

Communication Audit

**Conducted by the National School Public Relations Association
for the Boulder Valley School District
Boulder, Colorado**

January 2004

National School Public Relations Association

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NSPRA Communication Audit Report 6

Boulder Valley School District

Introduction

Superintendent George F. Garcia and the members of the Board of Education are committed to improving communication within the Boulder Valley School District and with residents. This audit was contracted for, approved, and supported by the Board and superintendent as part of a commitment to improve communication both within and outside the organization. It clearly demonstrates their willingness to risk change to improve educational opportunities for Boulder Valley School District students.

The challenges of building and maintaining public and community engagement, dealing with fluctuating enrollments and inadequate funding, and communicating effectively with all segments of the community affect not only the school district but the community as well.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of school employees and community representatives, it was obvious to the consultants that there is a solid base of support for and pride in the school district.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these, to propose recommendations that could ensure improved management of public relations, greater parent and community involvement, and enhanced two-way communication between the internal and external publics of the Boulder Valley School District.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district's Office of Communications or any other unit, they are intended to improve communication in a school district that is poised and committed to facing the challenges of education in the 21st century.

Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association enables a school district or agency to view its communications from an "outside" perspective. The audit is performed by seasoned communications professionals who have many years of experience in educational public relations/communications.

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the district sends the consultants samples of its communications policies, newsletters, booklets, news clippings, demographic data, etc. These are carefully examined from a reader's perspective, to see what they are communicating and whether that communication is as good as it could be.

A major segment of the audit occurs when the consultants conduct on-site focus group sessions to hear from many segments of the district's internal and external audiences. In our audit of the Boulder Valley School District, the consultants met with 139 people in 17 groups and conducted individual interviews with board members and other district officials.

The consultants for this communication audit were Richard D. Bagin, APR, Executive Director of the National School Public Relations Association (Maryland) and Dr. Marsha Chappelow, Assistant Superintendent for the Blue Valley Schools (Kansas). Richard Bagin, APR, has 30

years of school and corporate public relations and marketing experience and Dr. Chappelow has more than 20 years of experience at all levels of school administration.

Findings in this report reflect our review of many district documents and the perceptions of participants who met with the consultants in focus groups on October 1 and 2, 2003. These perceptions were based on answers to a series of questions the consultants posed to each group.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of the Boulder Valley School District provides an important foundation for developing a comprehensive communication plan for the district. The audit informs district

leaders about community attitudes and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the communication program. The audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. Developing any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Guiding Definition

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has worked with school districts, state and national education organizations and agencies to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, information and communication practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

Assumptions

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

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

Parameters of the Audit

It is difficult to measure public relations. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program, however, including a public relations/communication program, is to determine whether it is helping the organization work toward its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the consultants reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of the district's vision, mission, beliefs and goals.

Copies to participants

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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 communications 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 each focus group participant receive a copy of this report for review and feedback.

Observations

The following observations are drawn from the most common responses we heard in our focus groups and from our interviews with staff members and our review of your materials. This audit

report captures these responses to assist the Board and district leaders in developing strategic plans for the district and its communication effort.

This report also gives additional recommendations for your consideration.

You Are Known for Well-respected Results and Choices for Students

Most focus group participants spoke highly about the academic results and quality of teaching in your schools. They pointed with pride to your students' accomplishments and all indications from test scores, awards and other third-party endorsements demonstrate that your level of accomplishment is quite high in Colorado as well as throughout our nation.

Most participants also indicated that they were pleased to have choices for their children and even non-parents seem to enjoy the options you offer students. Some indicated that they wished that their own neighborhood school could be their school of choice, but they felt that facility and programmatic inequities forced them to look outside of their neighborhood.

More than a few respondents saw the choice program as a segregation-enhancing practice. “Many people choose their school because the children there look like their children,” some said.

Staff Dedication Is High

Nearly all participants indicated that they were pleased with the dedication and professionalism of your teaching staff. They felt that teachers were of the highest quality and that they should continue to be recognized as best as possible for their contributions to your district. Most participants felt that teachers were underpaid and should be given more consideration when money becomes available to do so. They also indicated and feared that teachers may be leaving because of the uncertainty of the future budgets and higher pay from other districts.

It is also important to note that residents and parents feel that teachers are often the best and most credible communicators for your school district.

Community Support for Education Is High

Support for education in your system is higher than many communities throughout the United States. The results of your customer satisfaction surveys, plus responses we received from all types of participants in our focus groups, indicate that your community wants to make education a priority in your school system. People want to be involved and want their involvement to mean something for the school district.

