whereas now we’ve made great strides.
- At the building level, I feel we are told rather than asked, but I also feel free to offer my opinion when I need to and that I am listened to.
- I transferred from one building to another this year and it’s amazing how professional the new school treats their teachers. It can differ widely from building to building.

**Leaders Listen and Consider Input**
- Feel I can have open conversations with the curriculum office. It has been very intentional.

**Ways to Improve Engagement**
- Celebrating success sometimes seems superficial.
- Gold Award statistically becomes almost impossible to do after you’ve achieved it once.
- Emphasis is on testing and gains in testing and not the whole child and individual progress. Especially when teaching an at-risk population, you really do have to celebrate the progress. There’s a lot of talk about doing that, but not a lot to back that up. The pressure is definitely to raise the test scores.

**Greatest Communication Challenge**
- The Board and the teaching staff in the district cannot be working against one another. There needs to be open communication and trust that the teachers know what they are talking about. Certain Board members are a big problem when it comes to trust.
- I see it more as the willingness and trust to communicate. I also see it as not just the Board, because they rely heavily on the top administration. Need transparency.
- If they were communicating with teachers and had a better relationship and trust with our association, they might have a better perspective. But when you only communicate with part of the organization, then you only get part of the information you need.
- Public comment section of Board meetings is a disaster. Only five minutes with no response perpetuates ranting. Public has a right to be heard but it is a disaster. There are times when I was fearful during those sessions and I was very glad to have a police presence.
- Need better technology at the Board meetings. I can never get logged on during the meeting. The internet here is not sufficient.
- Trust is a huge, huge issue.
- Credibility. Why do we only want to talk about the negative things?

**Group: School Secretaries**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
- Our teachers.
- The diversity.
- How hard the secretaries work for so little.
- “Our administrators are awesome. I don’t know how they do it every day.”
**Changed Perceptions**
- Yes, for the worse. People think there’s some loss of control in a lot of our buildings.

**Quality Education Provided**
- I think the Board doesn’t stand behind the schools or the administrators.
- They don’t trust the leaders to provide a good education. We see a lot of parents pulling their kids out to other districts.
- Families want us to parent their kids.
- The public has no idea what is involved.
- A Board member should spend a whole week in a school. For example, spend time in an elementary school after the students haven’t had recess for two or three days.
- Or come to a high school and see what we deal with day in and day out.
- Administrators need to do that too. The students come to the secretaries first, before they go to an administrator.
- “Sometimes I feel like I’m a parent to 300 students and 50 staff.”
- People at the TAC building have lost touch with what goes on in the schools.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**
- Unfortunately, behaviors override the learning. If there are 10 kids that are not doing what they are supposed to do, it takes away from the resources we need to put towards learning. We need to reverse this if we are going to attract and retain more students.
- The administration feels like their hands are tied, they are not allowed to suspend or expel.
- We have a lot of kids who want to learn, but the discipline takes away from it. Parents see that and pull their kids out of the district.
- I don’t fault the children. We will call a parent and tell them how disruptive their child is and they say they can’t come over now.
- One participant said her school has people wanting and trying to get into it. They have the dual language program and are one of the few that is ethnically diverse.
- Columbia has good scores and people want their kids there. They have small class sizes and are not a magnet.
- There are lots of inconsistencies from one school to the next, such as class size at the elementary schools.

**Strengths of Communication**
- Email. Most agreed it is very effective.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- Secretary meetings. We have them once a month for elementary secretaries at 8:00 a.m. This is the worst time of day for an elementary school secretary. I have to go to my school, get things open, subs, traffic, etc. After 9:00 a.m. would be better.
- My school doesn’t have early childhood or pre-K so a big chunk of the secretary meeting is not helpful for me.
- I can’t leave where I am to attend because I am the registrar.
- Most of content of the meeting could be in an email. Maybe do that every other month.
• Would be better to move to a more central location. Just too hard to get there at that time of day with the traffic.
• For a new secretary, secretary meetings may have value. Seem to be repetitive after the first year.
• Separate the meeting out for elementary, middle and high school secretaries.
• Need to be better at communicating things to parents. Secretaries are not child care providers. We get yelled at by parents for not knowing things that break on the news.
• The new email system is broken in so many parts. Used to be user-friendly, now you have to dig it up.
• There are times in our building when we’ve had positive things happen and call the media and they never show up.

Sources of News and Information
• Principals and administrators.
• Email.
• News media.

Most Credible Sources
• A lot of information is word of mouth. Never know what is real.

Best Way to Communicate
• Email: If you want me to know something, send me an email.
• Automated messaging.

Communication Vehicles

Websites
• Helpful, I use it.
• Often use it to respond to parent questions. Also tell parents where to find things on it.
• Website has gotten a lot more user-friendly.
• I think there is a demographic issue. For parents using just smart phones, it’s much harder for them. Need either a responsive site or an app.
• Need it in Spanish, too.

OPS News
• (Some did not even know what it is.)
• I get it as a parent. Gives you a quick rundown. Not a lot of detail which is frustrating. For example, how they handled the ACT.

Facebook/Twitter
• Only some in the group use it and no one said they rely on it for information.
• “On snow days, I watch it like a hawk. Closing announcement comes there first or on the news before we get automated messaging calls.”
• I don’t think we should have to use social media. I’m on a computer all day long.
Portals
- Sharepoint is more beneficial at the school level, not necessarily at the district level.
- Campus Portal is used more at the high schools. I’m in there all of the time. I would like to be able to change addresses and other updates autonomously instead of having to wait for SIS to do it.
- District does not do a good job of telling us what is allowed and what is not allowed on changing the portal, like, when do we have to fill out certain forms?

Information is Timely and Accessible
- Not always. Snow day notifications we get after the parents.
- I would get my parent call long before I get a staff call on a snow day.
- Principals are notified of transportation changes and we are not.
- Inconsistent. Some things are timely and others are not.

Receive Needed Information On Events, Decisions, etc.
- Usually I just get an email from my principal.
- We also get Board Notes, but who has the time to read them all?
- Weekly Postings from District Communications includes the TAC lunch menu (not sure why). Have to click on it every week and then have to click on every link. Don’t have time for that.
- HR is not very good about communicating things. Went through a contract negotiation and never heard anything about the outcomes.
- “I have no clue what my rate of pay is. If you call, you’ll get sent to eight people.”
- Another example is the new changes with sick days. I manage that for my building and it was not clear.

Opportunities for Input
- At building level, yes. Not at the district level.
- “I’ve given it, but not necessarily because I was asked.”

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
- A couple of years ago I got on a soapbox about support for new secretaries. Nobody should feel like a deer in the headlights. I made a folder with all of the forms. They took it from me. Then they developed the new secretary meeting. It took a while but eventually they listened.
- I feel they really don’t want my input.

Ways to Improve Engagement
- Would be nice for new secretaries to have training just like new teachers.
- Interesting that engineers and everyone else has overtime. Unless you get special permission from your principal, you volunteer your time. We come in early and leave late.
- We did not get a letter stating we were rehired for the next year and what our pay was. Supposedly our benefits costs went up but we got a small raise and then had to pay a shortfall, but then they switched it back. Never sent a letter about it.
They say things like, “We couldn’t do this without you. We appreciate you. You are the front line,” but I do not feel it is sincere. If it was, our paycheck would reflect it. There are times when I’m there and no administrator is there and I’m answering all of the questions.

I never leave at 4:30. Who will be with the kids?

