the leader in school communication

nspra

Communication Audit Report

Grand Island Public Schools

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Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Grand Island Public Schools (GIPS) has contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for an in-depth, independent review of the school district's overall communication program. The NSPRA Communication Audit process helps to identify the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in a school communication program through an extensive process that includes:

- A review of print and digital communication materials, tools and tactics;

- Quantitative research through the surveying of district staff (instructional, support, administrative, etc.), parents/families and community members; and

- Qualitative research through focus groups with these same audiences and through interviews with staff who perform formal communication functions for the district.

Details of this process can be found in the Introduction of this report.

The results of this process are shared in four main sections of the report:

- The Key Findings section provides details about what was learned through the review of materials and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

- A SWOT Analysis distills these findings into the district's primary internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats related to its communication goals.

- The Benchmarking of Results section reflects how the district's communication

program compares to other districts on nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey questions and national standards of excellence in school public relations, as outlined in NSPRA's *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*.

- The Recommendations section details suggested strategies and tactics for addressing identified communication gaps and for enhancing effective strategies already in place.

Report Synopsis

Following is an overview of this report. As with all school systems, GIPS has areas in which it excels as well as areas where improvements can be made. For a full understanding of what was learned, the rationale behind the resulting recommendations and what will be required to implement those steps, it is recommended that the report be read in its entirety.

Key Strengths of the Current Communication Program

- GIPS underwent a difficult leadership change early in the year, but stakeholders are heartened that the district's image is beginning to improve. They frequently used phrases like "getting better" and "rebuilding" to indicate their new hope in the effectiveness of district leadership.

- There was wide recognition and appreciation for the communication challenges of responding to the growing needs of a more diverse student population and community.

- The communications team is highly regarded for their efforts on behalf of the district, and the materials they produce are viewed as being clear and easy to understand.

- GIPS has established strong branding for the district as well as the schools, with

quality images and consistent use of district colors and themes for all media.

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- The GIPS communications team has developed communication goals and outlined the basis for a plan but currently lacks a comprehensive, strategic communication plan. This report will aid in development of that plan, which is needed to establish measurable objectives for communications in support of district goals, to serve as a guide for staff communication practices and protocols, and to establish performance benchmarks to measure success.

- Adapting to new leadership is an ongoing conversation topic. There is an optimistic "wait-and-see" attitude about new leadership regaining the trust of staff, parents and the community. The challenge for the district will be in developing and communicating about an intentional transition to new leadership styles and approaches that will continue to build even more trust and support.

- Communication with parents, particularly at the school level, was identified by stakeholders as needing improvement. Specifically, there is a need to set expectations on what and how information is to be shared as well as how to meet the needs of newcomers to GIPS.

- There is a perception that GIPS leadership could be more transparent in sharing information, particularly regarding how GIPS will meet current and future financial challenges. Stakeholders want to know the "why" behind decisions.

- The growing size and diversity of the district present ongoing communication challenges. Consistency in communication procedures, policies and expectations

across schools and departments is needed. There is a perception that there is a wide variance from building to building on what is communicated and how.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing GIPS' communication program. For each of these Recommendations, a series of practical action steps based on current best practices and award-winning school communication efforts are included in the report.

1. Complete the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan.

2. Standardize parent/family communication processes across schools, departments and the district.

3. Build greater awareness of and expand resources for meeting the information needs of diverse students and their families.

4. Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.

5. Provide communication training for administrators and key front-line staff.

6. Implement multimodal communication strategies to increase stakeholder knowledge about district finances.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in GIPS, not just the communications team. It is generally not feasible to address more than two to three recommendations each year. But while some report recommendations may require major investments of time, this report also offers opportunities to rethink existing practices or to make quick improvements without a significant investment of resources.

Introduction

The Environmental Setting for Communications

When assessing the communication program of an organization, it is important to first have an understanding of the organization itself as well as the environment in which it operates. That background is provided here.

About the District

Grand Island Public Schools (GIPS), located in Hall County, Neb., is a comprehensive school system offering college- and career-ready education to students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The district includes preschool at three locations, 14 elementary schools, three middle schools, an alternative middle school setting, one high school, an alternative high school and two off-site career academy campuses. Combined, these buildings educated nearly 10,000 students in the 2022-23 school year, according to the Nebraska Department of Education.

The GIPS school community is racially, ethnically and economically diverse. In its 2021-22 annual report, the district shared that its students identify as 55 percent Hispanic, 36 percent white, 4 percent Black and 3 percent multi-racial. More than half of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (61 percent) and about 19 percent are English language learners. According to community data from the National Center for Education Statistics, English is spoken "less than well" in 9 percent of households, "very well" in 24.1 percent of households and the only language spoken in about 67 percent of households.

In fall 2023, Superintendent Matt Fisher was named permanently to the position after serving as the district's interim superintendent for eight months. He brought new executive leadership to the system, which is also governed by the nine-member GIPS Board of Education. They are in the midst of implementing the On Track to Thrive 2025 strategic plan, which includes GIPS Success Area 3 and its objective 3.2 to ensure "every student and family is welcome in GIPS schools" through engagement efforts, partnerships and other methods impacted by the district's communication program.

About the GIPS communications team

For the last seven years, Jennifer Worthington served as the chief of strategic partnerships and stakeholder engagement for GIPS. After her retirement in December 2023, Mitchell Roush began serving as the director of communications and marketing, and leading the Communications Department of the Office of Strategic Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement. Roush worked closely with Worthington during the last three years of her tenure and is a member of the District Leadership Team.

The district's communications team also includes a communications coordinator, who is responsible for writing and research, and a communication specialist, who is responsible for graphic design. Depending on the assignment, either may also act as a project manager.

The team recognizes that, "to maximize the success of the Strategic Plan, it is crucial to reach our audiences through a robust communication plan," as stated on its department webpage.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Process

NSPRA's mission is to develop professionals to communicate strategically, build trust and foster positive relationships in support of their school communities. As the leader in school communication™ since 1935, NSPRA provides school communication training, services and national awards programs to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

- An important foundation for developing and implementing an effective strategic communication plan.

- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

The development of any effective communication program begins with research. Therefore, the first step of the process is to seek data, opinion and perceptions. The process for this research is detailed in the following section, and the results of this research can be found in the Key Findings section.

Based on the research findings, the auditor identifies common themes and makes general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the communication program. The auditor then uses this information to develop Recommendations designed to help the district address communication challenges and enhance areas of strength. Each of these customized recommendations are accompanied by practical, realistic action

steps grounded in today's public relations and communications best practices, as reflected within NSPRA's 2023 edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* benchmarking publication.

It is important to note that the primary goal of any communication program is to help the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, the auditor developed each recommendation in light of GIPS' vision and mission statements as well as its strategic plan. The result is a report that will provide GIPS with a launching point for improving and enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

Research Components

The NSPRA Communication Audit process incorporates three methods of research to capture both qualitative and quantitative data.

Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the communications team submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences, including the *GIPS Monthly Update*, the GIPS annual report, the Parent Support flyer, the Welcome Center information sheet, the Are You On Track infographic and *The Islander* high school newsletter. The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites, social media pages, and news media coverage of the district.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor's review of websites and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content.

SCOPE Survey

NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback

from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey was conducted for GIPS from Oct. 3-22, 2023. It included questions regarding the following:

- How people are currently getting information and how they prefer to receive it.

- How informed they are in key areas such as leader decisions, district plans and district finances.

- Perceptions about what opportunities exist to seek information, provide input and become involved.

- To what degree stakeholders perceive communications to be understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

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

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

- **Parent Survey:**
    - 335 surveys completed
    - ±5.4 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target met)

- **Faculty/Staff Survey:**
    - 240 surveys completed
    - ± 6.3 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target almost met)

- **Community survey:**
    - 45 surveys completed
    - ± 14.6 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met)

- Due to lower participation among community members, no significant findings are included in this report based solely on SCOPE Survey responses by community members.

This same survey has been administered to more than 100 school districts across the United States, and the Benchmarking of Results section includes the SCOPE Scorecard, which compares GIPS' SCOPE Survey results with the results of other districts who have conducted the survey.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit process is the focus groups component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent, the chief of strategic partnerships and stakeholder engagement, the director of communications and the communications team on Nov. 6-7, 2023.

For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. Each group met for an hour and was guided through a similar set of discussion questions on a variety of communication issues. Participants were assured their comments would be anonymous and not attributed to individuals if used in the report.

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

- Support staff

- Supervisors and non-teaching professionals

- Teachers

- Parents – English language

- Parents – Spanish language

- Community partners

- Students

- Principals and assistant principals

- District Leadership Team

- GIPS Board of Education members

Your NSPRA Research Team

The research team who delivered NSPRA's communication audit services included the following professionals, whose vitae can be found in the Appendix:

- Auditor Frank Kwan, APR

- Audit Assistant Sheba Clarke, APR

- NSPRA Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR

- NSPRA Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR

- NSPRA Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR

- NSPRA Communication Research Specialist Alyssa Teribury

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the GIPS Board of Education, Superintendent Matt Fisher, the District Leadership Team and Director of Communications and Marketing Mitchell Roush to explore new communication opportunities, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. When reviewing the report, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- **The report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its communications team** by suggesting

options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. The recommendations included here are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking GIPS' communication program to the next level.

- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.

- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that GIPS would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the school district and its work through the perceptions of others.

- **Perceptions are just that.** Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.

- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditor's analysis,** and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the final report is issued.

Next Steps

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Implementation of the recommendations should be approached

strategically, using this report as a road map and taking the following into consideration:

Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.

- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority,** but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.

- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the communications team.** NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the communications team, others may apply to additional departments or all staff.

- **Look for opportunities for immediate improvement and to rethink existing practices.** Action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the school or the communications team and still pay quick dividends are noted as "quick wins" with the symbol shown to the right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task or process that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders' feedback and the auditor's analysis. These are noted with the symbol shown to the left.

- **Some recommendations may require additional staff capacity or financial resources** to undertake while maintaining existing communication activities.

Sharing the Report

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that GIPS share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward.

Be sure to also share this information with key stakeholders such as employees and parents/families. This kind of transparency will demonstrate that district leaders prioritize two-way communication with stakeholders.

NSPRA's staff auditing team can provide suggestions and examples for how this report could be effectively shared with various constituencies as well as the public.

Key Findings

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

This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district's image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders. Conversely, the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals.

District Image/Brand

- On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to provide an overall rating for their perception of the district. As shown on the right, 59 percent of employees, 44 percent of parents and 49 percent of community members rated the district either above average or excellent.

  When those responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCOPE Survey results of more than 100 districts nationwide (see SCOPE Scorecard), GIPS' ratings are at or above the average for each stakeholder group.

Overall Perception of the District
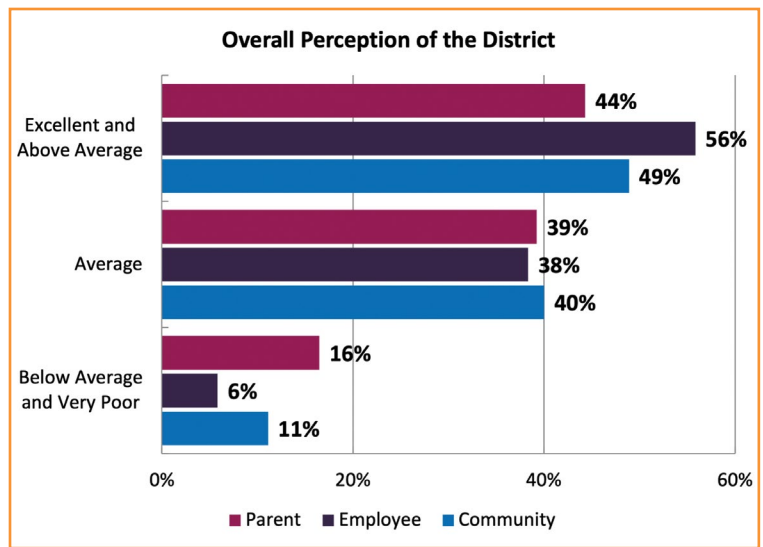
Overall Perception of the District	Grand Island	National Average	National Low	National High
Staff	3.6	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents	3.8	3.8	2.6	4.3
Community	3.5	3.3	2.1	4.3

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

- There is high regard for the GIPS staff, with stakeholders from all focus groups expressing their appreciation for the quality of teaching as well as the caring approach of staff at all levels. Community and parent focus group participants used terms such as "dedicated" and "committed" when referring to staff, with one parent describing it as, "The boots on the ground really care."

- Parent and staff focus group participants commended GIPS on the development of stakeholder groups to support the district, citing as examples the Key Communicators Community Group, Teachers Leadership Coalition, Superintendent's Student Advisory Council and the Parent Councils.

- The many instructional opportunities and options for students were noted as a quality feature by staff, students and parents in the focus groups. As one participant noted, "The academy structure is positive. More kids are college or career-ready now."

- Participants in all focus groups referred to the district as having "a mixed reputation," noting the positive aspects of diversity and size as well as the challenges related to perceived reputational damage from leadership controversies prior to the current administration.

- A consistent sentiment shared by all focus groups was the belief that recent changes in GIPS leadership have been positive. Many parents and staff referred to the district as being in the process of "rebuilding." Representative comments from staff included the following:

  - "There is optimism that the tide is turning, with new leadership making leaders more approachable."

  - "I think it's better now and I think the school board is also listening. "

  The student focus group discussed the perception issues of the district and suggested that they should be put in context. As one student shared, "I look at it like a whiteboard with one black dot. The dot is what the focus is on and the white is what we are all about."

Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District - Parents

	Parent Email	Parent Text messages	Parent Social media	Parent Newsletters	Parent Calendar
Less than monthly+Never	7%	8%	24%	22%	18%
Monthly	5%	6%	10%	15%	26%
Daily+Weekly	88%	86%	66%	63%	56%

Legend:
- Daily+Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than monthly+Never
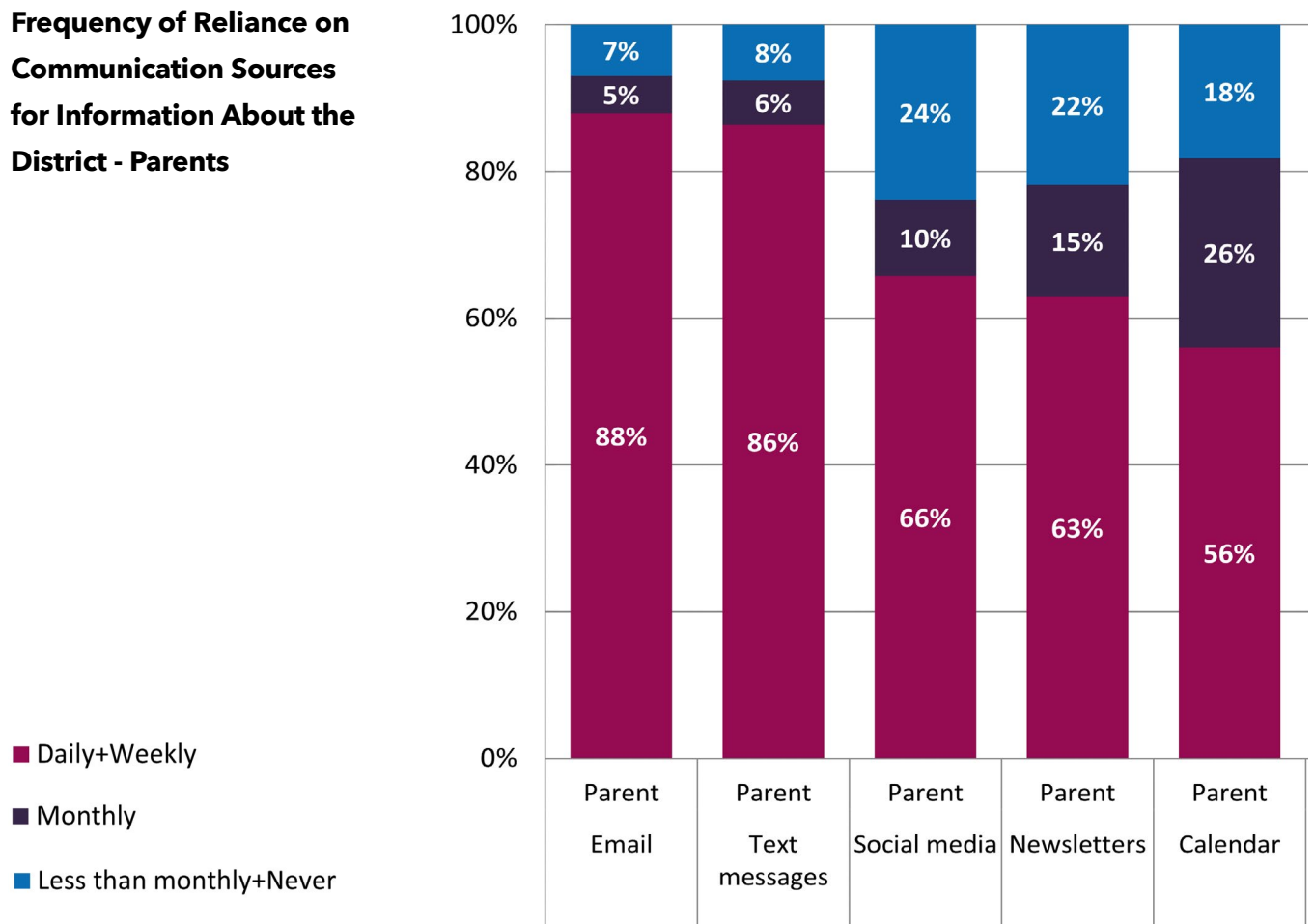
- In the focus groups and in the open comments on the SCOPE Survey, participants cited their belief that one of the strongest points about the district is its diversity and inclusivity.
  - As one student said, "I love the diversity because it gives you experiences that you may not have had otherwise."
  - District leadership shared this observation: "If you want to see the world, you don't have to leave Grand Island. The world really is here."
- Perceived challenges with GIPS' increasing diversity were also shared. In staff focus groups, participants cited a need for staff to be able to offer multiple languages and literacy levels.

Communication Sources and Preferences

- **The SCOPE Survey sought participants' insights on the frequency with which they rely on various sources for information about GIPS.** The results for the three groups surveyed are shown on pages 12-15 and reflect that reliance on various sources of information varies among stakeholder groups. On a daily or weekly basis, parents rely most heavily on email and text messages (see chart below), employees rely most on email and newsletters, and the community turns most often to social media and local news and media.

Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent
41%	28%	46%	50%	54%	68%	64%	85%
13%	31%	15%	12%	15%	21%	26%	7%
46%	40%	39%	39%	31%	11%	11%	9%
What other people tell me	Website	Local news and media	Printed information	Phone calls	Meetings	School board	Podcast
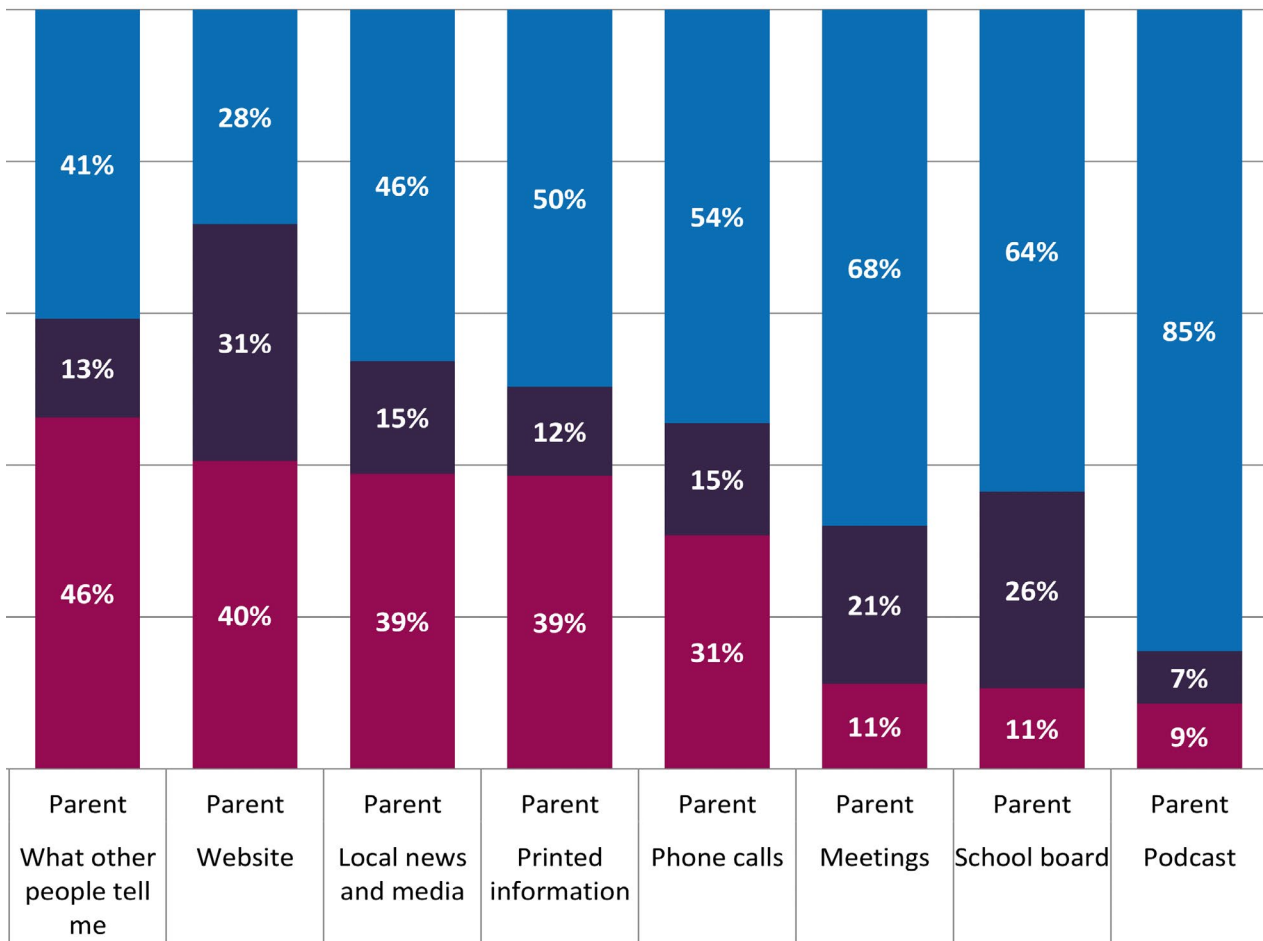
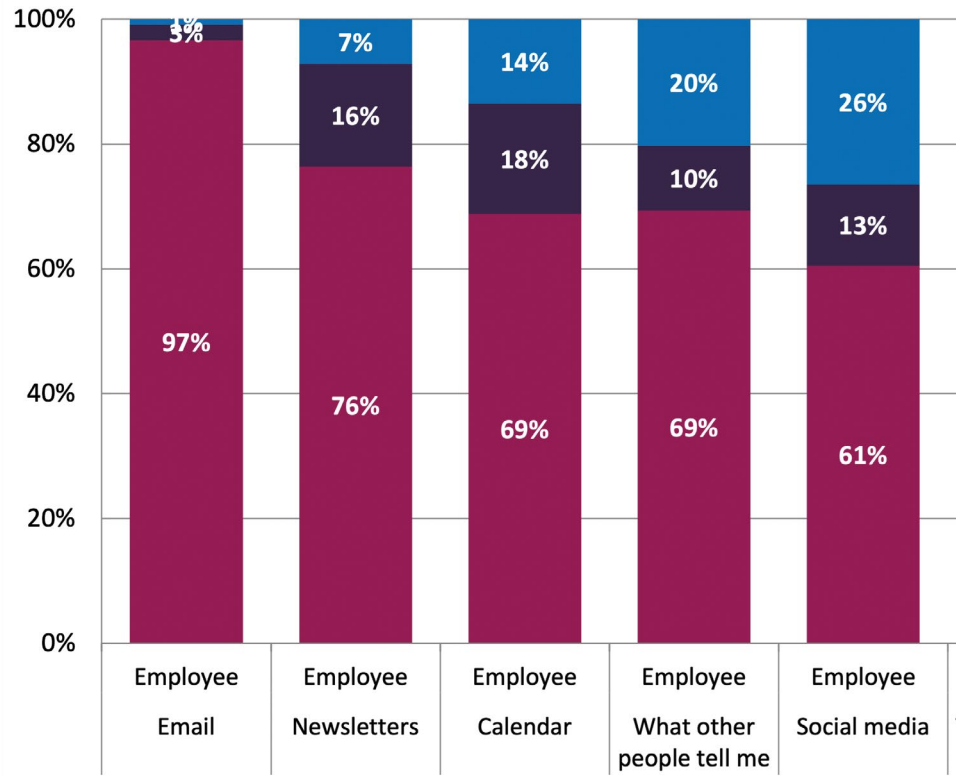**Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District - Staff**

Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District - Community

- ■ Daily+Weekly
- ■ Monthly
- ■ Less than monthly+Never

Employee communication channels (stacked bar chart):

Channel			
Employee Text messages	52%	11%	37%
Employee Meetings	51%	30%	19%
Employee Local news and media	41%	23%	36%
Employee Website	41%	28%	32%
Employee Printed information	36%	22%	42%
Employee Phone calls	28%	14%	58%
Employee School board	10%	57%	33%
Employee Podcast	3%	9%	89%

Community communication channels (stacked bar chart):

Channel			
Community Text messages	19%	0%	81%
Community Newsletters	19%	24%	57%
Community Website	14%	33%	53%
Community Phone calls	14%	0%	86%
Community Printed information	14%	26%	60%
Community Podcast	10%	7%	83%
Community Meetings	7%	29%	63%
Community School board	5%	30%	65%

- Digging further with those who indicated **reliance on a particular communication source** found:

  - Email sources were generally informational emails from the district (78%), personalized emails from an individual (74%) or automated emails from the district or school for things such as attendance or lunch balances (73%).

  - Newsletter sources were generally a school weekly/monthly newsletter (81%) or the GIPS Monthly Update (67%).

  - While there was a higher level of reliance on the district website (44%) than on school websites (36%), there was a slightly higher level of reliance on calendars on a school website (48%) than the calendar on the district website (46%).

  - Among those who rely on social media, the most used platform by far was Facebook (87%) with X/Twitter (18%) and Instagram (13%) far behind.

  - Among those survey respondents who indicated reliance on meetings for information, nearly twice as many rely on individual meetings (76%) than on group meetings (39%).

- The SCOPE Survey shows that stakeholders have **different preferences for *how* they receive information, depending on the *type* of information sought**. Among staff and parents, email is by far the preferred source of information, except for receiving information about school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises, for which they prefer text messages.

  - At least half of staff members who responded to the survey most prefer:

    - Email (90%) for general district news and information.

    - Text messages (76%), automated calls (57%) and email (51%) for information about school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises.

    - Email (85%) for receiving information about school and district events, programs and calendar updates.

    - Email (92%) for finding information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues.

  - At least half of parents who responded to the survey most prefer:

    - Email (84%) and text messages (62%) for general district news and information.

    - Text messages (88%), automated calls (54%) and email (52%) for information about school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises

    - Email (85%) and text messages (62%) for receiving information about school and district events, programs and calendar updates.

    - Email (82%) for finding information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues.

  - There was less consensus among community members who responded to the survey than among staff and parent respondents, but nearly half of community members most prefer:

    - Email (42%) and social media (40%) for general district news and information.

    - Local news/media (45%) and social media (38%) for information about school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises

- ▫ Social media (50%) and email (45%) for receiving information about school and district events, programs and calendar updates.

- ▫ The website (45%) and email (45%) for finding information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, finances and related issues.

- ▪ Local news/media and mobile apps were the least preferred methods of communication for both staff and parents, with fewer than 10% of respondents selecting them as preferences for any of the information types.

- Less than half of all survey respondents (40%) use local news and media on a daily or weekly basis to find information about the district. GIPS has frequent mentions in the media, and the majority of the sentiment in the coverage is neutral (70% of coverage) or positive (16%), according to NSPRA's media monitoring analytics. The number of media mentions in 2023, though, was about half of the number for the same period the previous year, at 395 vs. 723.

- In the parent focus group, the use of a school's Parent Council representatives to share information was clearly stated as being ineffective. This is perceived as being due to the small attendance at parent meetings in addition to the materials provided by the district not being specifically designed for parents.

Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- Staff, parents and community members are generally satisfied with the quality of communication from the district, with more than half of SCOPE Survey participants for each stakeholder type agreeing that communication is above average or excellent, as shown in the chart at right.
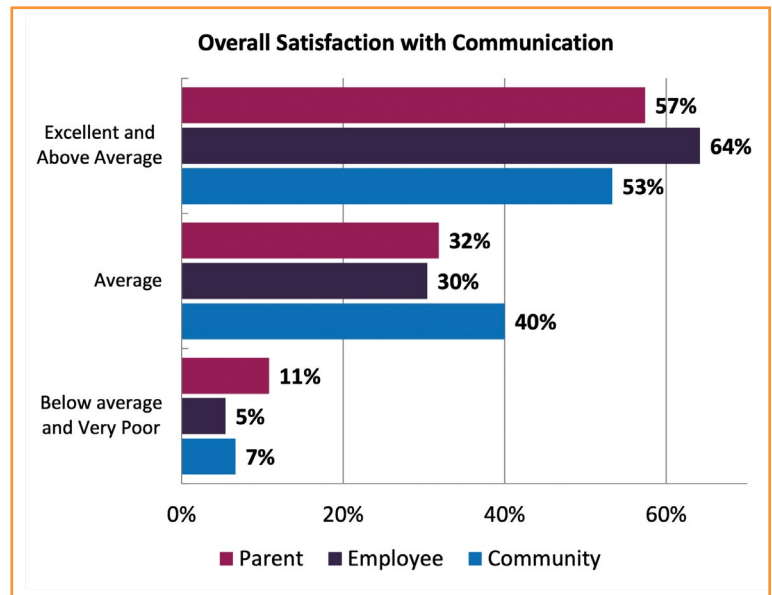
  When these responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with the SCOPE Survey results of over 100 districts nationwide (see SCOPE Scorecard), GIPS' ratings for overall satisfaction with communication are close to the national average for parents and higher than average for staff and community members.