Many noted that they now choose to spend their time with local schools where their involvement can make a difference. They feel that their time in working with the Board and central office is not meaningful and lacks authenticity. Some indicated that their views were ignored and no closure was ever brought to their involvement. They feel they make recommendations and nothing happens and no rationale is given to the “whys” behind the final decisions. This situation also existed for the District Parent Council as very little action is taken as a result of these meetings.

Our observation is that you are not doing a very good job of keeping some of your most loyal and active customers as part of your school support team. Most of these participants and groups really form the foundation of your support in their respective school communities. If you begin losing them, you begin chipping away at the overall support you have built over time with these engaged leaders.

Community Suggestions Viewed as Solutions

You are fortunate to have a strong base of an educated and successful citizenry. In such communities, school leaders often receive recommendations that are viewed as ultimate solutions. Working with such an involved community can be seen as a challenge as such advocacy groups are often very demanding and need to be facilitated so they can see all sides of an issue.

They also need to understand the total ramifications of their solutions and be willing to take responsibility for them.

Related to this observation is that a number of focus groups stated that no one can accurately figure out when “a *No* answer actually means *No*.” The perception is that a decision made at one level can be overturned at another level if you can effectively lobby for the change. Such overturning of decisions or policy creates a dip in staff morale and feeds the notion that no decision is final “until we can get our way.”

Equity Issues Abound

The Boulder Valley School District serves all students and has initiated programs to better reach all children and community leaders. This continues to be an ongoing process and some participants felt that inequities surface because of “where they live” in your school district. Our observation along with feedback from participants indicated that you are making positive efforts in this important area.

Communication Infrastructure Is All in Place

In reviewing your communication effort and vehicles, we are pleased to say that you have most of the communication infrastructure in place to be very successful. Staff members in communication know what they are doing and all indications are that they also know the next steps to take to improve the communication results for your system. As your staff

becomes more entrenched in your “communities,” they will be of even further value to your program.

Communities in Transition Becomes a Key Issue for Communication

You know that the demographic background of your community is changing. Items like growth in some areas contrast with decline in others. New residents add enthusiasm in some areas while school closures create animosity with some groups. Such changes all add up to some new moving targets for your communication efforts.

Tight Budgets Create Heightened Sensitivities to Programs and People

Tight budgets and budget cutting is normally a difficult leadership challenge. The process often creates “sides” on issues, “finger pointing” on the value of programs and people, and unhappiness among all those who may see themselves as “cuttable” from the next budget.

When school districts find themselves in the midst of these vulnerable times, communication becomes even more important as relationships with key people and groups need to be kept moving in a positive direction. We heard through our focus groups that the statement, “teachers are replaceable,” became an emotional trigger for the teachers and their support for the system.

Whether it was said or not, the perception is that the central office and perhaps the Board feel that teachers are replaceable. Creating anger with a majority of employees who are

viewed as one of the best assets of your excellent school system is not a positive step in building support for your schools. Our recommendations will address this issue.

Rebuilding and Maintaining Trust Is Your Key Communication Issue

The clearest mandate we heard in our focus groups was to begin rebuilding trust among your community and staff. Some community leaders and advocates felt that your public participation and engagement activities were not authentic and thus a waste of time.

They felt their recommendations were not listened to and that no rationale was given as to why their recommendations were not followed or even modified. They gave the impression that such “involvement” was perfunctory at best, so that the district’s leadership could say that they did involve the community in their decisions.

This lack of feedback or “closing the loop” is causing a major credibility and trust gap for the district for those leaders who are involved at many different levels and communities in your school. It needs to be the highest priority in implementing the recommendations in this report. You could have the grandest communication vehicles of any school district in our nation, but if people do not believe what they read or hear, the effort will be a waste of time and money.

Your School Community Is Looking for Heightened Visibility and Involvement of School Leaders

Another request from many participants was to see, meet, and hear from your superintendent and other key school district leaders. They want more than “paper” reports on progress and what the vision for the next few years will be. They want to see and hear the leaders and want to see more visible leadership for the district.

School District Decision-making Process Is Unclear

Both internal and external groups commented that they are not clear how decisions are made in the school district. In organizational communication, it is always important to make sure of the channels of decision making so communication can assist that process. In focus groups, we heard on three occasions from internal groups that frequently, “the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.” We also heard from external groups that they are not sure where to go when they have questions on issues.

Your Communication Starts Proactive, But Seems to Turn Reactive

Over the past few years, you have proactively started a number of engagement activities that fall into the proactive arena. In this sense, you are again a frontrunner among many school districts in Colorado.

But our observation is that during the proactive process, some changes are made in the process, a communication void is created, and you find yourself reacting to comments or allegations from others who have chosen their own way to explain the void you created. One maxim in the communications arena is that if you create a communication void, your critics will surely fill it.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this report are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather, should be seen as a road map for enhancing communication overall with special emphasis on key issues that

impact Boulder Valley School District. We advise the Board and the administration to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations can be implemented immediately and which should be included in long-range plans.