Greatest Communication Challenge

- No consistency of enforcement. We follow the policy and tell parents what the policy dictates. If the parent just keeps going up the ladder at TAC, they eventually get what they want. TAC undermines us.
- Next year will be a nightmare with the new busing policies. Some of my parents say they are not worried because they know somebody at TAC.
- The reality is that does happen. People get what they want because they know someone.
- If people complain loud enough or go to Channel 7, they get what they want.
- Why have policies if you don’t back us up in enforcement? They should be telling parents that we are telling them the truth.
- My principal follows the policies and is wonderful dealing with families. Then someone from TAC comes down and supports the parent, not the principal.
- I have one parent who calls every week saying, “I’m calling TAC, and I’m going to have your job.”

Group: TAC Secretaries

Strengths/Points of Pride

- Good programs like magnets.
- Virtual school.
- Special education.
- New alternative school for special needs.
- Bond program.

Changed Perceptions

- Under Superintendent Evans it has become more positive. Before that it was chaos. Board was in chaos, very negative public perception. He has done a good job getting stakeholders on board and did it right away.
- It’s better because the superintendent has done an excellent job.
- Because the superintendent is positive it makes them feel good about their jobs.
- “He doesn’t care about what position level you are. He treats everyone the same, and shares the same corny jokes.”
- With new principals you can see the change and that has helped with the caliber of folks hired.
- With the people Mr. Evans brought in it was a night and day improvement.
- Technology has greatly improved.

Keys to Attracting Families and Staff

- Nebraska Loves Public Schools campaign is fantastic. Need to connect to that.
Strengths of Communication
- SchoolMessenger calls.
- Texting has just started and it will be interesting to see how well it works.
- Board highlights.
- Podcasts are good.

Communication Improvements Needed
- It would be nice to include secretaries in emails to their administrators (who forward to them anyway). They are part of the team and in a position to be confidential.
- They could be more helpful if included in the loop.
- Big changes that were coming weren’t communicated to them and there were things they could have done to help.
- A lot of departments, like food service and transportation don’t check email. There is a big gap there. Need a way to get information to them.
- Negative press makes it really hard
- It’s not that bad, but the newspaper is focused on telling the bad stories. They are more negative on OPS than other districts.

Sources of News and Information
- Email.
- Website.
- Sharepoint is growing and getting better.
- Check Board agenda and watch meetings.
- Trickle down from supervisors for the most part.
- Early childhood is transitioning, so communication levels are still unclear.
- Other secretaries.
- No updates come to them about staff (retirements, hires, etc.).
- No regular updates are provided.

Best Way to Communicate
- Email.
- Get a lot of information off of Sharepoint district communication.

Communication Vehicles

Websites
- Hard to find forms. Have to drill far to find what you are looking for.
- Operational services page is not user-friendly.
- Head Start is a good site.
- Often have to walk people through the website on the phone.
- Don’t know if there is link to the virtual school on the OPS site or not.
OPS News
- Why isn’t it emailed to them?
- Have to find it to read it.
- Some read it when they get it. A lot of it is a repeat from Board Digest or the podcast, but they like the pictures and achievements.
- “When you don’t see students all the time it reminds you of why you are here.”

Facebook/Twitter
- Most don’t use it.
- One checks Facebook.
- Yammer is irritating.

Information is Timely and Accessible
- Most of the time.

Expectations for Next Superintendent
- OPS has to be an open book all around.
- One participant said she likes the current superintendent’s podcasts.
- Continue the superintendent report at Board meetings.
- Board meetings are an interesting way to find out about the district.

Opportunities for Input
- No.
- Head Start staff work with their management team and provide input on decisions.
- Others felt they are an afterthought.
- Decisions are made and they are told what to do.

Greatest Communication Challenge
- Getting out the positive word. “We do good things, and graduate smart kids, but people don’t hear about it.”
- The tech department does a good job getting things out about what they are doing with students (via # and Twitter). Tech trainers take a lot of pictures of what they are doing with students to push out on #OPS Proud.
- A positive for OPS is the focus on career education for those kids who aren’t college material.

Morale
- One participant noted that being new and from the corporate world she’s noticed there are some “grumpy ones” in the district. “If everyone can just get along and play together in the sandbox it would be better.”
- In the tech department everyone is concerned about each other.
- It’s been rough for the teachers. Not sure they feel they are getting the support they need.
Group: Support Staff Representatives

Strengths/Points of Pride
- The diversity.
- The level of education the students receive compared to other districts.
- Programs we offer for our students.
- The buildings. I’ve been to other cities where they are terrible.

Changed Perceptions
- Recently it’s gotten worse. Been a tough year with the bus issue.
- The human growth and development curriculum was not positive.
- The new faculty and instruction that are coming in – we need to maintain some of the senior instructors to help them with regards to discipline and their instructional methods. I’m hearing some of the newer folks are struggling with the challenges.
- District Communications and OPS Board are trying to change it. Omaha citizens are kind of set in their ways.

Keys to Attracting Families and Staff
- The diversity and the dual language program in our schools.
- Class size would be a primary reason for choice. Balance of new and more senior certified staff. Need for experienced staff to handle discipline and still stay on top of curriculum. It’s overwhelming to handle a few kids with behavior issues. District’s hands are tied in handling them in a more aggressive manner because it’s a public institution.
- In a larger district, it gets more bureaucratic.
- With transportation it’s not going to get better.
- One of the reasons parents choose public school was because of the transportation being provided.

Strengths of Communication
- Update on superintendent search was well received. Hope that continues.

Communication Improvements Needed
- Staff directory is not updated.
- TB issue at Benson High. Student that drowned at Nathan Hale. Behavior issues at Nathan Hale. District doesn’t feel like they need to inform staff on big issues. There’s almost 5,000 of us. We are walking around not knowing what is going on with our own employer. They want to be able to talk intelligently on the issues.
- Even if there is a lockdown, a parent will call frantically because they received an alert and we did not.
- It’s too often that my 80-year old mom hears about things before I do. If that happened every once in a while, it would be more understandable but it’s happening a lot.
- It would also help my principal to not have to re-explain things every time.
- “I was embarrassed that I did not know about the tornado. I want to help quell the issues but how can I do that if I don’t even know the basic facts.”
Sometimes a parent will call me about a meeting at TAC and we don’t know anything about it. We simply can’t answer their questions.
We need our information translated into different languages.

**Sources of News and Information**
- Email. Everyone uses it, and they rely on it heavily. For some it’s overwhelming, especially if they work in more than one building.
- Sharepoint.
- Staff meetings.
- Weekly memos from principals.
- Daily announcements.

**Most Credible Sources**
- Email.
- Website.
- SharePoint.

**Best Way to Communicate**
- Email – Quick access.
- Email because I can access it from my phone or office.
- I don’t want a source that I have to go seek, like Sharepoint. Would like to receive texts as well.

**Communication Vehicles**

**Websites**
- Use sometimes and refer parents to it. For the most part, I am able to find what I’m looking for. Staff directory could be easier to access.
- Some of the school webpages are easy to find things on and others are not.
- OPS is trying to standardize them which would be nice.

**OPS News**
- Usually glance at it. Tough to read through the whole thing.
- I look at it and enjoy it. Used to come through the students if you had a student in the district.

**Facebook/Twitter**
- One of my schools uses Facebook. Not all that valuable for me as a parent.
- Twitter could be more effective if more people signed up. I get lots of good information there, superintendent podcasts and other announcements.

**Portals**
- SharePoint – Use it a lot. It’s updated daily and I’m able to find what I need.

**Information is Timely and Accessible**
- “I get most of it on the morning news. At least I’m getting it.”
• Breaking news feeds on my phone.
• What we get from the media is not always accurate – it’s not the full story.
• If it’s relevant to me, then I’ll ask my principal.
• I want to find out so I can give parents the right information.
• For one issue, I got the information from my niece (student), not OPS.
• Individual schools have automated messaging capability, but are they all using it?