Overall Satisfaction with Communication

Excellent and Above Average	Parent: 57%	Employee: 64%	Community: 53%
Average	Parent: 32%	Employee: 30%	Community: 40%
Below average and Very Poor	Parent: 11%	Employee: 5%	Community: 7%

Legend: ■ Parent ■ Employee ■ Community

Overall Satisfaction with Communication	Grand Island	National Average	National Low	National High
Staff	3.8	3.6	2.3	4.2
Parents	3.7	3.8	3.1	4.2
Community	3.6	3.2	2.0	4.0

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

- **GIPS consistently uses strong design themes and key colors**, clearly establishing a visual brand identity for the entire district.
    - The brand identity visual elements are evident throughout GIPS in its website design, online and print materials, flyers, recruiting notices, newsletters, and video graphics. Staff clothing reflects the main color theme, with the saying "Wear Purple–Be Gold."
    - The communications team has developed brand standard guides for all of the schools that specifies the colors, fonts, hashtags and logos that are to be used at a school. It has not yet developed such a guide for the district overall.
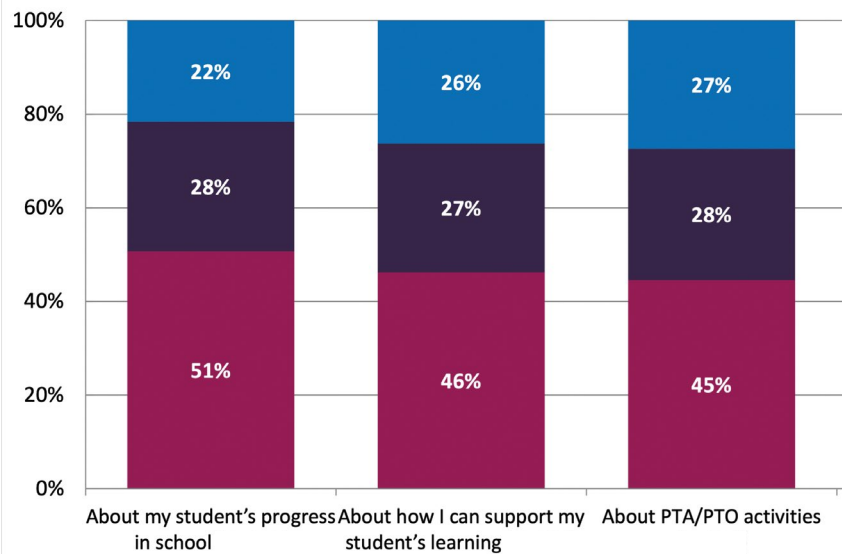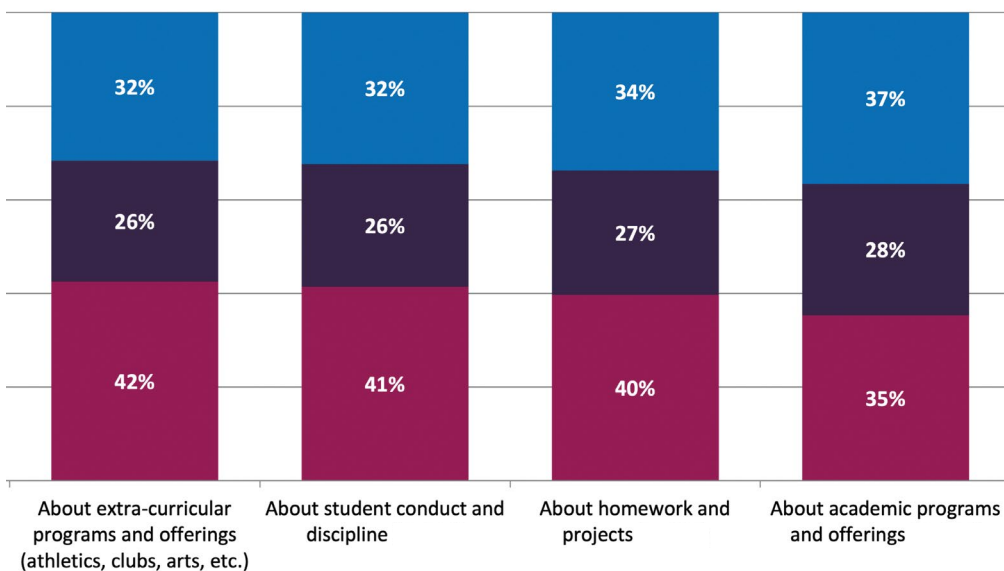
How Informed in Key Areas - Parents
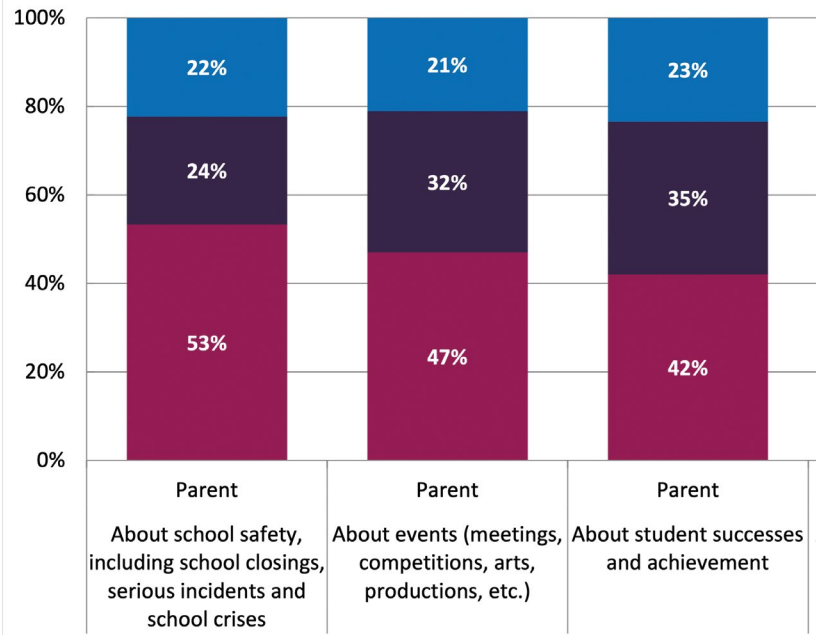
How Informed in Areas Specific to Parents - Parents

■ Extremely Informed+Very Informed

■ Moderately Informed

■ Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed

- On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate **how informed they feel in key areas**. As shown on pages 18-21:
  - Parents and staff feel most informed about school safety issues and events such as meetings and competitions, and community members feel most informed about events and student successes and achievements.
  - All three groups felt they were least informed about district finances, with less than half of parents and community members indicating they feel at least moderately informed and 62 percent of employees indicating they feel at least moderately informed.

29%	37%	38%	37%	54%
33%	32%	32%	35%	30%
38%	31%	31%	28%	17%
Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent	Parent
About district successes and achievements	About leader decisions	About district goals and plans	About district facilities	About district finances

32%	32%	34%	37%
26%	26%	27%	28%
42%	41%	40%	35%
About extra-curricular programs and offerings (athletics, clubs, arts, etc.)	About student conduct and discipline	About homework and projects	About academic programs and offerings

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How Informed in Key Areas - Employees

	Employee	Employee	Employee
	12%	12%	10%
	23%	34%	38%
	65%	54%	53%
	About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	About district successes and achievements
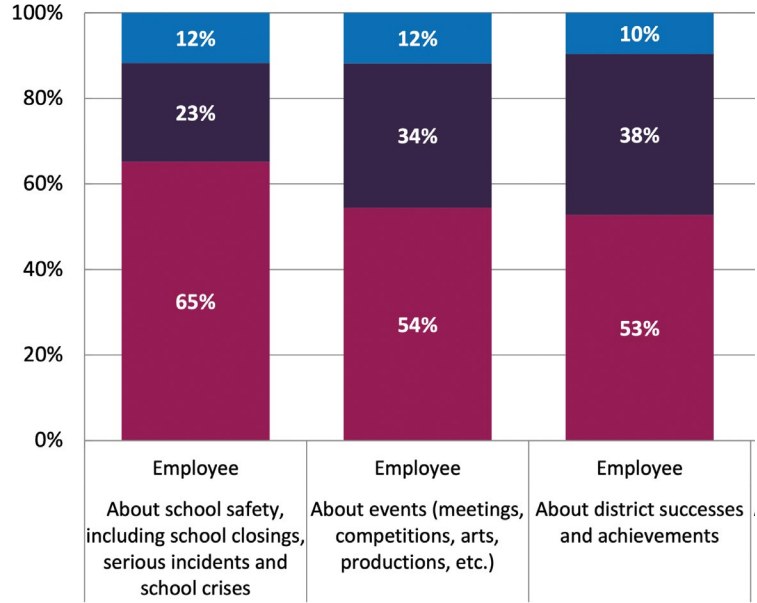
How Informed in Areas Specific to Employees - Employees

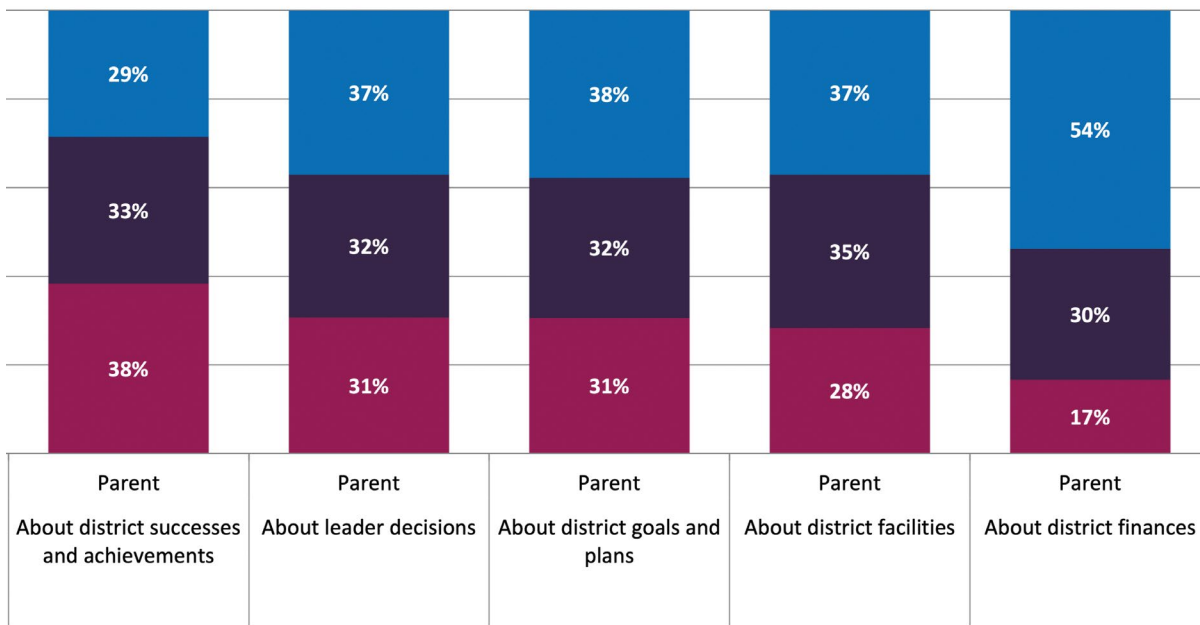|		
	7%	7%
	19%	20%
	74%	73%
	About how I can support student achievement (N=290)	About how to best perform my duties (N=290)

How Informed in Key Areas - Community

■ Extremely Informed+Very Informed

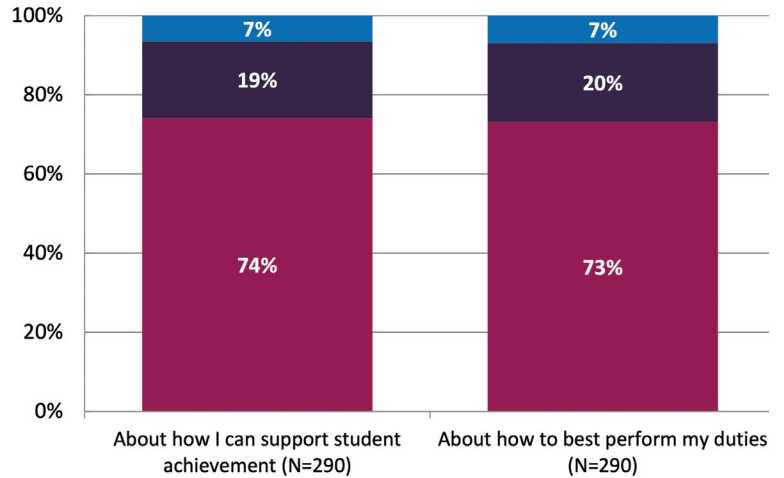■ Moderately Informed

■ Slightly Informed+Not At All Informed

	Community	Community	Community
	38%	33%	24%
	27%	36%	49%
	36%	31%	27%
	About events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	About student successes and achievement	About district successes and achievements

Employee — About student successes and achievement: 12%, 39%, 49%
Employee — About leader decisions: 20%, 32%, 48%
Employee — About district goals and plans: 18%, 34%, 48%
Employee — About district facilities: 27%, 42%, 31%
Employee — About district finances: 38%, 36%, 26%

About how I can deliver effective customer service (N=291): 14%, 23%, 64%
About how I can best represent the district as an ambassador (N=290): 17%, 27%, 57%

Community — About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises: 42%, 33%, 24%
Community — About district goals and plans: 51%, 33%, 16%
Community — About district facilities: 38%, 47%, 16%
Community — About leader decisions: 44%, 42%, 13%
Community — About district finances: 56%, 31%, 13%

- When parents were asked to rate how well-informed they are in **areas related to students**, they felt most informed about their student's progress in school and least informed about academic programs and offerings.

- When staff were asked to rate how well-informed they are in **areas related to their jobs**, they felt most informed about how to support student achievement and least informed about how to represent the district as an ambassador.

- All survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with **statements regarding communication from the district that relate to its quality and engagement of stakeholders**. As detailed in the charts on :

  - The majority of parents, employees and community members agreed or strongly agreed that communications are easy to understand, timely and accurate, and that they know where and how to direct a question, complaint or concern.

  - Staff (87%) and parents (82%) had the greatest level of agreement with the statement that communications are easy for them to understand.