Develop Trust

The greatest and foremost challenge we see for the leadership of the Boulder Valley School District is to begin developing trust and credibility among the leadership of the District, your staff members, and the community residents recently involved on various task forces and committees. There is a great deal of healing that has to begin after the budget reductions, negotiations, and the closing of schools.

As we noted in our observations, a great deal of support exists for your school programs and your students score among the best in your state. But we noticed a pocket of disenchantment that will continue to grow unless steps are taken to correct it. It is better to focus on this problem now before the disenchanted build even more momentum that will surely influence the future of your fine school district.

Difficult decisions often cause pockets of resentment in all organizations. But when transparent decision-making is coupled with effective communication, the level of distrust is greatly subsided. And in your current climate that we observed in our focus groups, you will need to begin regaining the trust level of your key internal and external groups — one decision at a time.

Of course, you may find a few in your community who may never believe what you publish or say. But they will eventually be in the minority as long as you practice transparent leadership and effective communications.

It will be difficult for the communications program to be successful until a level of trust is achieved so that a majority of staff and residents once again believe what they hear and read from the district.

The process will take months of observation and perhaps involvement by various key audiences to see that your transparent and visible style of leadership is once again something they can believe in. It is essential that the district keep in mind four guiding principles as it works to develop greater trust:

- τ Ask people for their opinions only if you plan to consider them. **And make sure you communicate with them about the “whys” behind your decisions as well as the responsibilities that come with those decisions. Don’t create a communication void because they will fill it with their own version of why you made the decisions that you did.**

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- τ When involving people in decision-making, bring them into the process at the start, not after some decisions have already been made. **If items beyond your control cause you to change the process, make them aware of those items as well. If you change direction in mid-stream without explanation, you will be back to square one at the bottom of the credibility index.**

 - τ Visibility of your key leaders is an integral part of building trust and credibility. **Recommendations in this report address the issue, but we need to make sure that you understand that our definition of visibility is more than just being present at a meeting or an event. It calls for interaction with participants and a demonstration of active leadership by your superintendent, cabinet and Board members.**

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- τ Communicating to the “nth” degree, if you will, when involving people for advice and decision-making. **You need to “close the loop” on each meeting you have with your various groups by publishing a quick, grid-like summary of items discussed, action taken, or follow-up needed. And then you need to deliver on the follow-up as prescribed in the summary.**

Make a Commitment to Visible Leadership

Focus group participants agreed that they would like district administrators and the Board to visit schools more often. While this is time-consuming, employees appreciate any efforts by

administrators to spend time in classrooms and lunchrooms, and it can bring long-term benefits to the district.

These visits should be scheduled in addition to those involving business or problem-solving. An effort should also be made to visit support staff such as transportation, food service and maintenance. Many participants mentioned they would like administrators to show an interest in them and their work on a personal level.

It was mentioned that Board members are not seen in the schools as often as in the past. Recognizing that it may be difficult for Board members to visit schools depending on their work schedules, one suggestion is for Board members to schedule attendance at various co-curricular evening activities.

We believe it is important for your superintendent to schedule visits in as many schools as possible. We also recommend that he make school visits an ongoing part of his schedule. There was strong sentiment in favor of this kind of high-profile visibility among all the focus group participants, and we believe this will also help establish the superintendent as a credible, approachable leader.

We recommend that all visits be reported on in some fashion as a follow-up. For example, the superintendent, administrators and Board members could report on visits or attendance at special events as a regular part of the Board Meeting agenda. Other avenues include adding brief notes in the *BVSD on the Inside* or on email, and sharing impressions at staff meetings. Not only does this raise the visibility of school leaders, it also gives them “bragging rights” about the district, which builds pride and staff morale.

Leadership and visibility in community activities is also an important component. We encourage Board members and administrators to take active roles in local civic organizations and be seen representing the district at community functions and events. This also creates opportunities for getting the district's messages out to the community through face-to-face interactions.

One additional visibility tactic to add credibility is the possibility of creating a monthly column by your superintendent in the *Daily Camera*. A number of focus group participants indicated that they could assist the school district in approaching the publisher to make this space a reality. If accomplished, it will be important to make the column a collection of brief "brag pieces" plus a mild discussion of the "meaty" issues facing the district. In other words, if it is all fluff, it will lose some credibility in your community.

Develop a Blueprint for District Decision-making

By opening up communication about the decision-making process on policies, goals and objectives, budget, and curriculum, the Board and administration can continue to develop a transparent style of leadership that allows stakeholders to monitor and participate in the educational process. This will not only foster trust and credibility in the district, but also encourage all stakeholders to assume responsibility for the success of their schools.