**Receive Needed Information On Events, Decisions, etc.**
• Most of the decision-making seems to already have been done behind the scenes.
• Information coming from the Board they make a point of communicating to parents and staff.

**Information Desired (that don’t currently receive)**
• HR – I got a raise that was retroactive for a year and I had no idea. When I started my job, there was no communication about the basics, where is my badge, no handbook for my job. I’m writing my own job description. I don’t know if it’s compliant with policies.
• This problem is not just for new hires. I’ve been here three years now and found the handbook online. It’s there, but some policies and procedures I still don’t have and have trouble finding.

**Expectations for Next Superintendent**
• Transparency would be huge.
• Already have their PhD or doctorate, not in the process of getting one. I prefer it in education but you also need someone with a business background.
• Continue with diversity on the Board.
• The Board is going in the direction of trying to run OPS too much like a business, not nurturing and educating children.
• Appreciated the superintendent and Board staying positive in the face of budget cuts.
• Have to look at the investment in the classroom. We have a lot of people in this district who are not committed to the students. They are committed to their benefits package. It goes back to getting quality folks in our classrooms. We know our children are having psychological and emotional issues and we need people in the classrooms to support them. Everyone is worried about their retirement package. If we get a superintendent with an education background, that would be ideal.
• Think outside the box. The big money stays in the TAC building. Schools don’t have decent pencils but staff at TAC make big salaries.
• Administrators need to spend more time in the classrooms. We used to have so much more help than we do.
• My kids had the opposite experience in OPS. There is a huge disparity among our schools. Some have everything and some have so little.
• Dual language offers so much. Why doesn’t every school have that option?
• I was really starting to like Mr. Evans and am very sorry to see him leave in what I see as an abrupt manner. I’m not saying he wasn’t committed, but the Board doesn’t seem to want to try and work with TAC. I think he came with the intention to stay longer and see the changes through but the Board doesn’t want to work with him.
• Would be nice to hire from within if we have someone out there. They know the community.
Opportunities for Input
  ▪ Definitely not.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input
  ▪ With transportation and human growth, we had the opportunity through our Board rep and surveys, but feel the decision was made regardless.
  ▪ We did not know what the survey results or the focus group results were. The Board already knew how they wanted it to go and just went through this long drawn out process. Hard for me to believe everyone thought this new assignment plan was a good plan.
  ▪ They say they want to appear transparent. Sounds good, that’s for sure.

Greatest Communication Challenge
  ▪ Not thinking outside of the box – limited forward thinking.
  ▪ I honestly don’t know. We’ve put a lot of money into technology, at least here at TAC. They have a lot more resources than they used to. They should be able to think outside the box and access the technology that is available to get the information out. Is there a strategic plan for communication? The new Director of Communication is really sharp. She was forward-thinking with the automated messaging calls around the transportation issues. She made sure families were informed with multiple email blasts and automated messaging calls.
  ▪ When we had the clowns or the TB situation, there was more communication amongst the kids around that situation than with us.
  ▪ I’m very excited about the new Director of Communications, the team she is assembling and their ability to move forward.
  ▪ Does not seem like the Board is in sync with TAC. They don’t try and work together as a team.
  ▪ If folks are not following the policies about contacting the media, there needs to be a charge.
  ▪ Employees should hear about incidents from the district and not the media. I travel from building to building and the story changes wherever you go.
  ▪ You never know if what you are getting from the media is accurate.

Group: Student Representatives
(This group included one student advisor and one current college student who graduated in 2015. Written responses to questions were collected from some student leaders by the Office of Equity and Diversity)

Like Most About Schools
  ▪ The diversity. How we welcome diversity and a genuine effort to help the newcomers. They are not just thrown into a classroom environment. They are acclimated to not only the environment around them, but also the school environment. Each culture has representation that is specific to its culture to make sure we are being inclusive and respectful.
  ▪ I like how OPS always seeks out information as far as achievements, not just the schools’ but the students’ as well. They celebrate the student’s individual achievement and accomplishments.
Best Part of Education Experience

- I felt truly supported by my teachers and administrators and that I was given many opportunities to seek out leadership positions and development on leadership and other skills that shape who I am to help me bring back a positive influence to my community.
- The different opportunities that the district provides for them not only academically, but holistically to help them be the best they can be. There are plenty of resources out there to help them overcome obstacles.

Improvements

- It would be nice if schools would prepare students not headed to college. For some, that may be their path for whatever reason. It’s great there is the push for college, but I know some of my peers would have benefitted from alternative options. For example, entrepreneurs, resources they could learn to be successful without college or university, and professions such as artists. Teachers would tell them to choose something more realistic – even though that is their dream. They should support all, regardless of their choices.
- The district should have more professional development for all staff. Minnesota Humanities should not be voluntary, it should be mandatory for all staff that interact with students. Include more sensitivity training. Staff that has been reported or observed going against district vision as it relates to discipline should be retrained. Students should be put first. That would help relationships a lot.

Wish I Had Known When a Freshman…

- I’m pursuing the teaching profession. I found out there was a program offered at the career center for students who were pursuing teaching but I didn’t find out about it until I was a senior and it was too late. It would have really helped me to strengthen my skills before going to college.
- For transition kids, to be spoken to earlier about how important it is not to be truant, perhaps it would not be such a mountain for them to climb. If the counselors had more time they could give them that guidance and also keep them informed about the options available to them like the career center. Also ease up on requirements to get into career center.

Information Needed as a Student

- If any incidents happened at the building, such as a lockdown or on a larger scale, they may tell us but not tell us why. I want to know. Also school closings during winter.
- The counselors have such a huge workload other than counseling. There are a lot of students who fall through the cracks. They don’t know where they stand grade-wise or have not gotten any guidance. Some may not even know who their counselor is.

Best Way to Communicate

- Text messaging for students today. Announcements over the speaker system. I didn’t have a cell phone until my senior year so most of my news came from my peers or the announcements.
- Agree with announcements. In the transition programs, lots of kids don’t have phones or they get turned off or the numbers get changed. There’s also a lot of mobility, so snail mail can be tough.
Communication Vehicles

Websites

- I used it. Depending on what I wanted, I found it fairly easy to find what I needed. Or I would search within the school website. I used the school website the most. Searching within the site itself worked well. Was organized well. Never really had an issue with finding things. If I did, I could ask a teacher to help me.
- There is a lot of information out there that parents and students didn’t have access to before. The biggest challenge is getting the word out to them to go and use it. You can find out a lot of things.

Facebook/Twitter

- When I was a student I followed my school’s Twitter and Facebook account, not the district account. My high school had a number of different Twitter accounts so you could follow more than one. Would be nice if they handed out a sheet of paper with all of their accounts so I would know what to look for if I wanted to stay informed.
- I’m on both but I don’t get on them that much. They cause too much drama. For the students, if they follow anyone, it’s their school’s pages, not the district pages. Most follow a club or a sport.

Opportunities for Student Input

- I always put myself in a leadership position on student councils and leadership groups with the counselors of my school. I was able to meet with multiple administrators depending on the project we were working on. As a student council member, they were accessible. I don’t know what it would be like if I were not involved in leadership positions. I met regularly with the principal for breakfast meetings as a student council member and brought non-council members each month. We were asked for both input and feedback. Kind of like an advisory board. I definitely felt I was listened to.
- I work with the transition programs. I feel like they are not heard and the district doesn’t even recognize them as part of the district. We are told we are a program, not a building. We don’t get the funding or the resources. It’s not fair. These are also OPS students. They may have obstacles in their way that prevent them from attending a mainstream school. District is doing a wonderful job on getting schools caught up on technology and books. We don’t get any of that. We are overcrowded. We don’t get recognized as being a part of the district by administration. This adds to the stigma of the kids. We have to fight tooth and nail for everything we do.