  - Community members (67%) had the greatest level of agreement with the statement that they know where and how to direct a question, complaint or concern.

  - Across all three stakeholder types, there were comparatively lower levels of agreement that their involvement, input and opinions are welcome and valued. Among community members in particular, less than half indicated agreement.

  - More than half of parents (58%) and staff (68%) agreed or strongly agreed that communications are open and transparent, but less than half of community members (40%) felt similarly.

- In focus groups, parent and staff comments reinforced the survey results and provided additional insight on **communications quality in relation to emergencies and transparency**:

  - Emergency communications were mentioned as being generally effective, with participants noting that multiple channels are used to share information in crisis situations. Although there was some concern about the same message arriving in different forms, the general feeling was, "I prefer to be over-notified than not notified at all."

  - Participants said they understand that there are limits on how much information the district can share. However, some stated that they felt the district could have shared more than they did. As one participant put it, "Telling us only that the situation has been resolved is not helpful."

  - Participants expressed a strong desire for greater transparency and a need to know more of the thinking behind the district's decision-making. There was particular interest among all participants in knowing more about the district's finances.

- **A lack of consistency at the school building and individual classroom level in messaging and how it is shared** was a topic in parent and staff focus groups. Representative comments include:

  - "The quality and quantity of communication all depends on the principal and varies from building to building."

  - "There is not a lot of consistency between the buildings with what information is offered and how things are provided. Even in the same building, we have a newsletter that is inconsistent in how information is shared."

  - "While the instruction is good, communications are dependent on the teacher's desire to communicate."
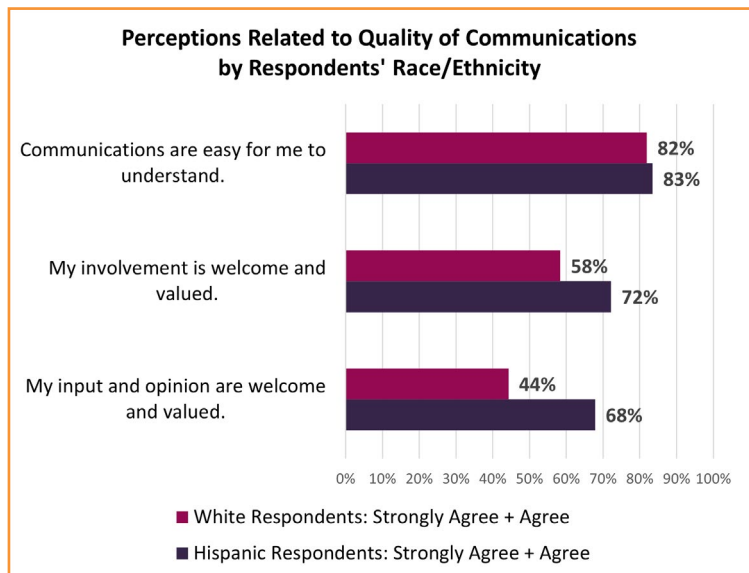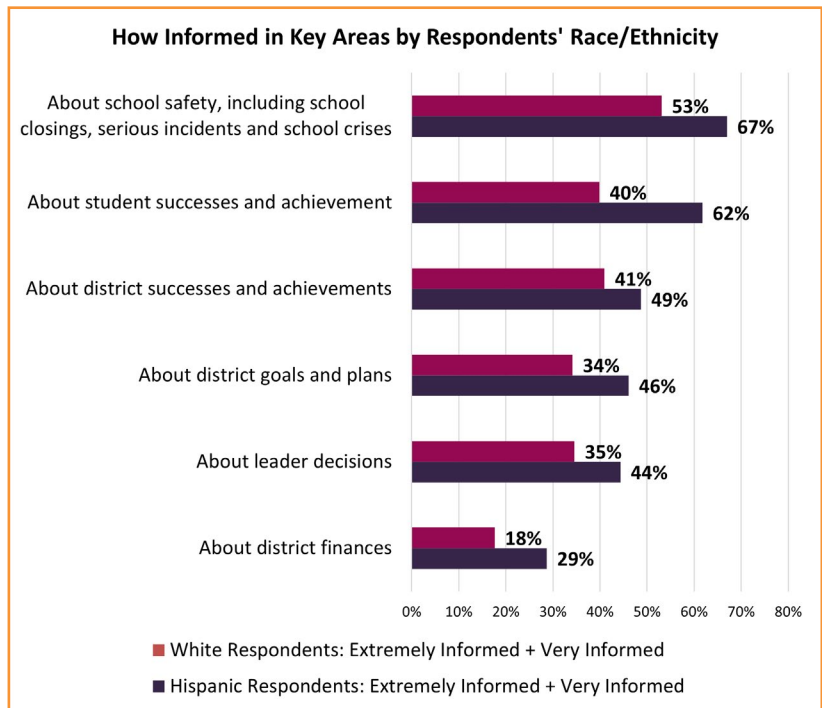
- **GIPS is a diverse school system**, but the largest racial or ethnic minority population among students is Hispanic/Latino. About 20% of SCOPE Survey respondents identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino/Latina, not far off from the 32% of students who identify the same. A comparison of responses among survey participants who identify as Hispanic and those who identify as white found some interesting trends:

  ▪ In response to questions about how informed they feel in key areas, a greater percentage of Hispanic respondents, by 8-22 percentage points, indicated they feel very or extremely informed. This held true for information about school safety, district successes and achievements, student successes and achievements, leader decisions, district goals and plans, and even district finances, as shown in the first chart below.
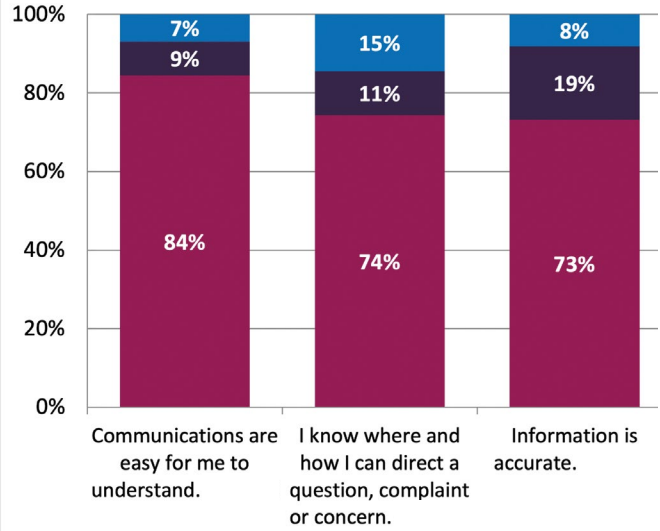
  ▪ A greater percentage of Hispanic respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements that their involvement, input and opinions are welcome and valued. The difference in agreement levels amounted to 14-24 percentage points, as shown in the second chart below at right.

  ▪ Similar percentages of Hispanic respondents (83%) and white respondents (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that communications are easy for them to understand.

How Informed in Key Areas by Respondents' Race/Ethnicity

Key Area	White Respondents: Extremely Informed + Very Informed	Hispanic Respondents: Extremely Informed + Very Informed
About school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises	53%	67%
About student successes and achievement	40%	62%
About district successes and achievements	41%	49%
About district goals and plans	34%	46%
About leader decisions	35%	44%
About district finances	18%	29%

■ White Respondents: Extremely Informed + Very Informed
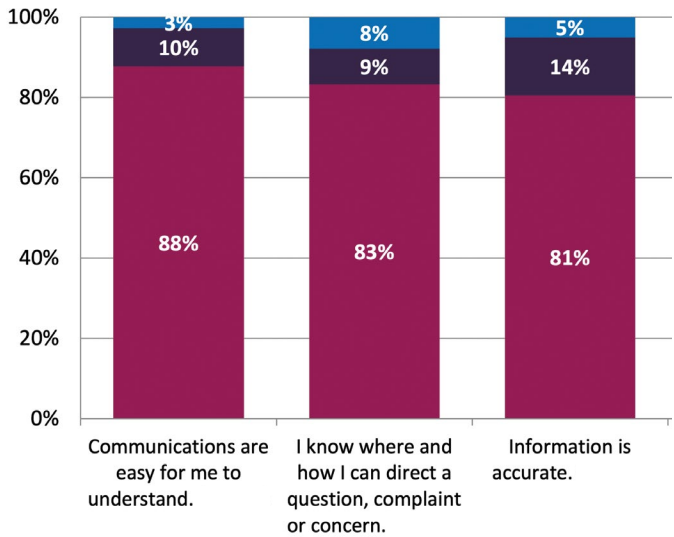■ Hispanic Respondents: Extremely Informed + Very Informed

- Communication concerns from parents in the Spanish-speaking focus group centered on a desire for more translators to help them understand what the district is doing and saying, particularly at meetings. Not having sufficient numbers of translators/interpreters was a theme across teacher, support staff and student focus groups, too. Students shared concerns that "newcomers" who don't speak English "are not asking the teachers anything" and aren't invited into classroom discussions due to language barriers.

Perceptions Related to Quality of Communications by Respondents' Race/Ethnicity

Statement	White Respondents: Strongly Agree + Agree	Hispanic Respondents: Strongly Agree + Agree
Communications are easy for me to understand.	82%	83%
My involvement is welcome and valued.	58%	72%
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	44%	68%

■ White Respondents: Strongly Agree + Agree
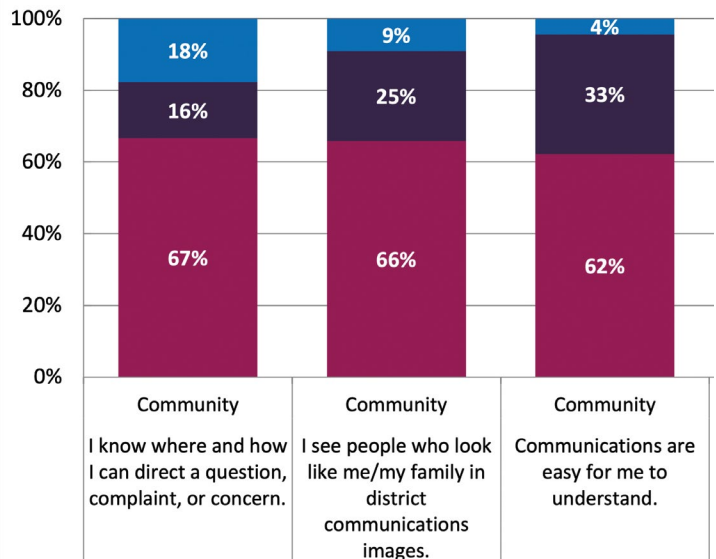■ Hispanic Respondents: Strongly Agree + Agree

Perceptions Related to the Quality of Communications - Parents

Communications are easy for me to understand: 84% / 9% / 7%
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern: 74% / 11% / 15%
Information is accurate: 73% / 19% / 8%

Perceptions Related to the Quality of Communications - Employees

Communications are easy for me to understand: 88% / 10% / 3%
I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint or concern: 83% / 9% / 8%
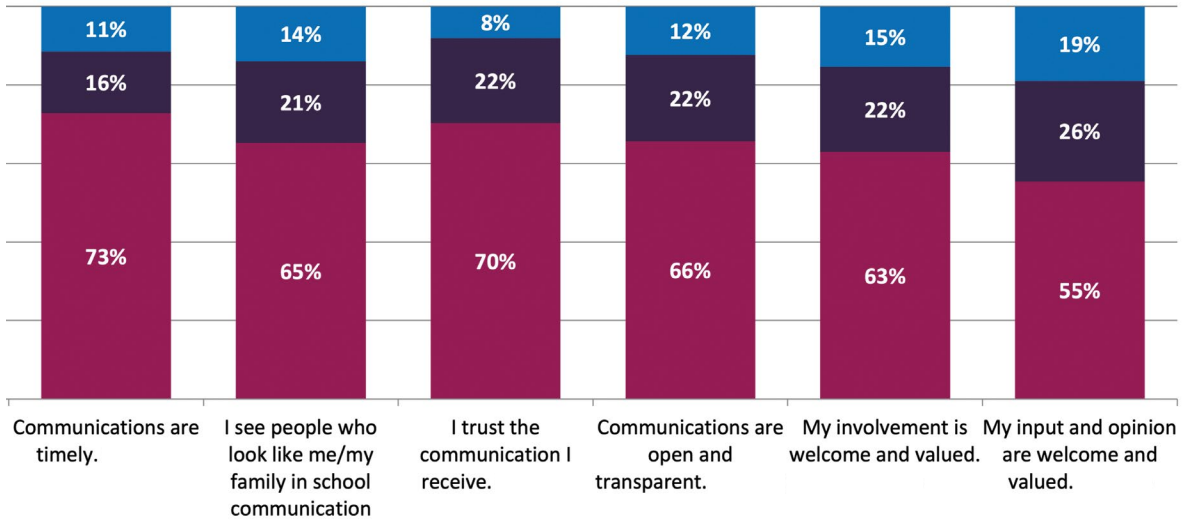Information is accurate: 81% / 14% / 5%

Perceptions Related to the Quality of Communications - Community

■ Strongly Agree+Agree

■ Undecided

■ Disagree+Strongly Disagree

Community: I know where and how I can direct a question, complaint, or concern: 67% / 16% / 18%
Community: I see people who look like me/my family in district communications images: 66% / 25% / 9%
Community: Communications are easy for me to understand: 62% / 33% / 4%

Chart 1 (top row):

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Communications are timely.	73%	16%	11%
I see people who look like me/my family in school communication	65%	21%	14%
I trust the communication I receive.	70%	22%	8%
Communications are open and transparent.	66%	22%	12%
My involvement is welcome and valued.	63%	22%	15%
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	55%	26%	19%

Chart 2 (middle row):

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I trust the communication I receive.	78%	16%	6%
Communications are timely.	78%	15%	7%
My involvement is welcome and valued.	73%	18%	9%
I receive communication that makes me feel valued as an employee	71%	18%	11%
Communications are open and transparent.	70%	23%	7%
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	63%	24%	13%

Chart 3 (bottom row) — Community:

| Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I trust the communication I receive.	58%	29%	13%
Communications are timely.	58%	33%	9%
Information is accurate.	56%	40%	4%
My involvement is welcome and valued.	47%	36%	18%
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	44%	36%	20%
Communications are open and transparent.	40%	44%	16%

- The communications team reports that GIPS' digital resources, printed materials, posters, etc. that are available in English are generally also translated into Spanish, by district staff.
    - The district's Smore e-newsletter platform has a translation capability that automatically responds to a reader's mobile device native language settings.
    - The district website has a "select language" option powered by Google Translate. In addition, translated versions of certain materials, for example registration information, the GIPS Handbook and the Annual Report, are linked in various spots on the website.
    - The district's mass communications system, ParentLink, allows for translation into Spanish and Arabic, and into Somali for email and text messages of up to 50 characters.
    - At the GIPS Welcome Center, where English learners and their families begin the registration process, materials are translated into Spanish, Arabic and Somali.
    - Lengthier materials are more challenging translation projects, which is likely why the auditor found that the website indicates the Spanish language version of the On Track to Thrive 2025 strategic plan launched in August 2021 is still pending.