Education is in the midst of flipping back to a modified centralized mode of decision-making since the arrival of the No Child Left Behind legislation and ongoing budget struggles faced by most school districts. So parents who have been comfortable functioning in a site-based management world are a bit more

confused when they see central offices everywhere making more of the decisions about their children's schools.

Some strategies to do this include:

- τ Publish a blue print of the path of how a decision is achieved in your school district. Indicate who makes which types of decisions within a prescribed timeline. Not every decision will fit into this grid, but it may help a parent learn more about the process. It may also guide those in the focus groups who were saying, "When is a *No* decision, a final *No*?"
- τ Close the information loop on all projects. A communication gap we identified is the need to "close the information loop" by explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale for specific actions and projects and

then reporting back to them with the results of these efforts. While the Board and administration always strive to make good decisions on behalf of students, they may sometimes be perceived negatively because the staff or public are not given the same information or background on an issue that was used to make the decision.

Ensuring that the rationale for decisions is presented along with the outcome is a critical role for your communications effort. Some focus group members who had served on district-wide committees or task forces indicated that they didn't receive feedback on why their recommendations were not accepted, or were changed. In some instances, once their work was finished, they never received any response at all.

A number of participants felt their time had been wasted and that their input wasn't valued. Communication follow-through is critical if the district truly wants to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way.

Develop Key Message/Talking Points About Boulder Valley School District

Develop written message or talking points for major issues that influence the public's perception of your district as well as what you want your school district to be known for. From our focus groups we recommend that you discuss creating ongoing messages framed around your six priorities. Some examples include:

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- τ highlighting continued student achievement,
 - τ reaching and teaching all children,
 - τ praising your high-quality and committed staff,
 - τ staying on top of all facets of fiscal and program accountability, and
 - τ valuing the work of your community and volunteer committees.

These messages should become part of your ongoing communication effort and be included in most vehicles you decide to use.

For example, in your internal newsletter, you may want to take a key message and demonstrate by example how you are “walking the talk.” You could also use these messages in key visioning presentations to community groups as part of a

school district speaker service. The same could be done for your superintendent's column in the *Daily Camera*, plus the new e-newsletter to key communicators mentioned below.

Create a District-wide Key Communicator Network

A Key Communicator Network can be a real asset for a school district in terms of providing strategic information to influential community members, stimulating two-way communication, and promptly dealing with damaging rumors.

To organize a Key Communicator Network, ask each principal, each principal's secretary, central office administrator and Board member to recommend two or three people, parents or community members, who are well known and respected in their neighborhoods or the community and who will volunteer for this task. In addition, add the names of local leaders of well-known organizations or businesses in the community (including Realtors and those representing minorities). The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

Each person should receive a letter from the superintendent explaining the key communicator concept and inviting him or her to participate. Follow-up phone calls can be made to encourage participation.

The key communicators should meet two or three times a year with the superintendent or his designate. Depending on the size of the group, these meetings could be broken down into smaller groups and held at different times. At these meetings the superintendent should outline District plans, explain the background of issues, both current and potential, and respond to questions. It is a great setting for the superintendent and others to strengthen credibility and trust with key leaders in your numerous communities.

Between meetings, each key communicator should receive a brief newsletter, as well as copies of other district publications that will keep them informed of successes, initiatives, events and issues. The newsletter should provide short, timely updates on Board actions and the rationale behind decisions, key messages to share with the community, and updates on education-related legislative issues.

Many districts are using electronic newsletters to communicate with their Key Communicator Networks because this facilitates swift and timely distribution of information, particularly in a crisis. The newsletter can be sent as an email, in PDF format, or as a broadcast fax, depending on which is the best way for communicators to receive information.

A key communicator's role is to provide up-to-date information about school issues to those he or she regularly comes in contact with. When someone in the community needs more information or a rumor needs correcting, the key communicator should be able to call the Communications Office to secure the needed information. The key communicator can then get the correct information back to the community and hopefully head off a potential problem. In cases where widespread misinformation exists, the Communications Office can address the issue through meetings, news releases and other publications.

A Key Communicator Network is an excellent feedback device to help keep the district aware of community issues. It serves much the same role on a district-wide basis as a PTA/PTO executive board does in helping to keep the principal aware of parent and community concerns.

Also note that a viable and effective key communicator is much more than just an email list-serve. It is a key relationship and trust builder for your school district. That's why the small group meetings with members of the network are critical to its success.

Create a District Speakers Bureau

Focus group participants strongly felt that school leaders should be active and visible in the community, particularly the superintendent. We recommend creating a District Speakers Bureau which would offer local business, civic and service organizations a variety of education topics and speakers to draw from for meetings.