Leaders Listen and Consider Input

- Yes.

What Community Should Know About Students and OPS Schools

- They need to know about the transition programs. I am a community person, too. When I’m out there they don’t know the names of the programs. Those that do, they have a negative perspective of any of the transition programs. They need to be aware of the lack of respect the district gives those programs and then maybe it will change. People need to know all that we are doing despite the challenges and limited resources.
- I think there is really high support for sports and their activities, but when it comes to academics, the support is there but it’s not as prevalent as it is for sports. There should be more
communication about when and where those things are happening. The students who are not athletically inclined or interested should also feel supported.

- I think this district has a lot experience within their staff, and their input is not being listened to or respected. The more things change, the more they stay the same. A lot of time and energy could be saved if people were listened to more. Even if you just take a portion of what they are talking about. Districtwide, the morale among staff is down, especially those who have been here for longer.

Submitted in writing by Student Leaders (Responses transcribed as submitted)

Like Most About Schools

- We like that Central is very unified, diverse, and opinionated. We feel that we are aware of social issues and what is going on in the world.
- The good things at Bryan – Teachers (security), Academic Program (AG & TDL), and Diversity (mix it up lunch).
- I like the diversity and the community.
- The diversity and community feel.
- One thing I enjoy about my school is how diverse it is.
- It’s easy and short.
- I like the community and diversity. I get stopped by people in town who are alumni when I wear my letter jacket, and they seem really proud of their old high school.
- Our performing arts program as well as our counselors. Sports have been improving.

Wish I Had Known When a Freshman…

- Some of us wish that we would have been exposed to courses like Honors and AP. Some of us wish that we knew how important it was to be involved in sports. Some of us wish we had known the reputation of most of the teachers.
- Different organizations/clubs, take AP classes, every credit counts, cut people off (toxic people) when needed, start on GPA right away.
- Importance of credits and small decisions. Tell the truth. Be inclusive.
- The importance of standardized testing. The importance of joining a lot of clubs and taking a lot of honors classes.
- How much homework you get compared to middle school and how easy freshman year was compared to others.
- Getting ready for ACT/SAT and college prep.
- Homeroom is a must!!!
- To know more about the different programs that prepare you for your future career. Wish we had known a way to have the same enthusiasm as freshman year.
Information Needed as a Student

- Information about ACT and SAT, when colleges are visiting school, graduation requirements, scholarships, economic and financial, earning college credits and information. Do not underestimate us and our intelligence. We are the voters of tomorrow. Just because we are younger does not mean we do not know what we are talking about. Decisions they make affect us just as much as adults.
- College – what it takes to sign up, what you need to do, requirements for college you want to apply for. That you need to apply before senior year.
- Snow days, new implementations, better lessons w/inclusive information (honesty), new activities, resources.
- Getting prepared for college.
- College process and how to sign up for college testing.
- College visits. Recognition for other career path opportunities. School events. Do well in school.

What Community Should Know About Students and Your High School

- Academic programs are working to create jobs. We are smart! Improve our test scores. School isn’t bad, we have accomplishments. Positive towards athletes. Hard workers.
- We need them to know more than sports and know about the students’ achievements, programs people can get involved in for opportunities. Northwest is more than our bad reputation. Activities to better students.
- North High is not “da hood.” Great academic opportunities. Amazing sports programs. Great teachers. The best principal. Our STEP program is great and more than engineering. Out time is not 10 years from now, it’s now.
- We try hard. We are not fools. We’re the future. Not a single student represents the whole student body. We have good school spirit at football. Award-winning CAD program.
- That we’re warm hearted and caring. There’s barely any bullying. Also that South isn’t a bad school full of Hispanics. We have some diversity and wonderful classes. We also aren’t bound to fail simply because of our reputation. We have successful students who have gone to Harvard, Emory and even MIT. We are a chosen generation because our voices will be heard, because we are a lot more than the stereotypes and status quo that has been set on us.

Group: Elementary Principals

Strengths/Points of Pride

- Increase in achievement scores.
- Diversity.
- Variety of offerings, i.e., career tech, that people don’t know about.
- Comprehensive programs and resources.
- Do a great job persevering and rising above day to day.
- Meeting student needs at the school level.
- Educating the whole child in every aspect – food to glasses.
Community partnerships.
Compassionate and dedicated staff.
Before and after school programs.
Intermurals at schools.

**Changed Perceptions**
- As a district, OPS has tried to get more positive stories out than ever before.
- Slowly getting better but has a ways to go.
- District still seems to have a negative image.
- There was an intentional effort to raise OPS’ standing in the community, but not sure it’s been accomplished on a big level.
- The busing issues killed them, as well as the sex ed adoption controversy, Nathan Hale behavior issues, and more controversy than last year.
- More proactive over the past three years, but last year was more reactive.
- Wonder about the intentional effort for proactive external communication; it feels like we have lost the internal communication.
- Went from positive everywhere to just negative news. Headlines are bad, need to work with editors on that.

**Strengths of Communication**
- Overall it seems the district has opened up more under Superintendent Evans, but not sure if it’s because of community support or something else. Lots of old community wounds have resurfaced.

**Morale**
- “With scores up, it should be up, but we are dragging.”
- Need to be able to rally the troops.
- Relationships that were established are now gone.
- No investment in needed people.
- “What is my job? I’m just told what to do.”
- Board is not as supportive.
- Union is against the district. OEA felt betrayed on the extended time issue. They felt they were lied to (two years ago).
- They didn’t have the key messages on the extended time to help frame it for staff. They were just told to watch the Board meeting.
- Had to redo whole schedules as a result of the time change.
- Staff think the principals knew about the change and kept it from them.
- Poor trust. Things get pushed out and when it doesn’t go well, they have to deal with the fallout.
- They were asked for input but it wasn’t heard. Tough to swallow.

**Communication Improvements Needed**
- Departments don’t know what others are doing, so principals are inundated with requests. Hasn’t improved since last time.
With restructuring of departments, everyone has information to share but doesn’t want to take responsibility, so they don’t find out who the new contacts are when people leave. Some departments don’t know what their responsibilities are.

- Bridges need rebuilding; things came at a cost internally.
- Communications office could be a buffer with media.
- To be successful people need to know the history and culture of the district. Need the freedom to share the information as well. “We don’t know what we don’t know.”
- One participant said she used to feel there were people in TAC she could go to with problems, but she doesn’t feel that way anymore. Feels she can’t reach out to anyone other than colleagues.
- Staff can’t reach out in a safe way.
- Some felt that previously staff at TAC dropped everything to help principals. Now the group feels no one cares; the phone isn’t answered, no one responds to their calls.
- They used to be able to call anyone at TAC and get support. It’s not like it used to be.
- Need to build internal relationships.

Sources of News and Information

- If it’s bad, they see it on the news with everyone else most of the time.
- Updates at monthly meetings. Typically reacting to it.
- Because email is public record, they don’t always send it.
- Mixed in terms of timeliness.

Most Credible Sources of Information

- Each other.
- Executive Directors (EDs) could be the point on critical messages.

Best Way to Communicate

- Phone or text.
- When messages are sent to them at 2pm to get out by 3pm, they don’t always see it until it’s too late.
- Every department thinks they have to send everything.

Expectations for Next Superintendent

- Be in direct contact (instead of thru EDs). They want personal access and relationships.
- They want to know that when the chips are down the superintendent has their backs.
- The former superintendent called them the “CEOs” of their buildings. They don’t feel that way now. They want to be empowered as principals. Taking the budget away was a morale killer.
- They want words to match actions. Walk the talk and communicate.
- Don’t need a lot of changes.