Digital Communication Tools

District/School Websites

- The GIPS district website and school websites are built on the Finalsite/Blackboard platform and are the responsibility of the communications team.

- The redesigned GIPS website was launched in 2022 and features welcoming, high-quality images for visitors and the district's purple color theme (pictured at right). Photos show the diversity of the district's students. Navigation from the home page to schools, programs and departments is prominent, links are functional, and there is a mix of attractive still and multimedia content. Images and stories are added regularly as fresh content. The GIPS district site visual theme is carried over to all school websites, and consistent branding makes it clear that each school is part of the district "family."
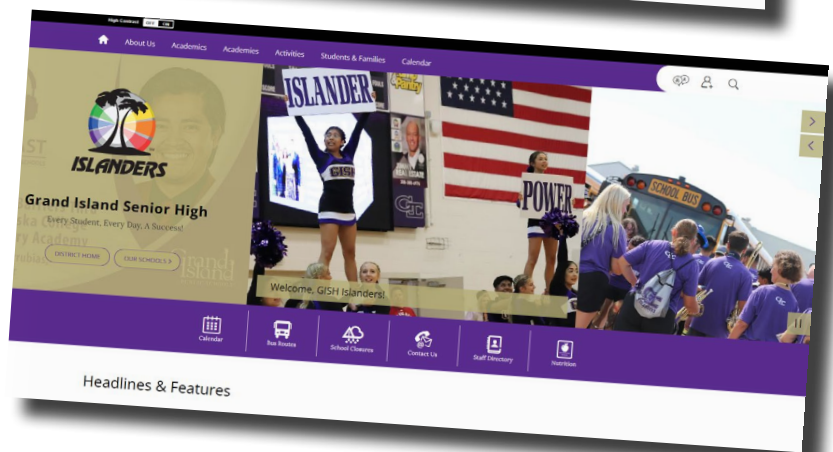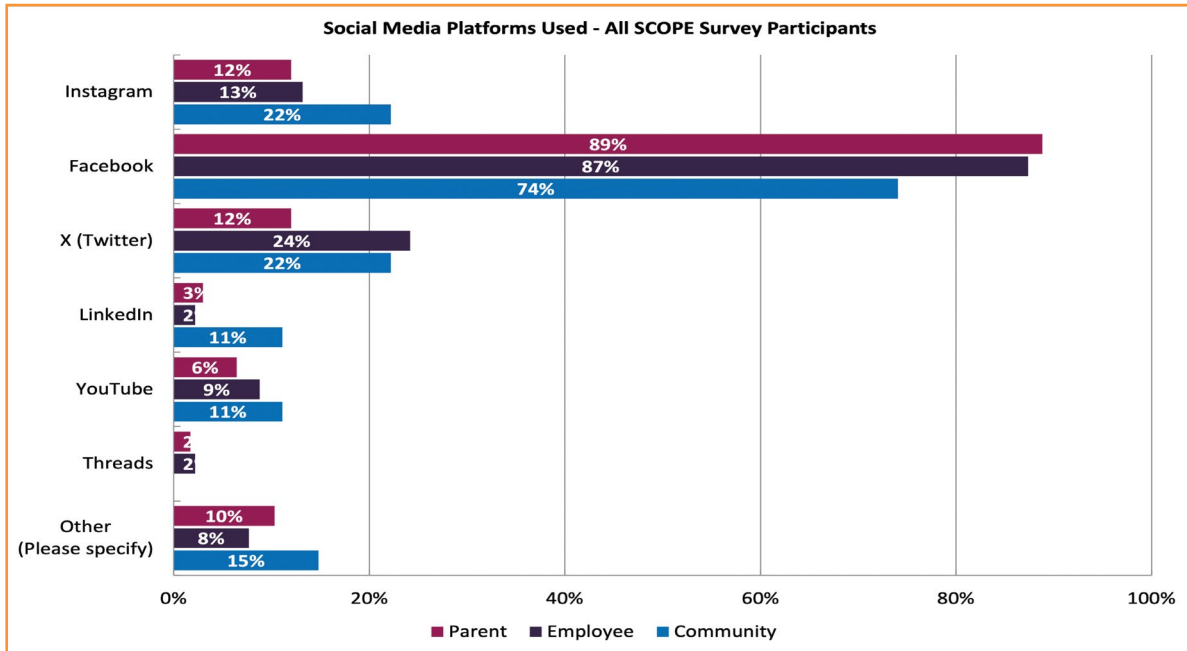
- The GIPS website has accessibility features, including larger type sizes and a high contrast text mode. The WebAIM website accessibility tool showed relatively few accessibility issues on the district homepage. Six errors were identified due to missing form labels. There were 36 alerts, which are less serious than errors, and call attention to structural issues that, if corrected, could make navigating the site easier for those with accessibility issues. The full report can be viewed at: https://wave.webaim.org/report#/https://www.gips.org/Page/1#.

- The district's On Track to Thrive 2025 strategic plan is prominently and easily accessible from the main homepage.

- The site has dedicated menu options and content for current "Students & Families" and for potential newcomers to the community at "Join GIPS." It does not have dedicated content areas for other potential constituencies such as local news media or taxpayers like retired citizens and residents without school-age children, but public information sources such as the GIPS Cast podcast and district social media channels are promoted prominently.

- The search feature seems to not return helpful information. For example, a search for "annual report" yields only calendar items and a search for "podcast" yields multiple listings for "homepage multimedia gallery." This suggests that the logic used to identify search results should be explored and improved in collaboration with Finalsite/Blackboard.

District/School Social Media

- GIPS' Facebook page (pictured at right) has approximately 16,000 followers. In a review of a typical week of posts from Dec. 4-8, 2023, the engagement rate was 0.22 percent, which is higher than the 0.15 percent average engagement rate for Facebook across industries in 2022. Across all surveyed stakeholder groups (parents, staff, community), Facebook was by far the most frequently used of the various social media platforms (see chart on page 28).

- GIPS' Instagram account has 3,607 followers. In a review of a posts in October 2023, the engagement rate was 2.05 percent, which is higher than the 0.6 percent average engagement rate for Instagram across industries in 2022.

- GIPS' X/Twitter account has 5,456 followers. In a review of a typical week of posts from Dec. 4-8, 2023, the engagement rate was 1.0 percent, which is higher than the 0.5 percent average engagement rate for X/Twitter across industries in 2022.

- The communications team measures social media monthly for growth and engagement, and comparisons are done with similar school districts in the state by platform. Every six months the results are reported to the Board of Education.
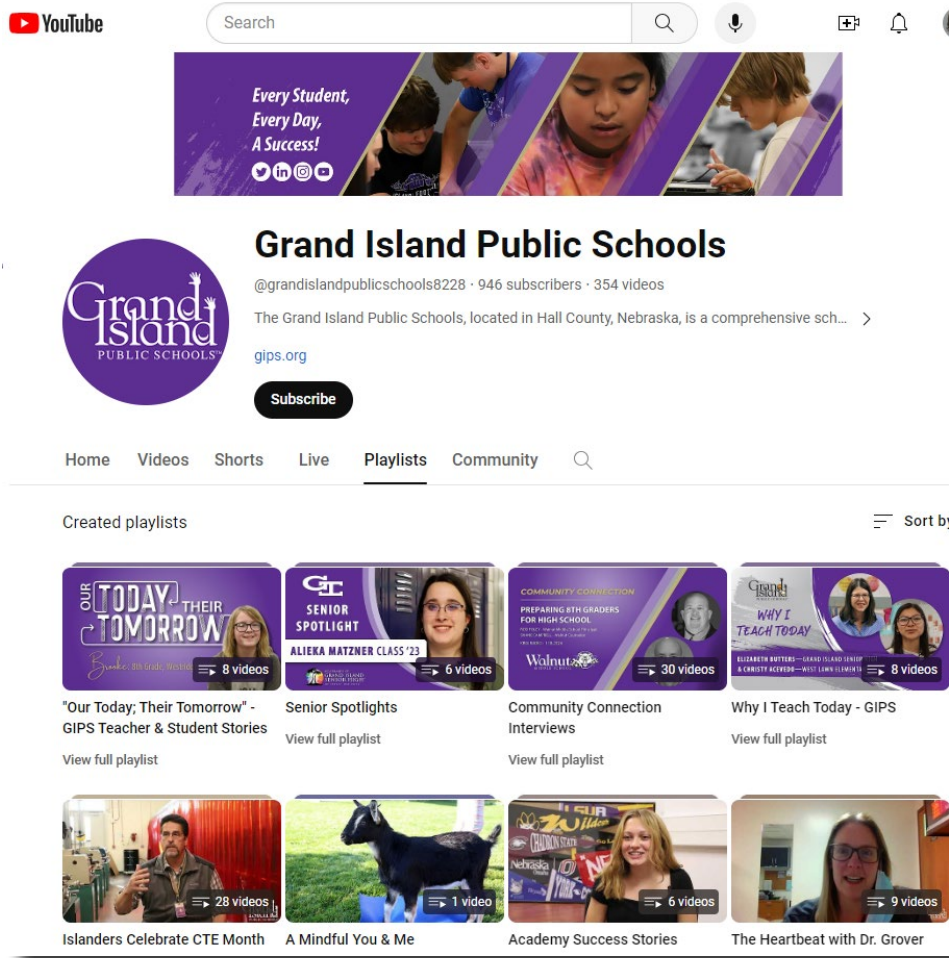
Social Media Platforms Used - All SCOPE Survey Participants

Platform	Parent	Employee	Community
Instagram	12%	13%	22%
Facebook	89%	87%	74%
X (Twitter)	12%	24%	22%
LinkedIn	3%	2	11%
YouTube	6%	9%	11%
Threads	2	2	
Other (Please specify)	10%	8%	15%

- There has been a steady increase in the district's social media following, particularly for YouTube and Facebook, over the last few years. Since June 2022, Facebook followers have increased by 2,000, Twitter/X followers have increased by 637, Instagram followers have increased by 201 and YouTube followers have increased by 130. The communications team attributes this increase to external factors, such as a very high-profile school board election, as well as an intentional internal effort to post more and more consistently.

- The communication team's key performance indicator for social media is three or more Facebook posts per day, with one new video per week. The team estimates that postings have tripled over the last two years.

- As noted on pages 12-15, social media is a significant source of information for many GIPS stakeholders. More than half of surveyed parents, employees and community members rely on social media daily or weekly for information about the district, and for community members, it was the top-rated source of district information. The survey results also show that Facebook is by far the most popular platform across all three stakeholder types, as shown on the next page.

- The GIPS Cast podcast is a recent addition to the district's communication toolbox. Podcast episodes are produced by the communications team and hosted by Communications Director Mitch Rouse. The podcasts average 450-500 listeners per episode and are shared on major channels including Apple, Spotify and iHeart.

- Social media platforms are linked on the district website and electronic newsletters, and icons are displayed on hard copy materials.

- All GIPS communication with social media followers are done by referrals to direct messaging and not through posts.

- All social media posts are archived for public record/FOIA needs.

District/School Video Channels

- GIPS has a YouTube channel with 921 subscribers that houses the district's video productions (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuoqzO4XGtolkuK788Ynt5Q). The videos produced by the communications team are professionally done and engaging, with quality imagery and audio along with appropriate music. The graphics, purple color and logos used in the videos clearly identify them as part of the GIPS family of communications.

- In a review of posts from Nov. 13 - Dec. 14, 2023, the engagement rate was 0.9 percent for six videos, which is lower than the average engagement rate on YouTube for 2022 of 1.64 percent.

- The channel opens with an overview of the district and its beliefs (*On Track to Thrive*) and includes videos of graduations, board meetings and events. It also features several video series, including *Our Today; Their Tomorrow* (stories about students and teachers), *Why I Teach Today* (stories about teachers) and *My Choice, Our Voice*, featuring students from GIPS academies.

- GIPS is also featured on Community Connection, a weekly radio program by station KRGI. Program recordings are listed on the YouTube channel.

- The district's videos are featured in its various communication channels and on the website.

Word that Best Describes the District: Faculty/Staff

Word that Best Describes the District: Parents/Families

Word that Best Describes the District: Community Members

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) and external opportunities (O) and threats (T)—known as a SWOT analysis—affecting the ability of GIPS to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
INTERNAL	• GIPS staff are held in high regard for their dedication to students. • The district is perceived as providing an expansive range of educational opportunities. • Leadership has created opportunities for community involvement in the schools and district. • Branding is established and used consistently to support the district's mission and vision. • There is a robust digital communication program in place to keep stakeholders informed, celebrate successes and tell the district story.	• There is not yet a comprehensive strategic communication plan in place to guide public relations and communication functions. • Some stakeholders believe that communications are not open and transparent. • There is a need for additional resources to communicate with non-English-speaking parents and students. • Stakeholders want to understand and participate in the decision-making processes of the district. • There is a lack of consistency in how different schools share messages.
	OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
EXTERNAL	• The transition to the new superintendent is viewed by external stakeholders as promising and can be leveraged to build community support for the district. • Staff are well-regarded and trusted by external stakeholders, putting them in a position to be credible public ambassadors for the district.	• A perceived lack of transparency in financial, legislative and operational communications can negatively impact trust in the district and support for future initiatives. • Increasing diversity in the community and the student population will bring additional communication challenges that will need to be addressed in order to ensure all parents/families and students are equitably informed.

Benchmarking of Results

National Benchmark: SCOPE Survey Scores

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted the online School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and community members. This data was used by the auditor to identify strengths and weaknesses of GIPS' communication program, and many of these key data points are included in the Key Findings section of this report.

An additional value the SCOPE Survey brings to our clients is the ability to compare their SCOPE Survey results on issues that matter most in school communication with the results of the more than 100 surveys conducted by districts and educational service agencies, large and small, across the United States since 2015. This data is presented in the SCOPE Scorecard on the following page.