Speakers could include the superintendent, central office administrators, communication services director, other directors and possibly some teachers as well. Each speaker could have a topic area focus. Some possible topics to speak on include:

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- Academic programs,
 - What NCLB means for ,
 - Special programs (IB, vocational, etc.),
 - Understanding the budget and budget process,
 - Parent/community involvement,
 - Planning for disposition of schools, and
 - Current issues and trends in education.

A brochure should be prepared to distribute to local groups and organizations with a brief description of the speakers and topics and information on scheduling a presentation. A PDF of this publications could also be carried on your website.

This will allow the district to develop an ongoing method of reaching these groups so it is not seen as only coming to them when help is needed to pass a bond or levy. It will also help the district keep key messages in front of your selected audiences.

It also provides the district with an opportunity to directly communicate programs and initiatives to key groups and patrons. Prepared PowerPoint presentations and videos will make this effort professional. This service could also be offered online for easy access and booking. A speakers bureau would allow the district to take its message to the public rather than always bringing the public to the district.

Each presentation should also be accompanied with a “leave-behind” which captures the gist of the presentation and gives audience members ways to follow-up with the school district.

Cascade Internal Communication

One of the communication gaps we found in talking with your internal and external audiences was the lack of clarity and consistency of communication of who does what by when after meetings of the Cabinet, DLT, Education Program Leadership Team, Administration and Operations, Principals Advisory, Teachers Advisory, District Parent Council, Principals, and District Accountability.

Each of these meetings needs a designated participant to create a grid of action taken and then distributed as soon as possible after the meeting. You may want to rotate the responsibility.

The grid should be a bare bones approach and yet communicate pertinent information and responsibility.

It could look like this:

Item	Action/Discussion	Next Step	Responsibility	Deadline
Testing Notice	Principals to parents	Draft Letter	Sam Smith	1/3/04

Key Communicator	Invitation Letter	Send Letters	Sally Smith	1/10/04
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Grids are then distributed to each participant. Participants are required to pass pertinent information on in a timely fashion to those they supervise. The information then cascades throughout the organization in an organized fashion if all participants follow through on their communication responsibility.

In some school districts, administrators are held accountable in their annual review for this communication function. Staff members are asked in a communication survey if they are receiving the information they need in a timely basis to perform their jobs. We have found that such an accountability feature

exposes gaps in the communication flow of the district and those responsible for the gap.

Copies of the grid are also used to set the agenda for the next meeting. In focus groups, we hear the statement, “the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing,” much less frequently when this simple grid is put into place.

Have Building-level and Other Organizations' Newsletters Carry District Information

Participants told us that your parents agree with a growing national trend that indicated that school building newsletters are often the most-read school publication in many communities. That should be good news in that you do not have to create an entire new entity to deliver your news in a publication that is well read.

However, you need to identify each of these newsletters and begin feeding them a template of information about the district that is easy for them to use. You may also want to offer a workshop for the wide range of editors you may have for

these publications to show them how to best use your information and share with them some publishing “tricks of the trade” that may save them time and money. Your communication staff can more than adequately handle this type of workshop. It will also communicate that the district is there to help communicate at the building level.

You may also consider regularly sending district news to a number of other publications throughout your community. Senior centers and other civic groups and larger corporations may appreciate receiving news for their own publications.

Establish a Communication/Information Depot Resource

One of the major obstacles we found is that focus group participants mentioned that they were not sure where to go for their information requests. Some participants were unaware that there was a communication office to assist them. They mentioned a communication staff person from the distant past as the only contact they knew.

The good news is that this should be easily corrected. Some recommendations include:

- On your website, list a spot to contact the information office so the request goes directly to the office. List on the website that a response will be given in

whatever timeframe you feel you can deliver. An example would be 48 hours during school days and then you should attempt to meet that response time as often as you can. After you receive a number of the same requests, you may want to post a FAQ sheet on your website next to the section where they send you their requests.

- You need better signage to direct lost visitors to the information office or another area where they can receive guidance to reach their destinations. In your building, you give little direction to people arriving from the parking lots.

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- At all community and parent meetings, as well as community presentations by your speaker service, a flyer should be available listing the contact people for the most frequently asked questions about your schools.

Improve internal communication

To bolster your outreach program, you need to first make sure that your internal program is efficient and effective. Focus group participants told us you have some work to do when it comes to internal communication. Some recommendations are:

Memo consolidation

Develop a process to consolidate memoranda from central office units to schools, eliminate faxing and emailing all except urgent items, ensure that all affected staff get copies of important memos, and install email in all schools and offices.

Principals and school secretaries complained about the number of memos and faxes emanating from the central office. Some common themes among their complaints were:

- Deadlines for requested information were too short;
- Many memos were unimportant;

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- Many memos were faxed to schools, with another copy coming through the interoffice mail; and
 - Some memos requested information from schools that was readily available from other central office units.