Greatest Communication Challenge

- Trust. As employees of the district, it doesn’t feel like things are great. Who gets credit for gains? They don’t feel they get the credit at the building level.
- They work on morale at the building level.
But it’s shaky because teachers are asked to do more than ever before, as are administrators.
They feel they have lost control of budget issues.
OPS is functioning more like a business, allocated by FTE and the size of buildings instead of an equity formula.
Don’t know who to call now when they need something like a meeting on the behavior skills program. Not sure EDs will do anything.

Communication Role is Clearly Defined

Need to be very proactive.
There are so many people who don’t know the history of the district or what schools and special programs are out there. They have no clue about what they are.
It has led to a great disconnect – what they want it to be vs. what it really is.
When you have multiple executive council members and a superintendent with no history or experience in the buildings, they are not connecting.
Don’t know if EDs are filling the intended void.
EDs are supposed to solve major issues or crises for them – make a single call and they handle it from there.
They still feel they don’t know who is in charge.

Group: Secondary Principals

Strengths/Points of Pride

Individual schools.
People here have a mission to help kids; they truly care.
Teaching staff has been incredibly strong through all the chaos. They have kept things rolling.
“We will teach every kid.”
There are other options in Omaha, but staff made a choice to serve here. Says a lot about them. Have to remind them about it. Same for leadership, who could be successful elsewhere.
What sets us apart is that there are more people who care about the welfare of kids on a daily basis. We do more with less than the average district. Students have high needs and staff understand that; others want to be part of it. We develop from within.

Changed Perceptions

In the last years of the former superintendent’s tenure there was discontent; the community looked on OPS as failing and it was tainted by interest in taking over neighboring districts. The Omaha World Herald always took a shot at OPS. Now in general the community thinks the district is doing a good job, scores are up, etc., but internally the shift is the other way – serious trust issues exist (with outsiders coming in). Maybe the district was too “inbred” before. No one knows anyone at TAC anymore. They don’t know who to call when there are issues.
The Saturday “Chalkboard” in the newspaper is now all parochial schools. Technology is great, but they hate the form they have to complete to get story coverage. What really happens is the good stories don’t get to the newspaper.
The Chamber is supportive.
Internally, those who have known each other a long time only trust each other.
They don’t have a problem going through District Communications. They are concerned about the media spin. Monique Farmer has done a great job pulling things back together.
District Communications needs to be more approachable. More challenging now than in the past. It’s a change.

Communication Improvements Needed
OPS is a district where people can just call the media and the media runs with it. It’s pretty scary as an administrator. Would like to know there is an ongoing dialogue with news outlets to come to an understanding.
We have failed to use the experts in the district that have retired. Instead, district is paying consultants to come to fix things.
It’s almost a taboo to talk about small class sizes.
“If you bring people together and give them a say, a lot of this will go away.”

Sources of News and Information
Erin Duffy at *Omaha World Herald*.
Watching Board meetings.
Principals’ monthly meeting. Superintendent shares what’s happening.
Each other and those that they have relationships with.
There are a small number of people they feel they can ask questions, get an answer and gain an understanding.
They are concerned district isn’t being proactive.
They heard about the extended time plan from the news media. They got a call during the summer about adding 35 minutes to the schedule. District didn’t tell anyone prior to doing it and didn’t look at the ramifications (i.e., what to do with staff who only work seven hours, signs on schools, etc.).
Used to have separate elementary and secondary meetings, which included sitting down with the superintendent and assistant superintendent to talk about new ideas.
Never have any meetings all together to hear from the superintendent about the greatest challenges.
They tried to get a meeting on middle school alternatives but superintendent didn’t come prepared.
Morale is good in the buildings and bad about the district. Staff don’t trust the district and the top-down mandates.
They feel they have been handed a bill of goods that turned sour. Have tried to move too fast with the changes handed down.
The 6th grade to middle school shift blew up and hurt morale across the district.
When the student community services department was eliminated, there was no plan to replace those services. The need for that department continues and they don’t know who to call. In the past, staff would be out to help schools on site.
Restructuring is ok, but don’t just abandon something if needs exist.
Expectations for Next Superintendent

- Acknowledge and honor institutional knowledge.
- Keep external audiences happy and reinvigorate the internal. Would like to see the Board trust someone from the inside to take over.

Group: Directors/Managers/Supervisors

Strengths/Points of Pride

- Diversity.
- Offer opportunities unique to OPS students.
- Unique programs and schools. Lots of choice.
- Preparing kids for life and for the world. Making academic gains each year.
- OPS supports students with special needs. OPS has a higher ELL population so it provides rich programming.
- OPS has great programs.
- Clean facilities. Out-of-towners are amazed at how nice the schools are. Great career opportunities at OPS; they get many applicants for jobs posted.
- Facilities are old but well-kept and have a lot of character.
- People mow their yards when OPS does. District is a lighthouse in Omaha’s high poverty communities because they follow the district’s lead for what to do.
- Innovative. District does its homework and research on programming. Takes risks and pilots programs that others follow.
- The driven nature of the work they do.
- With all of the opportunities on the table, “We still have heart.”

Changed Perceptions

- Yes; OPS has implemented big initiatives that the public is aware of, i.e., extended instructional time, science planning, etc. People struggle with change, so sometimes it has been difficult to adjust. The short timeline related to the extended instructional time prompted concern.
- Perceptions have changed, especially more recently for families as NCLB often placed unrealistic expectations on urban systems. When OPS’ efforts were seen through the NCLB lens it was not illustrative of reality in the district.
- Public schools in general have been used as political fodder. Anything negative, especially related to those in poverty, African American or ELL kids, the issues are magnified by those looking to gain from it, i.e., the media. It also impacts staff who are working hard day to day and see the great things happening in schools. There’s not as much media interest in the good things taking place.
- The media is looking to find the cracks in what the district is doing. Some staff have been very vocal about their displeasure with the extended instruction time or new discipline policies and the media picks up on that instead of the improvements happening as a result.
- Even with all of that, taxpayers voted for a major bond.
- District Communications has been proactive in trying to influence stories in the media. In general, the narrative has changed more for the positive. The bond program was great, but then there was
the bus issue at the start of the year. Coverage goes up and down, and they are trying to make it more balanced.

- Ten years ago no one came to Board meetings. Now there is high attendance at meetings and people are viewing them online. The district has met its transparency goal.
- Increased attendance/viewing is not necessarily positive. It’s more about the drama and entertainment factor. Need to capture this new audience and turn it around to something positive.

**Communication Improvements Needed**

- OPS doesn’t utilize its own staff to get the positive message out. They learn about things from TV or the newspaper, not from the district.
- If their supervisors are aware and if they get information in a timely fashion, they will share.
- They didn’t hear until late about the extension to the school day, and teachers heard about it even later.
- It’s a two way problem – getting information and then giving information.
- One participant said, “As someone responsible for communicating, it’s difficult to find the best medium to use.” It takes five or six steps to ensure those he supervises get information. They also don’t always know where information is posted. Tools keep changing.
- At a higher level, communication is occurring on the margins at work, or they don’t have time to get to it. If tools are constantly changing, timing is limited.
- They can be a pathway to move information, then the Board changes direction, which creates rumors. Lots of uncertainties in the district right now; don’t trust the communication.
- When Board members withhold comments in meetings because they “want to make them in public,” it looks bad for the district.
- At one time the procedure was that only the president spoke for the Board, but that has changed.
- With restructuring, there are some gaps and now there’s a question about who owns what process; it’s fragmented.