The rating numbers provided for each question, on a 1-5 scale, correlate to the following descriptions as applicable for the type of question to which participants were responding:

1. **When participants were asked to rate** *how informed they feel* **on specific topics, they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Extremely informed
   - 4 = Very informed
   - 3 = Moderately Informed
   - 2 = Slightly informed
   - 1 = Not at all informed

2. **When participants were asked to rate** *their level of agreement with* **specific statements, they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Strongly agree
   - 4 = Agree
   - 3 = Undecided
   - 2 = Disagree
   - 1 = Strongly disagree

3. **When participants were asked to provide ratings about their** *perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications,* **they responded using the following scale:**
   - 5 = Excellent
   - 4 = Above average
   - 3 = Average
   - 2 = Below average
   - 1 = Very poor

SCOPE Scorecard

| | | GIPS | NATIONAL | | |
			Avg.	Low	High
STAFF	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About how I can support student achievement (1)	3.9	3.6	3.0	4.4
	About how I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador (1)	3.5	3.2	2.4	3.8
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	3.7	3.4	2.8	4.0
	About topics that make me feel valued as an employee (1)	3.8	3.1	2.3	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my school/department (2)	4.0	4.0	3.4	4.5
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	3.8	3.7	2.7	4.3
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.8	3.6	2.6	4.2
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.6	3.6	2.3	4.2
PARENTS/FAMILIES	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About my child's progress in school (1)	3.2	3.4	2.4	4.1
	About how I can support my child's learning (1)	3.4	3.8	3.1	4.4
	About school and district events and programs (1)	3.3	3.3	2.5	4.1
	About crises/serious incidents (1)				
	Agreement with statements about communication:	3.5	3.5	3.0	4.1
	I trust the communication I receive from my child's school (2)	3.9	4.1	3.4	4.5
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	3.8	3.8	3.1	4.4
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.7	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.5	3.8	2.6	4.3
COMMUNITY	**Level of feeling informed:**				
	About academic programs and district performance (1)	2.9	2.9	2.0	4.2
	About district finances and related issues (1)	2.4	2.5	1.7	3.6
	About school safety (1)	2.8	2.9	1.7	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	3.6	3.4	2.2	4.3
	General perceptions:				
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.6	3.2	2.0	4.0
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.5	3.3	2.1	4.3

National Benchmark:
Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that members can use to assess their programs. To accomplish this, NSPRA sought to identify the characteristics that define a district's communication program as "emerging," "established" or "exemplary" in seven critical function areas.

As of June 2023, rubrics have been completed for the following critical function areas:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program

- Internal communications

- Parent/Family Communications

- Marketing/Branding Communications

- Crisis Communication

- Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns

- Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications

Benchmarking against the rubrics differs from other parts of the communication audit process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on survey results, what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews, or discovered in district materials. Instead, **it addresses how the GIPS communication program compares to national standards of excellence in school public relations.**

Benchmarked Areas

CFA 1: Comprehensive Professional Communication Program is the basis for all communications deployed from a school district and is rooted in the communications function residing at the executive management level. Communications are systematic, transparent, two-way and comprehensive. They align with and support the district's goals and objectives. Ultimately, the foster dialogue, collaboration, understanding, engagement and trust to support student achievement.

CFA 2: Internal Communications recognizes the invaluable role of all personnel as representatives of the district. It includes having a proactive program for providing staff with the skills, information and resources they need to effectively serve as ambassadors.

CFA 3: Parent/Family Communications recognizes the relationship between family involvement/engagement and student success. It includes a proactive communications program to keep parents/families informed about and involved in their children's education with the ultimate goal of building collaboration and trust to support student learning.

CFA 4: Marketing/Branding Communications acknowledges that increased competition, declining resources, changing demographics, news media scrutiny and the importance of public perceptions are just a few of the reasons districts need an effective marketing program. Having a well-defined and authentically experienced brand promise as part of the marketing strategy helps position a district in the community and supports the district vision.

CFA 5: Crisis Communication demonstrates that no better opportunity exists for districts to show the effectiveness of their leadership and communication than during a crisis. All eyes attention are focused on how a district handles and responds to crises at hand.

CFA 6: Bond-Finance Election Plans and Campaigns addresses specific instances in which districts must receive voter approval before spending the district's existing funds and/or levying a tax to raise funds for specific purposes. Before residents vote, there are

foundational steps for building informed consent through communications on a district's operating budget, capital project proposal, millage increase or other bond/finance election campaign.

CFA 7: Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications recognizes that implementing effective, equitable communications and engagement strategies–for daily communication efforts as well as for formal diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives– creates a respectful, inclusive culture that encourages individuals to share their thoughts and experiences without fear of backlash.

Benchmarking Scale

The chart below reflects the auditor's assessment of where GIPS falls within the seven benchmarked areas in line with these definitions of the progressive scale levels:

- **Emerging.** The program is in the early stages of development and largely responsive to immediate needs or problems, with minimal proactive planning. Goals, if articulated, are loosely defined with minimal alignment with district goals and objectives.

- **Established.** The program includes a series of defined approaches based on some research. Strategies, tactics and goals are defined. The program aligns with district goals and objectives. Some evaluation may occur.

- **Exemplary.** The program is conducted according to an articulated plan following the four-step strategic public relations planning process, a model of communications known by the acronym RPIE (Research, Plan, Implement, Evaluate). The program is aligned with and integrated into district strategic plans. It is supported through policy, training and resources. Ongoing evaluation to improve progress is embedded into operations.

The Recommendations in this report provide insight and advice that will help the GIPS communication program progress from its current status, as assessed by the auditor, to the next level in each area. For more details on these national benchmarks, find the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023.

CRITICAL FUNCTION AREAS	EMERGING	ESTABLISHED	EXEMPLARY

- **Comprehensive planned communications**

- **Internal communications**

- **Parent/family communications**

- **Marketing/branding communications**

- **Crisis communications**

- **Bond/finance election plans and campaigns**

- **Diverse, equitable and inclusive communications**
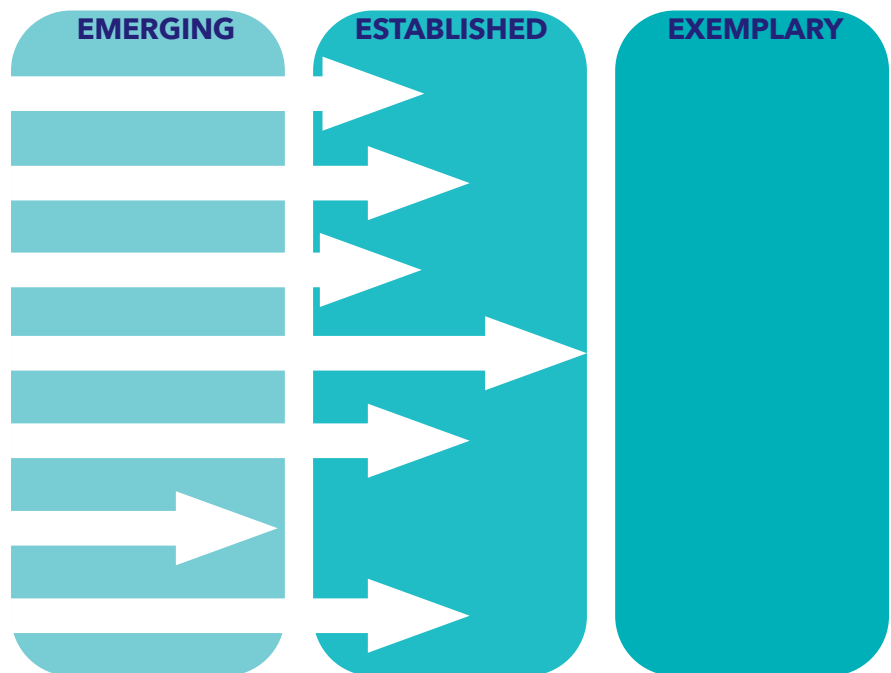
Recommendations

Having assessed the data gathered from the SCOPE Survey, focus groups, interviews and district materials, the auditor finds that GIPS maintains an active, solid and multi-faceted communications program. The communication audit process has helped to identify gaps and opportunities, and this report provides related strategies for improvement and enhancement. It is clear to the auditor that the GIPS communications team has the desire and talent necessary to execute NSPRA's recommendations.

With the communications team undergoing a transition with its senior leader retiring, it is an opportune time to develop a comprehensive strategic communication plan to guide the department's efforts going forward. The basis for such a plan has already been outlined by the team, and this NSPRA Communication Audit Report will help to expand it, provide greater structure, set measures for accountability and ensure ongoing alignment between the formal efforts of the communication program and the GIPS Strategic Plan.

While stakeholders are generally satisfied with GIPS communications, several areas of challenge and opportunity emerged through the research process. Focus group participants clearly expressed concern for what they described as a tumultuous leadership transition. However, they also expressed optimism that positive change is occurring and that Superintendent Fisher is seen as leading the effort to rebuild GIPS' reputation.

To build on this momentum, it is imperative that GIPS address several challenges facing its communication program:

- Stakeholder feedback suggests that improving parent/family communication, particularly at the school level, is a critical need for GIPS to further support their engagement in the schools and their students' education. A careful review as to what is working well and where there are areas for improvement is warranted and accomplished, at least in part, through this communication audit.

- As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, ensuring that all students' families consistently receive important district and school information in their primary home language will be challenging. There is a perception among some parents, staff and students that GIPS should be doing more to meet the live translation needs of its non-English speaking students and their families.

- The SCOPE Survey results and focus group comments indicate that stakeholders do not always view GIPS communications as open and transparent, and there was a clear desire to know the "why" behind district decisions.

- GIPS teachers and staff were universally seen as strong assets of the district. However, more can be done to support them and increase their enthusiasm for standing as ambassadors for the district and its schools through communications professional development.

- Finally, an ongoing issue that will grow more critical in the future is the state of the district's finances and what will need to be done to continue to support student programming and operations. Strongly noted in the SCOPE Survey was a lack of understanding about GIPS finances and fiscal operations across all stakeholder groups; a not uncommon but still concerning trend in school districts today.

The following recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority and are accompanied by action steps that provide tactical ideas for how these recommendations might be accomplished. However, the district may choose to address these recommendations through tactics other than those outlined here.

Some of these recommendations can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. Generally speaking, a district should not try to address more than two to three recommendations each school year, while also continuing to deliver existing programs and services. This is a long-term effort, and new communication components will need to be introduced as budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Complete the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan.

2. Standardize parent/family communication processes across schools, departments and the district.

3. Build greater awareness of and expand resources for meeting the information needs of diverse students and their families.

4. Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.

5. Provide communication training for administrators and key front-line staff.

6. Implement multimodal communication strategies to increase stakeholder knowledge about district finances.

Recommendation 1:

Complete the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan.

The GIPS communications team is to be commended for having already started the process of outlining a communication plan. This existing plan can serve as a foundation for the development of a more strategic, comprehensive plan designed to ground all of the district's communication efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, cost-effective and most likely to succeed in the Grand Island community.

Revising and expanding the existing plan to reflect the findings of the NSPRA Communication Audit will take GIPS to the next level in strengthening relationships, increasing understanding, building trust and solidifying support for the core values articulated in the district's strategic plan.

NSPRA recommends that the plan follow the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronym RPIE (Research, Plan, Implement, Evaluate). The recommendations and action steps in this report can serve as foundations for the strategies and tactics of the plan and help GIPS integrate strategic communications into every aspect of the district's work. Creating this structure for local education topics and potential concerns to be addressed proactively and effectively will also help to increase stakeholder confidence and trust.

Action Step 1.1

Evaluate the current plan against school public relations best practices.

QUICK WIN

NSPRA offers many resources that will help GIPS revise and strengthen its strategic communication plan. First, watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on "Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan," available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans.

Then review these NSPRA award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:

- Pattonville (Mo.) Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program—https://bit.ly/3HkADUw

- Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan— https://bit.ly/48u8g2o

Action Step 1.2

Update the research section of the GIPS plan to include the findings of the communication audit.

Research for a strategic communication plan can help identify challenges and opportunities for a communication program, particularly those for which specific goals and objectives might be set. This NSPRA Communication Audit Report,

including the SCOPE Survey data, provides an understanding of how stakeholders access information, how they prefer to receive it and how they feel about the communications they receive. When revising the plan, the auditor recommends summarizing the most relevant, top-line research findings from the SCOPE Survey and focus groups in bullet points in the Research section of the plan.

Following are additional data types to consider including as part of communications team research when updating the plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: enrollment, student poverty, access to technology, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by news media and specialized websites, etc.

- Local community demographics: National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/), the U.S. Census Bureau (https://data.census.gov/) and local county/city/town websites

- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (https://pdkpoll.org/), Gallup polls on education (https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx) and EdChoice Schooling in America Poll (https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/schooling-in-america-polling-dashboard-2/)

- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org/) and Gallup Workplace Insights (https://www.gallup.com/workplace/insights.aspx)

As part of the research, consider incorporating a summary of current communication, public

#1

Complete the development of a comprehensive strategic communication plan.

relations, marketing, and engagement activities within GIPS. This summary should encompass various ongoing activities and strategies such as managing website content, district and principal newsletters, social media updates, emergency notifications to parents and staff, letters and videos from the superintendent, news releases, annual reports, and crisis communication. The materials submitted for the NSPRA Communication Audit will largely fulfill the requirements for this task.

When planning the communications team's formal efforts, be sure to delve into the efforts made by other staff members to cultivate relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. Developing a comprehensive approach to communications should include an awareness of activities such as parent conferences, open house programs, participation in advisory groups, efforts to cultivate business partnerships, efforts to manage relations with the news media, involvement in community organizations, etc.

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

Action Step 1.3

Incorporate measurable objectives in the GIPS plan.

The process of bringing communication strategies to fruition starts with planning, and GIPS has some of this groundwork already done through the identification of specific deliverables outlined in the 2023-24 GIPS Communication Goals. The following additional steps should be undertaken to enhance the existing plan and respond to the audit findings:

- **Develop objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART).** The SCOPE Survey provides numerous data points that can be used to establish benchmarks. For example, since one of the goals is to "develop opportunities for superintendent engagement," consider setting a measurable objective based on the SCOPE Survey data regarding whether stakeholders feel their input and opinion are welcome and valued. For example, "By the end of the 2024-25 school year, the percent of parents who strongly agree or agree that their input and opinion are welcome and valued will have increased from 47 to 60 percent."

- **Delineate "strategies" and "tactics."** Strategies are used to achieve objectives and are broader in scope than tactics. A strategy states what is going to be done to achieve a desired outcome, while tactics describe how that strategy will be done. Carefully sorting the objectives from the strategies and the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to understand, particularly for district and department leaders in other functional areas. It will also make it easier for the communications team

to implement the plan and evaluate it for effectiveness. For example, if the measurable objective is to increase the percentage of all stakeholders who say they are moderately to extremely informed about district finances, a strategy and its related tactics might be:

- **Sample Strategy:** Make easy-to-understand district financial information available in multiple communication channels.

- **Tactics:**

  - Design an infographic that tells the budget story and post it prominently on the website and in all district publications. Review it at employee and parent meetings.

  - Create a short video explaining the budget and how it is developed.

  - Form a financial advisory committee that provides input on the budget and acts as ambassadors to explain district finances in the community.

- **Create key messages.** For each target audience, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the communications, and use that information to build targeted key messages. People's attention span and time is limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategy in the prior bullet, the following is an example key message: "The community is invested in the success of their local schools, and to respect that investment, the district is committed to ensuring that our financial information is easily accessible and understandable."

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

  - Parents broken down by active/involved, non-English-speaking, etc.

  - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals

  - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents

  - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislators

  - Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children

  - Students such as those participating in student government

  - Media representatives from radio and television stations and local newspapers and magazines

- **Identify the best tactics to use for each stakeholder group.** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. For instance, since social media was the top rated source of information for community members and a goal is to increase stakeholder knowledge about district finances, consider the development of a series of infographics to share via social media with links to a website page for more information.