The bottom line seemed to be: “Stop bothering us with trivial requests, and do a better job of coordinating the important stuff.”

One technique that has worked for other school districts that have experienced similar complaints is a consolidated Management Memo. This is a compilation into a single weekly memo of all routine information from all central office units. A top-level administrator should be responsible for condensing and compiling these topics.

Many districts find that this technique can eliminate a dozen or more separate memos each week and save many minutes of principals' valuable time. Please note that some districts have created an e-management memo which is sent by email to all recipients. Others have placed such a memo on an internal Intranet with special access by the respective audiences. Doing so cuts down on paperwork and individual requests that pile up for your busy principals and their secretaries.

Consolidation of internal newsletters

In addition to the twice-a-month *BVSD on the Inside*, you have quarterly newsletters going to employees from your equity department, your HR

department and your business and financial services department. They all look different and there is very little consistency in their approaches. Our opinion is that this practice leads to confusion and inconsistency.

Other leading school districts like yours have consolidated these types of publications into one internal newsletter to begin developing a following for that one publication. *BVSD on the Inside* is the most consistent and we recommend that you roll these other publications into it.

Even though you are torn on whether you should deliver it by email or paper, it still is the best internal vehicle you have. Most school districts are moving to email newsletters because the delivery is quicker and you save printing costs.

We recommend that you make *BVSD on the Inside* part of your new employee packet as well as the orientation you provide new employees. Corporations require employees to read their internal newsletters as that requirement is given at the employee 's orientation. You may want to consider doing the same.

To increase readership of this publication, you might want to add a few “softer” employee stories about your people and what they do in the community. You can start developing a BVSD family approach to the publication.

Gather Feedback and Advice on Marketing Your Choice Program

You asked the auditors to ascertain your community's current position on your choice program and the reasons parents select the schools they do for their children.

What we learned was that the main reasons for choosing schools were:

- class size,
- performance of the school on test scores,
- accessibility of the principals and teachers,
- openness to parent involvement, and

-
- convenience.

Some parents and community leaders were concerned about the “flight” from neighborhood schools and thought more effort should be put into making all schools equal. There was a concern by some that too many parents were looking for elitist schools even if they were not a fit for their children.

Overall, those who spoke with us preferred to have an open enrollment system than a neighborhood school concept. They enjoyed the freedom and opportunities it gave them for their children.

The best “marketers” for your schools are the parents who believe and trust in them. Student testimonials are also effective at the secondary level. So in addition to developing profiles dealing with the sought-after characteristics of

low class size, good test scores, and accessibility of teachers and the principal, include testimonials from parents.

Each school could also create a cadre of parent ambassadors to meet with prospective parents and students, and, in some cases, Realtors. Some schools invite “rising” parents and students to a picnic where the kids can play with current students and the parents can mingle and talk informally about the school.

The communications department could develop a tip sheet to help principals and their parent ambassadors with a set of priorities of what parents are looking for in a school and a various techniques to help them position their school as a school of choice.

Make Your Website a Go-to Resource

Like many leading school districts across the nation, your website is beginning to make a dent in the communication effort for your community. Focus group participants said they now are realizing that it is a good source of information about your schools. They still had some problems navigating through it, but it is becoming a good source of information for your community.

Some Considerations to Improve Your Website

Information published in other district publications should be available on the website as well. Some type of feedback mechanism can also be available on the site to encourage two-way communication. Minutes from board and committee meetings could also be available for review. Revised and freshly updated websites will enhance communication and the overall positive image of the district.

Websites are an increasingly important marketing tool for school districts in order to attract students and recruit teachers, administrators and support staff. Sections of the site should be designed with this in mind and should contain

information about district programs, application procedures, employee benefits, and links to community sites of interest.

Consider providing templates for individual schools, departments and other content providers. A template should contain coded formats for all critical information such as navigation and branding, so content providers need only fill in the page with their own content.

Develop a production and style guide with information about file-naming conventions, text and link colors, background colors, word count per page, and other standards. The guide should give instructions on the use of the logo and any other trademarks belonging to the district. Include guidelines that will ensure a consistent look, feel and navigation.

Ensure buy-in and involvement from employees by offering “how-to” workshops on using the style guides and templates and creating web graphics. In-house training on a variety of web topics, including email etiquette, effective web searches, online curriculum development and database development, will improve employee productivity on the web and give the district an opportunity to enhance its reputation as a technology-savvy organization.