**Sources of News and Information**

- Word of mouth.
- *Omaha World Herald.*
- Channel 7.
- Lots of sources – Sharepoint, social media, email.
- Hit and miss with supervisors. One said she often gets information from parents. There hasn’t been a clear chain of command for communication. Department meetings are not always timely.
- “There are so many ways to get information it’s overwhelming.”
- Board reports.
- They’ve never had the access they do now to Board documents, which is positive.
- Most communication comes in Outlook via Sharepoint.
- No consistent mode of communication. Because there are so many ways to find information, there needs to be a central point.
Communication Vehicles

Website
- Very cluttered.
- Have to call for help to navigate it.

OPS News
- No one knew much about it.
- “Probably in the email clutter.”

Facebook/Twitter
- Sometimes use.
- Twitter used most often.

Information is Timely and Accessible
- “Not so much.”
- They hear rumors about things that are happening, i.e., a curriculum day.
- Used to have more committees that spread responsibilities around.
- More is held at TAC now, not as inclusive as it once was.
- Have made cuts at TAC and the new people there don’t know the history. Not sure who now has what duties in departments that cut staff.
- Have lost lots of people, so some haven’t done certain tasks before.
- “Before you get used to new responsibilities, you are trying to catch up and there’s no time to learn your new role.”
- When the ball drops, it goes into a blame game. Somebody has to do the job.
- Lots of things are missing now.
- OPS has made an effort to be responsive to the community, but some may have forgotten that.
- Can’t let tail wag the dog. TAC has been cut to the bone.
- New administration wants change but first needs to ask, “Can it be done?” Need the infrastructure first. Don’t hear about changes until after Board meetings. The system can’t go backwards.
- Everything is piled on at once from four years ago. Need a vision moving forward.
- OPS is dealing with public disinvestment, which exacerbates issues.
- Planned obsolescence going on; heard it was supposed to be implemented in October, but have heard it will now be February. No one really knows what is going on, i.e., expecting teachers to know how to use the technology for curriculum. Need more proactive communication on new instructional tools.

Expectations for Next Superintendent
- Be inclusive; don’t create silos.
- Mr. Evans has tried to change the negative image.
- They want a vision to get behind (not just pass it through the departments).
• Next superintendent needs to mend internal fences and establish clear expectations for them and how to send information down to departments. Need clarity on that. Power politics and protectionism currently dominate.
• Board needs to realize the talented staff here. It’s mostly punitive rhetoric. Issues weren’t aired in public in the past.
• Board members are videoing classroom management issues on cell phones and making it public.
• Someone will need to clean up social media.
• Blame the *Omaha World Herald* for the impression the community has of the current Board.

**Opportunities for Input**
• People who will be impacted by decisions should be at the table, then they can be prepared to share.
• If decisions are being made about a department, have someone from the department there to be part of it. They find things out after the fact and then have to implement the decision.
• As a result, they are not seen as being on their game with communication.

**Key Messages Clearly Communicated**
• Sporadically.
• Not in the most timely manner.
• Only for the bond. They did a good job with that.

**Communication Role is Clearly Defined**
• Don’t have many expectations.

**Group: Superintendent’s Cabinet**

**Strengths/Points of Pride**
• Increased student achievement; progress in lowest performing schools.
• Engaged community that passed largest bond ever.
• Very diverse community and very inclusive. Very proud of that.
• Supportive community – dollars and private donations, Chamber, University.
• Have been very progressive the last four years with growth in technology and restructuring.
• Staff take pride in working for OPS.
• Passionate about making improvement; getting better every day.
• People stay a long time and return if they leave.
• Have high expectations of themselves and of others.
• When you look at the most vulnerable and neediest students, OPS offers phenomenal wrap-around services.
• Revitalization project of a neighborhood. Partnership with 75 North in communities and schools.

**Changed Perceptions**
• Has changed for the positive. Patrons believe in public education because of changes made. One participant reported there is a sense of change in his neighborhood.
Clear evidence in the bond passing 2-1. Those who supported it didn’t have kids in the system.

There are still pockets in the community that are distrustful.

There is some optimism in the openness and responsiveness to the community. People know that there is a place they can call and be heard. People know there is movement and want to know the impact. OPS is now seen as a district on the move.

Tracking new employee applicants, they apply to OPS because of its reputation.

### Keys to Attracting Families and Staff

- Accurate depiction of the district. We are big advocates for telling the truth about what is going on to attract support, even with challenges and shortcomings.
- Look at different target audiences – talk about benefits and technology. For new families, it’s how the principal greets them.
- In certain parts of the city people don’t even want to go for an interview.
- HR holds trainings monthly, one on marketing your building. Candidates are interviewing principals as well because of teacher shortages. They won’t go to a school if they aren’t comfortable with it.

### Strengths of Communication

- Under Director of Communication Monique Farmer, we are telling our story and spotlighting the work in schools.
- Increasing OPS’ presence in social media.
- More consistent messaging.
- Have brought new branding.
- Has brought a vision and plan. She’s thoughtful and proactive.
- Looking at how some crises were handled, she has coordinated communication with key stakeholders, which allows others to do their job. She has done an impeccable job.
- We have just begun to recognize the need to communicate in multiple forms. Relied too much in the past on a single email, etc.
- Now tailoring our communication approach to the audience and medium.

### Sources of News and Information

- They read District Communication’s daily report and the Board report. Hardly use the website.
- A lot of information on upcoming initiatives comes out of executive council every Friday.
- Information is then shared depending on what it is and who it’s relevant to.
- Some said they share within their own departments. But they are concerned that it’s left up to them with no direction.

### Best Way to Communicate

- Depends on the content of the message. Also depends on the audience.
- Email, texts are good.
- There is an issue with emails being public documents, so confidentiality is a concern.

### Expectations for Next Superintendent

- Appreciate that Mr. Evans is a very amicable, positive person. We need a people person.
Personal contacts they make; being accessible and timely.

The superintendent has a relationship with all of them. He’s honest and knows who he is.

Need to make sure we also need to be aware of how we communicate with the new superintendent on what he/she needs to know. They want feedback from the new superintendent on how much information is wanted from them.

**Greatest Communication Challenge**

- Student assignment plan between now and August.
- Upcoming bond.
- Superintendent search and integration of that person into the district.
- Important that everyone is well rounded – not just focused on one thing.
- Continuing to recognize the multiple audiences – not just parents but potential employees. Using social media to increase impact.

**Communication Role is Clearly Defined**

- Better at outlining the role with principals than with other staff. Don’t consistently craft messages as a team.
- Don’t do a great job with the “deskless” worker.
- Some information doesn’t push down because it’s considered “need to know.” The question is who determines what is “need to know”?
- The larger the department, the more ambiguous it is. Sometimes they aren’t aware of something until after the fact.
- This prevents a coordinated effort and causes starts and stops.
- Unless it’s an HR issue, information should be transparent.
- If they are aware, they can adapt and not be redundant.
- They want all resources to be shared and it’s helpful to know when they are being pulled out for other things.
- Not coordinated in all the mediums that reach everyone.
- Expectation is that communication comes from the relevant department, but this could become ineffective with the overload.

*Board Digest* is a good way to consolidate a variety of topics.

- Monthly meeting to talk about high impact professional development has information that needs to be shared. There are still some departments that feel their work doesn’t impact everyone else. But it’s still good to know to provide additional support. It’s evolving, not where it needs to be yet.
- Have worked hard to be more consistent with principals, but not with the rest of staff.
- Mediums of communication are disparate. We are lacking an integrated system.
- Important to understand the training cycles for principals.