- **Consider the resources required to implement the plan. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:**

  - Equipment, software and subscriptions

  - Materials and supplies

  - Printing and duplicating

  - Print and digital advertising

  - Professional development

- **Set timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation comes after implementation, be sure to identify key times to take stock and see if the plan needs modification.

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

It can be challenging to distinguish between goals, objectives, strategies and tactics in part because some industries use the words interchangeably. For their use within the field of school communications, an analogy that can be helpful is to think of the terms in the context of traveling to a desired destination.

- The **goal** is the final destination of a long journey.

- **Measurable objectives** are stops along the way to reaching that destination. They might outline how many miles to be covered each day, where the driver will stop each night and by what time the driver plans to arrive at each pit stop.

- **Strategies and tactics** get into the nitty-gritty details: Will the driver take the scenic route or highways? If the chosen strategy is to take the scenic route, which songs should be put on the playlist to keep the driver awake?

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- **Assign responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the communications team; other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. Further, as addressed in [Recommendation 2](#) and [Recommendation 6](#), it is important that employees understand key issues and initiatives, can answer questions about them and know when they are responsible for disseminating it.

As GIPS works through the planning process, ensure the following questions are addressed for every major initiative the district undertakes:

- Who needs to know?

- What do they need to know?

- Why do they need to know?

- When do they need to know?

- How are we going to tell them?

- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?

- How will we track and measure what they have learned and done due to our communication efforts? How will we measure success?

Action Step 1.4

Incorporate an evaluation section in the GIPS plan.

For each objective, identify evaluative measures to be used later to determine the success in achieving them. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, vote results, user analytics, etc. This data can be the basis of

research findings to inform future updates to the strategic communication plan. The SCOPE Survey data can be used as a baseline for future measurement and evaluation, and GIPS might consider the possibility of conducting a follow-up SCOPE Survey with NSPRA in another year or two as a planned future evaluation component.

Recommendation 2:

Standardize parent/family communication processes across schools, departments and the district.

Effective parent communication is critical to the success of a school district because having supportive and understanding parents helps ensure student achievement. The SCOPE Survey data and focus group comments show there is room for growth in this area at GIPS, and it was clear from interviews with district leadership as well as staff that there is a desire and willingness to improve.

The concern expressed most frequently by parents is the lack of consistency in communications and messaging from building to building. GIPS can address this challenge by:

- Standardizing and reducing the number of platforms and applications used to communicate with parents, particularly at the building level.

- Establishing protocols for sharing information, including who is responsible for communicating what, and how and when the information is to be provided.

- Consistently following the school communication framework to support families as they move through each grade level, especially when they transition from elementary to middle school or when they have multiple children in different buildings.

The following action steps will guide GIPS in implementing these processes and protocols.

Action Step 2.1

Conduct a rigorous review of the tools used to communicate with parents.

The first step is to take inventory of all communication tools currently in use across the district. To make sure the list is complete, each school principal should be asked to provide a list of the communication tools used in their building.

From there, the district should establish a small review committee comprising a few representative teachers, parents, school-level administrators, technology staff and communications staff. The committee should be briefed on what each tool is used for, who uses it, who receives it, how often it is used, how easy it is to use, whether training is provided on its use and any available data on readership, open rates, distribution schedules, etc. Committee members can also use this audit report to inform the group's discussion. As part of the process, the group should identify situations where schools and teachers are using different platforms to accomplish the same purpose.

Another consideration for the group is the potential for a holistic solution that integrates many communication capabilities into a single platform. A wide range of such products and features are available, including from Finalsite/Blackboard, the district's current mass communication vendor. Some of the other vendors often used by NSPRA members include Apptegy, School Messenger, Catapult K12, Edlio and Gabbart Communications/ ParentSquare. Some offer integrated features such as one-click posting of messages on text, email, website and subscription-based messaging, and allow parents to choose what communication channels they prefer

and when they wish to receive non-urgent communications.

From this analysis, the group will be able to develop a set of recommended communication tools for use by all teachers and schools as appropriate for student age groups. The list of recommendations should be shared with district leadership, who would make the final determination of which tools to keep and which to eliminate.

Action Step 2.2

Develop a guide for staff to establish a common framework for parent communications.

The next step is to develop a guide that spells out which tools are preferred for which schools and grade levels, along with best practices for how frequently they should be used, in which situations they should be used, and how to obtain support or training to use the designated tools effectively and efficiently. The guidance document should also include recommended release and response times to ensure information is shared in a timely manner and stakeholders are not left waiting for responses to their questions, comments or concerns.

The guidance document will be most useful if it also includes:

- Basic formatting tips to improve readability and visual appeal.

- A list of approved sources of royalty-free visual content that won't violate copyrights.

- Templates or examples for common school- or teacher-to-parent messages.

- Summaries of relevant school board policies and state/federal laws that relate to sharing information with parents.

#2

Standardize parent/ family communication processes across schools, departments and the district.

Find several examples of staff guidelines on when to use which communications platform in NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Goldmine) section on "Training - Administrators, Board Members, Staff" at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff.

Action Step 2.3

Develop a plan for implementing the guidelines.

Ensure the successful implementation of the new guidelines by carefully planning platform transitions and adoptions. Be sure to develop a mini communication plan for the transition, too. Consideration should be given to the following:

- Budgets and timing to acquire or prepare additional technology.

- Process and timing for introducing new communication technology to staff, students and families, including providing resources for learning how to use the systems and get questions answered.

- Timing and content of initial training and ongoing support for staff.

- How to sunset any technology no longer being used, including archiving or transferring the old system's content.

Action Step 2.4

Regularly review and update the guidance.

To ensure the guidance remains complete, effective and current with changing technology or stakeholders' needs, the guide should be reviewed annually and collaboratively by the communications team and technology staff for any necessary content updates.

The annual review process should also include school building principals and department chairs reviewing and discussing the guidance with staff during back-to-school staff/department meetings.

Action Step 2.5

Clearly define the roles that departments and individuals play in sending various types of information.

QUICK WIN

Inconsistencies in sharing information often occur because staff are not sure who is responsible for disseminating information. All GIPS leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the communications team. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at meetings of the District Leadership Team so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

Following are three specific steps GIPS might consider to help ensure communication responsibilities are clear:

- **Define communication roles for administrative staff.** Developing and

annually reviewing a chart that clarifies administrators' communication roles and responsibilities (see example on) helps ensure that messaging strategies and activities are understood and aligned with the strategic plan.

- **Produce a guide for district and school administrators** that sets clear communication expectations. Following are two examples:

  - Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School District–https://bit.ly/3uoCe8J

  - Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools– https://bit.ly/4a0z0ZF

- **Assign responsibilities for communicating on specific topics.** One way to address inconsistencies and improve communication follow-through after meetings is using a responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of "who does what" for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes for "FYI," "to be shared" and "confidential" to each agenda item. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If an item is marked "to be shared," then a discussion will be needed

Example: Communication Roles Guide for Administrative Staff

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Communications Team	District-level updates on: • Routine matters that impact more than one school • Urgent matters that impact any school • Major districtwide initiatives Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media • Video channel • News releases to media • Paid ad placements Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent's Administrative Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/action briefs Board policy changes	Board webpages
Chiefs of Elementary and Secondary Education	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Chief Financial Officer	Budget and finance updates Bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Chief of Human Capital Management	Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items	HR webpages Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Board meetings
Principals	School-level updates on: • School-specific routine matters • School-specific urgent matters • Major districtwide initiatives (using tool kit provided)	School-level tools for internal and external audiences: • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media

to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed.

Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes

FYI	
To be shared	
Confidential	

Following is an example of a guideline used by one school district to standardize parent communication practices:

- [Connect. Be Heard. School Communication Guidelines](#) (PDF) - Osceola School District guidelines on when to use what communications platform.

Action Step 2.6

Utilize school newsletters to share relevant district information.

Currently, GIPS holds Parent Council meetings with representatives from each school, who are then expected to share district news with other parents. Participants in both parent focus groups were adamant that this method is not effective. They said that meetings to share the information with parents from the individual schools are either not held or lack participation. In addition, focus group participants said that the materials provided in the Parent Council meetings for further distribution were not specifically prepared for a parent audience and were too difficult to understand.

As shown on , email serves as the primary source of information for most families, with 88 percent of parents saying they use email as a source of information about the district on a daily or weekly basis. In addition, 66 percent of parents use newsletters as a source of information about the district on a daily or weekly basis. Digging into the data a bit further, when asked what *types* of emails they use to get information from the district, parents rely on information from a variety of sources, including digital newsletters. When asked *which* newsletters they rely upon most, 81 percent cited school weekly/monthly newsletters.

Clearly, parents place a high value on information that comes from their child's school. Therefore, the auditor recommends increasing the use of school newsletters to share district information that is relevant to its schools. Being intentional and consistent about how information will be shared will be essential to this strategy's success.

Parents want brief, accessible, easy-to-read information from their district and schools. Communicators used to ascribe to the 30-3-30 rule: you had 30 seconds to grab a reader's attention, three minutes to explain the issue and then perhaps your target audience might take 30 minutes to really dig into the details. Now, with the multitude of ways that technology delivers an abundance of information on a 24/7 basis, it is the 3-30-3 rule: you have three seconds to grab a reader's attention, 30 seconds to engage them and three minutes to tell them what they need to know.

This is a challenge for school districts, particularly when communicating complex issues. Following are some tips for making sure the message gets across:

- **Create shorter pieces with compelling headlines, brief bullets, a simple summary and links** to where more information can be found, if desired or needed.

- **Provide a list of the articles or topics at the top of the newsletter and link them** to the accompanying story. In this way,

readers can skim the list and click on only what is of interest or importance to them.

- **Consider creating an infographic when there is a lot of data to be shared.** An engaging infographic can quickly deliver key information, can be repurposed for use on the website and social media, and shared with the local news media. Easy-to-use infographic platforms include Canva, Piktochart and the free AI infographic maker from Appypie; positively, the communications team currently offers training in Canva! For more inspiration, check out the Infographic category of the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section of the NSPRA website at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Infographics.

Ideally, each school will share the same information, as provided by the communications team, in a similar format whenever school newsletters are produced. In this way, parents will begin to rely on and trust this source of information about district issues.

Recommendation 3:

Build greater awareness of and expand resources for meeting the information needs of diverse students and their families.

GIPS is a diverse school system that has prioritized equity and inclusivity in its strategic plan values and objectives as well as in the formal efforts of its district communications team, as detailed in the Key Findings. Survey data suggests these efforts are helping to keep diverse families informed. But at the same time, parents in the Spanish-speaking focus group and participants in teacher, support staff and student focus groups shared concerns about the current level of access to translators, particularly for live interactions. The auditor also found that the limited availability of staff translators impacts the number of languages into which district materials can be regularly translated and the amount of time required for translation of lengthier materials.

This is not an unusual challenge in schools today, with 11 percent of schools in the Midwest unable to fill open teaching positions in English as a second language or bilingual education as of October 2023, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

More than half of the GIPS student population identifies as Hispanic/Latino/Latina, but there is also a growing number of students from Somalia, Sudan and Kenya, whose families have been drawn to the city for employment opportunities. As noted in the Introduction, English is spoken "less than well" in nine percent of GIPS student households. State Department of Education data reports that 21 percent of students are considered English language learners, and the district's annual report reflects that more than 60 different languages are spoken in student households.

Like all other students, students whose home languages are not English still benefit when their families are informed about and engaged in their education. However, it is difficult to inform and engage parents without consistent, effective means of communicating with them.

GIPS has operated a Welcome Center since 2007 for its "newcomer" students and families, who emigrate from other countries, often with limited or no English-speaking skills. The district describes the center as "offering each new ELL student and their family an introductory orientation to the school system and community, as well as individual support to complete the registration process." The center was well known to the community focus group members, with one saying, "We have an amazing Welcoming Center that brings in the newcomers and gets them set up." District leaders acknowledge, though, that the center may be outgrowing its capacity with the growth in newcomer populations.

As the district continues its work to engage the many diverse local and newcomer families, it should deploy tactics to ensure they are well-aware of the current resources available to meet their information needs. Consider also planning for future enhancements to staffing, as budgets allow, to support the desire for more translation services. Such efforts will help eliminate the information gap experienced by some families.

Action Step 3.1

Monitor and reflect on the communication preferences of non-English-speaking families.

The SCOPE Survey results provide some quantitative data for the communications team to analyze the communication preferences of diverse survey respondents. Through the Welcome Center and registration process,

though, the district could capture data that identifies the communication preferences of individual parents, beyond home languages. It is recommended to have the communications team review a template of the questions/materials provided at registration to see whether and where a question or two might be added to identify which communication tools families prefer for which types of district and school information. Of course, this comes with the additional need to explore how the district's communication tools might be set up to better tailor individual parents' communication experiences (see Recommendation 2).

Additionally, it may be helpful to conduct annual multilingual campaigns during the back-to-school season to remind parents of the importance of updating family contact information, language preferences and communication preferences, with instructions on how to do so. If the percentage of diverse families who annually verify/update their information is low, consider convening a small focus group of these parents/families to identify any barriers that may be preventing them from updating their information.

Action Step 3.2

Explore new methods for effectively reaching non-English speakers.

As the communications team develops its strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1), be sure to explore the available national research on new methods to better connect with various racial, ethnic and cultural groups. For example, radio is consistently the most used tool for media consumption among Hispanic and Latino individuals of all ages, according to the Hispanic Marketing Council's 2023 market guide.

#3

Build greater awareness of and expand resources for meeting the information needs of diverse students and their families.

Based on that data, GIPS might compile a list of local non-English radio stations and develop targeted, translated news releases and public service announcements—in ready-to-use audio file and print form—to share with those outlets. Radio is local, mobile, widely popular and, as mentioned in a 2023 North American Network webinar on earning radio media coverage, "If you can think of a language, there's probably a radio station that broadcasts in it."

Following are good articles on this topic:

- Hispanic Consumers Feel Brands Fail to Understand Them, Study Says: https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/387544/hispanic-consumers-feel-brands-fail-to-understand.html

- Why You Need to Include Spanish Media in Your Outreach: https://www.prsa.org/article/why-you-need-to-include-spanish-media-in-your-outreach

Action Step 3.3

Develop website landing pages customized for non-English speakers.

The district and school websites all include language translation features, powered by Google Translate. If resources allow, give consideration to also developing website landing pages designed specifically to appeal

to the interests of current and prospective students and families who speak a primary language other than English.

These pages should be customized, not just translated, and contain content that addresses the topics and issues of greatest interest to the specific population. Different from the Welcome Center homepage, the content for a customized landing page might include information about district and school policies, programs, services and events specifically for that language population as well as content developed in collaboration with members of the community on what to expect when a child moves up a grade level and/or to a new school building, how parents can get involved in their child's school and connect with fellow parents, major ways in which the GIPS school environment might differ from that of their home country, etc. Such a page would also be a great place to feature news items spotlighting students and families from that specific population.