The website provides general information about the district and links to each of the schools. It should also be viewed as another “publication” that can provide information on major district news, such as progress on the state assessment program/NCLB and district strategic directions, and new programs and initiatives as well as standard parent information, such as the calendar of events for schools, school lunch menus, bus schedules, and district policies. The website should also be evaluated in the context of how it delivers the district’s key messages. Users

should be asked to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or emailing responses.

The website should also be used for “myth busting” and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion or the district learns of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in a prominent spot on the web page for easy access. School newsletters and other publications should promote the website as a source of information when people have questions.

A feedback section of the website should be developed to be more than a staff email listing. One important caveat to this, however, is that questions posted to the website should be answered within a set timeline determined by the district,

or credibility will be lost. It is important to respond within a reasonable time frame or your critics will label the system a waste of time and money.

As the website is improved and becomes an important part of your school district's communication program, use other information channels to alert people of its availability. Include short articles in district publications, include the web address as part of the district's address on all documents, and provide drop-in articles to principals for inclusion in school newsletters. Useful websites can be an effective, economic way of communicating with your publics. But you need to build an awareness campaign so more parents and community members begin using it.

Examples of award-winning school district websites are available at **www.nspra.org**.

Develop Email Etiquette and Procedures and Improve Responsiveness

While most of us would agree that the advent of email has made it possible to communicate faster and with more people, it has created an expectation of immediate response that can interfere with work flow and cause stress.

Develop interoffice email guidelines. We recommend the district research patterns of current use in the schools and district office and involve staff in developing guidelines to keep email communications manageable. These should include setting reasonable timelines for responding to requests from other

departments and schools, restricting the distribution of “all user” messages and non-essential information (i.e. jokes, chain emails).

Develop guidelines for responding to email from the public. With the advent of voice mail and email, parents and community members have much greater access to teachers and district office personnel. While this is positive and increases opportunities to communicate, it is also important to set reasonable timelines for responding to requests and inquiries. We suggest the district create a committee of parents and staff to develop a set of guidelines for voice and email communications.

These should address response times (i.e., all calls will be returned within 48 business hours) and expectations for using these communication tools, such as

what constitutes unreasonable demands of a teacher's time (i.e., daily emails from a single individual, or an expectation for an immediate response.)

Once these guidelines are determined, they should be widely distributed to staff and parents. They should also be included in student handbooks and on the district website.

Email is an essential communication tool in today's world, but it is incumbent upon the district to insure that it remains a useful tool and not a time wasting burden.

Communicating with Your Minority Community

The increasingly diverse make-up of the Boulder Valley School District will require the District to seek different ways to develop genuine two-way communication with its families and patrons. You are lucky to have Superintendent Garcia as your leader as minority participants were pleased that the school district chose a minority to serve as its leader.

Some strategies for connecting to minority stakeholders include:

- Create a minority opinion leader network. Talk to faith and business leaders, community agencies and organizations, local colleges, government agencies and staff members who work with various groups to identify people who are recognized as active, involved members of minority communities. Consider

having each school with a high minority population also identify parents to represent the school. Use this network to advise the District on effective ways to reach minority constituents and to respond to projects and programs under development. Representatives from the minority opinion leader network should also be included in the key communicator network mentioned in an earlier recommendation.

- Increase efforts to translate informational materials for non-English speaking parents. Currently the District does provide some translation services. As the District's demographics change, it will need to address this growing need. Although Spanish is the predominant language, the District also needs to address the communication needs of the many other ethnic groups it serves. While it is unrealistic to think the District can translate materials into multiple languages, it can translate the phrase, "*This document is important. Please*

have someone translate it for you” into a variety of languages. This reference sheet can be attached to school documents and serve to signal non-English speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information. It is imperative that the District provides key documents in Spanish at the schools that serve as ELD centers.

- Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families. **Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable, such as church or home. Communicating face-to-face with parents in their primary language in their homes builds strong connections to the schools. Some districts have bilingual liaisons who work directly in the neighborhoods with families. The District should conduct research to**

determine whether this type of outreach is needed in some of its neighborhoods.

- Build partnerships with ethnic agencies. A strong relationship between the District and community agencies that serve specific ethnic groups will allow BVSD to benefit from their advice and expertise and help provide the District with an entree to these communities. We suggest bringing these agencies in several times a year to consult on new initiatives and projects that impact minority communities.
- Provide visual signs of welcome and an appreciation of diversity at schools. Something as simple as a poster that says “welcome” in many different

languages can make a positive first impression. Displays that highlight an appreciation of different cultures also add to creating an inclusive climate.

- Provide diversity training for staff. Diversity training for staff should be developed to build understanding and sensitivity to cultural concerns.
- Create a Welcome Center or telephone help line for non-English speaking families new to the District. The District might consider creating a Welcome Center, perhaps in collaboration with other agencies, where new families can receive an orientation to help them navigate the District. This would include assistance in getting children immunized and registered for school, information on community and district resources available to them, background on the district's ESL program including information about

testing, English classes for adults, and other educational opportunities. An alternative would be to offer and publicize a telephone help line (manned by a bilingual staff member, not a recording) that new families can call for information and answers to questions.