**Morale**

- Staff are anxious about not knowing what will happen with the next superintendent.
- OPS is a high poverty district, expectations are high and they feel it.
- In some cases there is a divide between school and TAC or between the union and district. Student assignment issue – “It’s OPS’ plan, not ours” needs to be “us and we” and not “us and them.”

- New staff orientation starts with the mission and vision. Trying to change the dynamic that employees work for OPS, not an individual building.

- Too much of communication is going one way through the principal. Need to communicate the broader vision.

- In the past, schools were branded separately as little islands. We don’t brand as one team.

- Secondary schools are competitive.

- Customer service is an issue.

- There is a clear disconnect from “I am OPS” when there is a crisis. They all need to have ownership and roll up sleeves to work together to solve things.

- Some discomfort is introduced by change. It comes with evidence of making progress as a district that there are differing opinions on moving forward.

**Group: Board of Education**
(Note: the auditors met with Board members in three separate groups. Their comments are combined here.)

**Current Image of District/Changed Perceptions**

- The bond is a testament to changes; it showed that there is real support. Support is better now than four years ago.

- Things have improved; there is an opportunity to get the district’s story out through the newspaper. The Superintendent and Board President have access to the newspaper editorial board. From a business leader standpoint there is good support for OPS. Chamber asks how they can help. From a legislative standpoint, OPS is doing a better job now communicating its stance on issues. There is a committee and members testify before the Legislature. The effort has to be from the Board, administration and district to get support from the community.

- OPS has tried to communicate in more and different ways, though not sure it has resulted in much change for parents and community members. For community leaders and the media, there has been some positive change.

- Media and general public perception has changed/is changing. We are doing a better job of communicating. With teachers and parents, there has been some change but not as much as with other groups.

- More people are able to tell you positive things that are happening.

- Getting a more positive reception to OPS than we did four years ago. Used to get, “Don’t send your kids there. It’s horrible.” Now you hear that some programs and schools are good, but overall it is still lacking.

- Communication with the community has improved, but it’s nowhere near where it needs to be. Now have a Director of Communications that is working externally and internally.

- Generally pretty positive, but there are some issues and negative things, i.e., buses and where the high schools are being built were hot button issues.
• It ebbs and flows. For example, busing took over the media at the start of the year. Some has to do with the media and some with changes in the district and how well we are framing issues for parents.
• Have taken steps now to have principals send out a call to reduce the rumor mill. Looking to try to open up more avenues of communication. Sometimes it’s not containable. Have to get better at doing more to provide accurate information and communicate with parents.
• A lot of OPS’ image is being dictated by news stories that are communication issues. Getting out in front of the story and explaining things is Job #1.
• Need consistent proactive communication; it’s more reactionary now.
• Need to charge the next superintendent with building a plan on expectations of being proactive.
• Director of Communications needs to be empowered to speak out at high level meetings.
• We have to be the source and tell our story.

Points of Pride
• We educate everyone who shows up. Have never heard anyone complain about it. OPS educates more special ed kids than everyone else.
• Everyone is welcome.
• If a student drops out there are programs to welcome them back.
• We take the most vulnerable, and their families, and educate them.
• We are holding our students to a higher standard. For example, our standards are higher than the state standards for extra-curricular activities while providing more support for them to meet that standard. Our achievement gap is closing faster than other urban school districts.
• The Board is very progressive, even though we don’t agree with everything. More so than school districts where everyone is united. We truly are a closed meeting held in public. Any other OPS Board has not accomplished what we’ve accomplished in this short a period of time. We are so far ahead of any other board.
• Great staff. Trying to address the schools that aren’t as good. Teachers go the extra mile, that’s a selling point. Have solid academics and achievement in OPS.
• Super proud of highest achievement scores in history, the strategic plan and the bond. Excited to see the first year of achievement data. “I’m happy to be a parent in the district.”
• In some schools that have less active parents, there is a push to bring more parents in to the school and encourage their participation. There are lots of situations with young parents learning to be parents (Head Start) and how to balance everything. OPS is providing them resources to help. A great asset is staff willing to go the extra mile.
• Inclusion and diversity is huge. Now have more staff reflective of the student population. District is more intentional about it.
• Have staff with more diverse connections and have looked more externally to recruit.
• There is a sense of community at individual schools, even if they aren’t performing as well. Parents look to the school as the lynchpin in the community.

Trust in Leaders to Provide Quality Education
• There’s been some improvement. Still have a long way to go. Some stumbles in how they’ve managed things, or they weren’t prepared. Community is seeing that lots of good things are being done. Has gone a long way toward building trust.
Implemented Open Book for financial transparency has helped. Going out and asking folks in forums about what to do shows we are genuinely listening. Have made meetings very transparent, use livestreaming, post agendas ahead of time. Still have a long ways to go, constituents don’t always trust the district. Need to communicate with them why they can’t always get what they want.

It will take a continued concentrated effort because of residual things that happened before current members were on the Board.

Probably depends on who you ask. I know who would automatically say yes and some that would say no.

I would say you would get more from the external stakeholders. Our former superintendent wouldn’t talk with them. They are thrilled that the current superintendent listens. It has continuously been a struggle for the entire district to try and fix a program. Most of that is tied to the budget. It’s two step forward then three steps back. We are making improvements, but probably but not as fast as people want it.

As a district we are disaggregating data to determine the areas that we need to focus on. Raising expectations for students. Human growth and development and the new grading scale are examples. The district is now more open to the things they need to improve upon. In the past, the Board has never requested anything. This is not a rubber-stamp board.

**Strengths of Communication**

- We are doing a better job as a Board in communicating. People feel valued. Have a high viewer audience. Doing a lot well, but capacity is a hindrance to the ability to communicate well.
- At the building level, principals are doing a better job. Some parents have trust in the principals.
- Using a broad number of ways to communicate.
- Social media.
- If you want to know something, there’s no reason for you not to know it.
- School issues, with changes from backpack messages, to ensuring split families get in, to using robocalls. Almost everyone now has a mobile phone, and one’s school sends it to them that way, so there is no communication problem.

**Improvements needed**

- We struggle as a district to make every point that we need to make so that parents can make informed decisions about sending their children here. For example, our year round school…people have no idea that it exists and is open to all students.
- #1 problem is the website. So deficient it’s hard to communicate well through it.
- One Board member (new to the Board) felt OPS is terrible at communicating. He can’t find his school’s PTO meeting dates. Don’t see the vast majority of parents looking to pour through the OPS website.
- Our website is awful. Parts of it are good. The district and school websites are horrible. Either they don’t know how to update it or they are just not doing it.
- We do not have a framework in place for Board members to communicate with their areas. If I want to send something out to my constituents, I have to do it all on my own; organize the lists, print the materials myself and pay for it.
- The district separates itself from that concept. If I’m a Board member and I want to do something, I can’t go to the district and ask for help with it. I have to craft my own policy and then come to
the Board. There is no avenue if you want to come up with a policy. There is no protocol or
timeline for how it gets put through.
- We do have the policy committee but you often get put on hold because they have other things on
their plate.
- Sometimes it’s awkward for a Board member when they are presenting something and there is
silence. If the district isn’t in favor of it, they are not going to touch it.
- We have struggled communicating as a Board in a timely fashion.

**Becoming More Proactive**
- Have lacked proactivity when we implement something new.
- Still need to keep the engaged vocal minority parents. Also need to engage other parents by
providing information on the go via mobile technology. Individual schools are all different, and
need to get them on board.
- Anytime you have a large organization, communication will be inconsistent.
- Social media is still new and people are leary of it. Should be a mandate to have a minimum
number of posts going out. Sometimes find out about news stories from parents via social media,
texts, etc. We can’t rely on the website; have to go with what is trending in education. Families
are sharing news with each other.
- There’s a dearth of information going out. When kids showed up to a school with no power, a day
went by before anything was said. Never saw any communication about it.
- The EDs are supposed to share best practices among buildings. It can be seamless or easy if they
know about it. Sharing would help internal communication.
- Putting a tech person in schools doesn’t require a genius.
- Also need to translate messages.
- Maybe the Board needs to set the standards for what needs to be communicated quickly with a
phone call and then followed up with an email. Unfortunately, not everyone is getting the email.
- Media policy: Staff are supposed to go through District Communications. Board is supposed to be
channeled through the President. If you do speak directly with the media, you are supposed to
make it clear that you are not speaking on behalf of the Board. If there is an issue going on, there
is no place for the Board to address it with the district so it goes to executive session and the
response is silence.
- I feel like the district doesn’t completely trust all of the Board members or the Board in general.
We are always an afterthought. I don’t think it’s intentional. They are just not used to having a
Board that is involved as we have been.

**Keys to Attracting Families and Staff**
- Making sure we have high quality effective teachers in every classroom regardless of school or
location.
- Being competitive. Students coming here are looking at everything – the teachers, the buildings,
the athletics, the coaches.
- People at this point expect us to be more rounded beyond the core subjects. No matter where you
go, you are going to have expanded program offerings.
- People in the western part of town automatically opt their kid out because they are looking at
what high school their kid will have to go to.
Most Effective Communication Vehicles

- Email. Parents appreciate it. They also appreciate the surveys and forums.
- Going to where the community in general is (not just parents), i.e., going to neighborhood meetings to communicate about the bond.
- Having a consistent plan for communication. Having a message.
- As a parent, I want to know what is going on with my son’s school. Never had a problem with that. It’s the vocal minority who think OPS needs a perfect website.
- Regarding how notifications are sent to the Board, I prefer an email or a text message. I can’t answer the phone during the day. But I can glance at my phone.
- Social media.
- For younger parents, mobile is the focus.

Communication Skills Desired in Next Superintendent

- Someone who understands an urban district and uses appropriate language for an urban district. Mr. Evans has had a calming effect in how he communicates.
- Someone not distant and standoffish. Continue relationship development piece and gain confidence of the community.
- Someone approachable from everyone’s perspective.
- I think we need a superintendent that can communicate with everyone, not just one side or one group. And also willing to listen.
- They need to be tech savvy with communication. A lot of people like Mark’s podcasts. To see them tweeting things about the district and being able to participate in that side of things as well.
- Effective communicator, someone that isn’t afraid to communicate whatever it is. Expectation is to communicate with the Board and with staff and community.
- Need to own shortcomings and problems and get out there with them. Need to continue on that path. Admit it’s not perfect but we’re working on it.
- Fearless.
- Do what’s right for kids.
- If communication is done well, the Board won’t feel they need to share the stories. Need to be able to take the good and the bad.

Communication Challenges

- We have a lot of variation between schools. Some are getting a lot of information out there with newsletters and social media and others are doing one posting on Facebook a month and that is it.
- I asked to be put on the communications distribution list of all of the schools in my region (each have about 20 schools). I only get stuff from three. One sends out things daily, very clear, and another sends very little and very vague.
- Still no protocols for whom to contact for various situations with your students. Who do they call, what are the steps for things like the bus not showing, their child being disciplined, etc. There should be one central number for people to call who can funnel them through. Happens at the schools and the district office, too.
- We had a student that drowned a few years ago. That was the hardest thing we’ve ever done and I don’t think we’ve still figured out the right way. Need a crisis communications plan.
- The district office should be more receptive and supportive of the communications director.
- Busing situation – missed the window of opportunity to get the message out. Could have eliminated two weeks of problems. OPS needed to take ownership of it.
- District has been in the media time after time the past year on communication and accountability.
Appendix

- SCoPE Survey Results Review
- Focus Group Discussion Questions
- What Is NSPRA?
- Consultants’ Vitae
SCoPE Survey Results Review

One component of this communication audit was conducting a series of SCoPE (School Communication Performance Evaluation) Surveys with OPS Faculty/Staff, Parents and Community.

This district received the complete summaries of results in an earlier report. These findings were incorporated into the Communication Audit Report recommendations as part of our quantitative analysis of the current communication effort.

The SCoPE Survey Results Review can be accessed at https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/docs/scope_results_review_-_ops_2017.pdf.
Focus Group Discussion Questions

Focus Group Questions for Public and Staff

1. What do you like best about Omaha Public Schools?  
   *(For staff)* When you think about Omaha Public Schools, what are you most proud of?

2. Do you think the district’s image in the community has changed over the past few years?  
   - Do you believe the public’s trust in district leaders to provide a quality educational program has improved?

3. What programs and characteristics of OPS do you consider key to attracting and retaining families and staff?

4. When it comes to how OPS communicates with you, what does it do well?  
   - In what ways does communication need to improve?

5. What is your best source of news and information about OPS?

6. What communication vehicles are most accessible/effective for you?

7. Is important information delivered in a timely manner?

8. What information would you like to receive that you don’t get now?

9. 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?

10. Do you feel that the district provides adequate opportunities for you 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?

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

Additional Questions for Principals and Administrators

- Are key messages clearly communicated so that you feel comfortable in sharing information with your staff and parents?

- Is your communication role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities in a crisis or as they pertain to sharing information with the public?
Focus Group Discussion Questions for OPS Board of Education Members

1. Do you think the district’s image in the community has changed over the past few years?

2. What are you most proud of as a Board member of OPS?
   - What programs and characteristics of OPS do you consider key to attracting and retaining families and staff?
   - What do you believe is most in need of improvement?

3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does OPS do well?
   - How can the district be more proactive with communication?

4. Which of the district’s current communication vehicles are most effective in delivering OPS’ message?

5. What communication skills are you looking for in your search for a new superintendent?

6. What other communication challenges do you see OPS facing in the future?
What is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity 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 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and educational 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/communication 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 4-day conference offers more than 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 resources 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.
 Consultants’ Vitae

Karen H. Kleinz, APR

Karen Kleinz, APR, associate 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 is 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 also 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.

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.

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.

She is the co-author of NSPRA’s professional development CD, Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for tapping the people power in your schools.
Sandy Cokeley, APR

Over the course of her career, Sandy Cokeley, APR, has amassed a unique blend of connected experience in public relations, marketing, and continuous improvement.

After initial experiences in public relations and marketing in the public and private sectors, she assumed the communications specialist post for the Pearl River School District in a NYC suburban community. Her role soon expanded to the administrative level as Director of Quality and Community Relations working closely with the senior leadership team in both communications and adoption of the continuous improvement management model. Pearl River moved from average-performing to one of the top districts in New York State and was named one of the first Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipients in education in 2001, the application for which Sandy authored. She retired from Pearl River in 2012.

She now consults with school districts and organizations in community relations and continuous improvement, as well as serves as CEO of SCoPE School Surveys, a program she founded to support data-informed school communications. She recently led a national benchmarking project in school communications, producing the National School Public Relations Association’s (NSPRA) Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures. In 2006, she led a national team of educators for Queen Rania’s Court in Jordan in developing criteria for a national teacher award. She serves frequently as a keynote speaker and workshop presenter.

Sandy holds a B.A. from Dominican College and is Accredited in Public Relations (APR). She is past president of NSPRA and has served as an eleven-time Baldrige examiner/senior/alumni examiner. She is co-author of Malcolm and Me: How to Use the Baldrige Process to Improve Your School, published by Scarecrow Education, and authored the opening chapter in the second edition of NSPRA’s book, School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education.