Evaluate Your Communications Effort

This communication audit will help you set benchmarks for some of the major communication programs you now have underway. Your ongoing survey work

with the community and staff can also assist you in measuring the key communication issues for your schools.

The best communication program plans are directly tied to the goals and objective of the school district. Your current communications team has created a plan to help the system attain its goals. To be totally effective, the communications office needs to continue working with the top leadership in communicating the district's goals to major stakeholders, strategically implementing tactics to help achieve the goals and working closely with the community leaders to rebuild trust with your internal and external audiences. Using your Communications Advisory Team is another tactic to add to the evaluation of the communication effort.

In addition, informal techniques such as focus groups of audiences should be asked to review the products of the communication office to see how they may be improved.

Communicate with Realtors

As some enrollment figures shrink, it is always positive to market to the real estate officials in your community. What are they saying about your schools to prospects who are thinking about living in your communities?

Your current plans seem quite adequate in delivering information to the real estate leaders in your community. Many asked for timely information to be delivered by email.

Sending them a PDF of your school choice profiles and other pertinent information would be a step in the right direction. Offer to have members of your speaker's service attend and present at their meetings.

Gather Feedback on Current Program Elements — What to Keep and What to Drop

As noted throughout this report, we believe your communication program is on the right track. We believe your staff is able and competent to meet the challenges outlined in this report. But we also recommend that it may be time to take away some of their workload by curtailing some of their activities.

We recommend that they discuss these items as a team and make their own recommendations based on the following:

- Enhance *BVSD on the Inside* as mentioned in the above recommendation. In the long run, it may save time and be more effective.

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- Consider eliminating the superintendent's birthday cards to staff. Feedback from focus group participants thought that they were no longer needed and seemed a bit perfunctory rather than meaningful to them. A periodic hand written note from your leaders to staff could save money and time and reap better results.
 - You may want to reduce the work and time associated with your daily news clips. Our feedback noted that most folks did not make the time to review them unless something really created a buzz within the education community. Those types of published articles are easy to select and could be continued, but we would cut down the frequency and volume of this service you provide.
 - You may want to reduce the duplicate effort you expend in marketing your open enrollment choice programs. Your website is the vehicle of the future for

this information and you may not need to publish a booklet showing all the choices. A round-up could be given on your website and single sheet descriptions of each school could be available at each school site. Developing a template for these single sheet promotion pieces could save time.

- Your seeking feedback from a communication advisory committee should be continued as long as you can prove to them that their input is being considered and feedback is given to them regularly. Participants may also be able to locate other vendors who may wish to assist the BVSD effort on a reduced-cost basis.
- Many of the other major publications you complete seem to be on target and needed. But they too fall into the credibility and trust gap already mentioned.

Market Your Foundation

Even though the majority of the focus group participants knew about the foundation and had seen its publications, to some participants the foundation was a non-entity. Several felt that the foundation had not changed with the financial needs for BVSD. Foundation staff turnover was also noted several times.

While the foundation is separate from BVSD, there appears to be no ongoing relationship so that the foundation and the district are heading in the same direction to meet the student's needs in Boulder Valley over time. Mutual trust needs to be established between these two groups.

Some recommendations to develop and maintain a relationship which will also help market the foundation are:

- An annual meeting between the foundation board/senior staff and the board of education/senior administrative staff should be held in September or October of every school year to share the direction and needs of the district and for both groups to share future goals.
- All foundation publications and event and grant information should be sent to the board of education and all BVSD administrative and leadership team members and principals.

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- Teacher liaisons and parent liaisons for each school should be established so that foundation updates can be given at staff and parent group meetings. This will help develop ownership at the building level.
 - Foundation executive director should develop relationships with district administrators as well as each building administrator. Administrators should support the foundation both verbally and financially.
 - Establish a message for the foundation that all foundation board members embrace as well as district leadership so that it can easily be shared with the community.
 - Foundation board members should serve as program speakers for civic clubs and community organizations to share foundation message.

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- Update and redesign the foundation website. Sometimes a new look helps to call attention to a new message for the future of the foundation and Boulder Valley students.
 - A district senior administrator or the superintendent should serve as an ex-officio board member on the foundation board again to ensure that the foundation and the district are moving in the same direction as partners for BVSD students.
 - Annual report for foundation should include names of businesses and individuals and level of support and should be distributed at an annual community breakfast where businesses, parents and administrators attend together. The superintendent could give a “State of the District” address.