Here are examples of customized non-English district website landing pages:

- ¡Usted forma parte del Distrito 196!, District 196, Rosemount, Minn.–https://www.district196.org/espanol

- Adiga ayaa Ka Tirsan Degmada 196!, District 196, Rosemount, Minn.–https://www.district196.org/somali

Action Step 3.4

Continue to provide inclusive opportunities for understanding information.

QUICK WIN

Research and the experiences of other school districts have shown that families cannot be fully engaged and support their child's academic progress if they are unable to understand

the language that a school system uses to communicate. The GIPS communications program uses a variety of tactics to support equitable access to information, but following are some additional ideas for increasing diverse families' sense of inclusion in the district:

- **Ensure all communication plans have components to address the information needs of diverse stakeholders.** Set clear objectives for increasing their understanding of district and school information, and measure success on achieving those objectives.

- **When communicating major initiatives, expand outreach programs to include neighborhood gathering places** such as religious centers, non-profit support organizations and local restaurants. Minority populations and those who speak a non-English home language are more likely to be responsive when approached in familiar environments where they feel more comfortable.

- **When inviting newcomer parents to attend events, make it clear their presence is wanted and welcome.** Some newcomers may be arriving from countries where parents are actively discouraged from participating in their local schools.

- **Discuss the differences in communication expectations based on families' cultural and socioeconomic differences** in annual trainings for staff, so they are comfortable with and have a good understanding of GIPS' diverse students and families.

- **Expand the superintendent's Key Communicator group to include Somali and Kenyan representatives.** As with all participants in the group, they should be invited to gather feedback from their circles to bring back to school and district leaders. This feedback can serve to advise the district of emerging issues and concerns in their communities.

Recommendation 4:

Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.

As noted previously, there is a greater sense of trust building within the GIPS community. However, there is also a desire for more information about decisions and the processes used to make them. GIPS can further increase trust by making consistent and intentional efforts to involve the community in the district's decision-making processes.

NSPRA's audits of school districts large and small often show that it is impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of all groups when school system leaders must make a decision that will impact multiple stakeholder groups with diverse and varying perspectives. However, districts that aim for public consent around the decision-making process can avoid the perception of winners and losers. In other words, the goal is that all stakeholders affected by a decision are aware that the decision-making process was fair and reasonable, even if they don't like the outcome.

Building public confidence in the decision-making process of a school system is not without challenges, and struggles to ensure that all voices are heard are not unique to GIPS. NSPRA auditors consistently hear from parents, teachers and support staff in many districts that they feel their feedback is neither wanted nor considered during decision-making processes—even when formally collected through surveys and community meetings.

Increasing transparency around decision-making processes is one powerful way to minimize divisiveness and build consent. Once consent for the process is earned, supporters

of the decision are more confident in their agreement and detractors are more willing to go along with the outcome because they understand why it was necessary, even if they may not totally agree with it.

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

Action Step 4.1

Consider how best to include stakeholders in the decision-making process.

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

- **If a decision has already been made, do not ask for input from stakeholders.** Stakeholders will feel their input doesn't matter when they perceive that district leaders have already decided on a direction for a particular issue. Instead of feeling included in the decision-making process, participants typically feel they are being sold an idea or have been asked to provide input only to create the appearance of transparency.

  - The more controversial a decision is likely to be, the more likely it will be that the district should involve its stakeholders in the decision-making process.

  - If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to state mandates or budget constraints for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, the focus should be on building understanding around the

situation that led to the particular decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.

- **Give public input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Asking for input and then appearing to ignore it is one of the quickest ways to cause stakeholders to disengage from their schools. Sometimes district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, based on their intimate knowledge of the schools or their professional expertise. But if they choose to seek input from stakeholders before finalizing the decision, and if that input favors a different solution or choice, they must truly listen to the input and consider the alternative options.

  - Respecting stakeholders and giving their input due consideration does not mean their suggestions must be followed. For example, their alternative ideas could be researched and feedback could be given regarding what those ideas would actually cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.

  - If the stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.

  - When reflecting on public input, always be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a relatively small or large portion of the community.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to

#4

Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.

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

Action Step 4.2

Develop and implement consistent systems for communicating pending decisions.

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

- **Consider incorporating communication protocol questions into discussions of major decisions.** These questions can be used as a regular component of the

superintendent's leadership meetings and adapted for department, school-level and advisory council/committee meetings as well. When discussing potential decisions to be made, ask the group to consider:

- **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem and the specifics that stakeholders need to know about it.

- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem and how it will be presented to stakeholders.

- **How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district.

- **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue. They are the ones directly (or perceived to be directly) affected by it.

- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.

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

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

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

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

- **Develop and implement feedback loops.** Consider creating "What We Heard" features in various district and school communications to highlight the status, results and next steps regarding pending or recent public input requests. These could take the form of brief videos on websites and social media or encouraging principals, department heads and other system leaders to share "What We Heard" information with their staff during meetings.

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

Action Step 4.3

Elicit informal input from staff quickly through "rounding" conversations.

QUICK WIN

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

Here's how it works: A district's leadership team is discussing an idea where staff input is needed to inform the decision.

- The district leadership team develops two or three questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue.

- The district leadership team asks principals and supervisors to each find 5-10 staff members in their building or department to answer the questions.

- Principals and department supervisors share the responses with the district leadership team for consideration in the decision-making process.

By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, GIPS leaders will expand the ownership of change and contribute positively to employees' feelings of being valued team members. It is important that staff members be told how this input impacted the eventual decision, so they are more likely to participate in the future.

Action Step 4.4

When gathering input, seek a variety of voices and perspectives.

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

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

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

Action Step 4.5

When announcing a decision, highlight how feedback and data shaped it.

QUICK WIN

Make sure that the announcement of any major decision is accompanied by information about the feedback that was collected in the decision-making process as well as the data used to make the decision.

The rationale for a decision should be provided in clear, easy-to-understand language and can be communicated using traditional means such as news articles or emails. In addition, consider using the communication team's strengths in design and production to create infographics, podcasts or short videos, particularly when the information to be shared is more complex. A consistent practice of explaining to stakeholders the genesis for specific actions, keeping them apprised of next steps and reporting on outcomes helps maintain trust and confidence in leadership.

In addition, as stakeholders see evidence of their input being valued—rather than simply being told that it is—they also will be more willing to answer future requests for input. Sharing the results of this communication audit report with all focus group participants is a great step for GIPS to show its use of communications input. Find examples of how other districts have shared their communication audit results at these links:

- Reynolds School District, Fairview, Ore.—https://www.reynolds.k12.or.us/communications/2022-communications-audit

- Pelham Public Schools, Pelham, N.Y.— https://www.pelhamschools.org/district/communications-audit

Action Step 4.6

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

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

- Racine Unified School District earned a 2018 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for a school transformation campaign that engaged stakeholders in the decision-making process through focus groups, online surveys, a Kaizen event and more.

- Alexandria City Public Schools earned a 2019 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award for its campaign to address high school capacity issues. The campaign involved capturing the voices of students, local business leaders and higher education leaders; surveying staff and the community; holding town hall meetings; and other strategies to engage stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Recommendation 5:

Provide communication training for administrators and key front-line staff.

A key GIPS strength is its dedicated teachers, administrators and support staff, and pride in the professionalism of GIPS staff was evident in the SCOPE Survey data as well as in interviews and focus groups. The staff in focus groups also demonstrated an eagerness to be effective, positive representatives of the district and also to have the tools and confidence to address negative comments and confront conflict.

Implementation of the following action steps will expand on this foundation and help GIPS to create a district-wide culture of communication, where all employees feel empowered and capable of representing the district well.

Action Step 5.1

Conduct an annual communication boot camp for district and school administrators.

The SCOPE Survey data about communication preferences and levels of feeling informed provide an excellent opportunity for the district to provide enhanced communications training to all staff responsible for conveying information—both veterans and new hires.

Through an annual communications boot camp, the district can provide strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help administrators in their leadership roles and all staff in their communications with stakeholders. Such training would also strengthen partnerships with the communications team, who can

provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments and support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators. Similar training for board of education members also should be considered and is often offered by state board of education associations.

While the trainings should be customized to the types of communication necessary for each employee group, following are some general ideas for how to structure a communication boot camp:

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review the SCOPE Survey data, as well as local and national research, to determine what families and community members want to know from their schools and school districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as mock on-camera media interviews and/or self-reflection exercises based on where they are as the chief communicator for their school or department.

- **Include specific training for tools and programs used by the district.** Ensure that all staff members who have communication responsibilities are thoroughly knowledgeable about the features of various platforms and how to use them.

- **Review writing best practices.** Share tips on how to write actively, concisely and effectively, using examples of edited sentences or paragraphs to illustrate readability.

- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from one of the district's schools or a department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices, challenges they have encountered and ways they might overcome them.

- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review the goals and objectives of the district's strategic plan, and lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.

To demonstrate the commitment to enhancing communication efforts and underscore its importance, a communication component should be included in the evaluation of district and school administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria.

Action Step 5.2

Provide regular virtual or in-person communication skills sessions for staff.

All staff, particularly those on the front lines such as administrative assistants, can benefit from communication skill-building sessions. These can be offered either in person or virtually (live webinar or on-demand video modules) and should incorporate strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help staff in their communications with parents and colleagues.

Following are some potential communication skills training topics for staff:

#5

Provide communication training for administrators and key front-line staff.

- Email communication best practices, including written content organization and length, visual elements, expectations for response times, best send days and times

- Phone call best practices, including initial greetings, voicemail content, expectations for response times, best call times

- Effective communication at parent conferences

- Treating co-workers and parents as customers

- Storytelling and composing well-written, engaging content for classroom, school and department newsletters

- Responding to the news media

- Staff members' roles as ambassadors for GIPS

While topics suggested for these training sessions could be addressed by the communications director, NSPRA has found that using an outside expert can sometimes garner more attention and motivation among staff. The superintendent and communications director should discuss this and decide what is appropriate for GIPS. If the choice is to identify someone outside of GIPS to act as a guest speaker or facilitator, the auditor and NSPRA staff can offer ideas for experienced presenters within the school public relations community.

Action Step 5.3

Provide quick reference fact sheets on potentially controversial issues.

QUICK WIN

Print and digital "quick reference" fact sheets on emerging and existing issues can be created as a resource to share with administrators, front-line staff and key communicators. By identifying and framing key issues, these fact sheets can help people feel more confident in articulating the district's position. This helps foster understanding and more transparency around issues and leadership decisions.

While fact sheets will differ based on the topic, following are the basic components typically included:

- **The issue at a glance.** In a sentence or two, describe the overall situation or issue.

- **Details of the issue.** Provide the pertinent details of the situation or issue in layman's terms, including the barriers and/or objections to be overcome. Use infographics and pictures, as appropriate, to share data or illustrate a point.

- **Timeline.** Outline what has been done so far and when the issue is expected to be resolved.

- **Next steps.** What is the process being used to address the issue or solve the problem? Include any means for community engagement that will be made available and how that input will be used.

- **Community involvement.** Beyond participating in any formal community engagement opportunities that may be provided, share what various stakeholder groups can do to assist in the process.

- **Key messages and talking points.** Provide succinct answers to frequently asked questions.

- **For more information.** Direct people to where additional information on the topic can be found and who to contact if they have questions.

Action Step 5.4

Develop an ambassador training program.

All employees share the role of representing the district to the community and serving as ambassadors for the schools. SCOPE Survey data shows that nearly 60 percent of employees feel extremely informed or very informed about how to best represent the district as an ambassador, which is higher than the national average. But given that "what other people tell me" is in the top six sources of information about the district for parents, employees and community, it is very important to ensure that all GIPS employees are equipped to serve as effective ambassadors for the district.

- **Develop an ambassador tool kit to help employees see themselves as representatives for their school system when out in the community.** It can be delivered in a print, virtual or video format and should include basic facts and information about the district such as:
  - "Fast facts" about GIPS (e.g., number of students enrolled, the number of schools, number of employees, teacher-to-student ratios, student demographics, achievement statistics)
  - The district's strategic goals and progress in achieving them
  - Financial information (e.g., annual budget, revenue sources)
  - Brief summaries of special initiatives

and programs

- ▪ Branding elements for employee use (e.g., logos, taglines)

- ▪ How stakeholders can engage with and provide feedback to the district

The topics might sound similar to what is presented in the district's annual report to the community, but the ambassador tool kit content should be written with an employee reader in mind. Think: "What would staff want to know if they were asked to talk about our school system?"

While new employees are most in need of ambassador-style information, it is beneficial to redistribute tool kits annually to all employees during the back-to-school season. This serves to remind them of their daily roles as representatives of an educational community. In remarks to employees throughout the school year, leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as ambassadors for GIPS schools and public education.

- • **Recognize and reward outstanding employee ambassadors to keep employees motivated and engaged.** Invite employees to anonymously recognize each other for representing and promoting the school system in an exceptional way. Provide simple rewards such as district-branded swag or donated gift cards from local businesses. Highlight an ambassador of the month (or year) on social media, on the website, in publications and at board meetings.

- • **As the ambassador effort grows, consider formalizing the strategy by designating official employee ambassadors of GIPS.** These should be carefully chosen thought leaders who are well-known and respected in the school community. Consider choosing those who don't already have an official leadership role

with the school system. Empower them with timely and accurate information (such as the ambassador tool kit), and then have them represent their school and/or the district at community festivals, during school tours for the public, on social media, etc.

Following are some examples of school systems empowering their employees to serve as ambassadors:

- • Social media brand ambassador program, The School District of Palm Beach County, Fla.–https://twitter.com/pbcsd/status/1214569109947592705

- • 2022-23 OCPA Pocket Guide, Orange County (Fla.) Public Schools–https://issuu.com/orangecountypublicschools/docs/2022-23_pocket_guide_-_web

Action Step 5.5

Enhance the on-boarding programs for new employees by including a communication/ambassadorship component.

While onboarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of the communications team, the department can play an important role in getting all new hires off to a great start and ensuring that when parents and community members get information from these new employees, it is accurate and reflective of the district's strengths.

Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, with the goal of creating a positive on-boarding experience that goes beyond human resource forms and documents and offers a solid grounding in GIPS' history and values.

Following are some suggestions for addressing new employee's communication needs:

- **Combine in-person onboarding with online topical training.** Face-to-face meetings promote connection and help build relationships that create comfort zones for new employees, allowing them to meet others going through the same experience and to start establishing a support system as well as a word-of-mouth communication system. Hold initial orientation meetings in person, and then supplement with virtual training (either live or on demand) in special topic areas. The key is ensuring all training opportunities allow employees to ask questions and get answers that will help them do their jobs well, thus promoting a holistic culture of two-way communications.

- **Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees with GIPS operations, culture, history and procedures.** Provide new hires with items such as:

  - A tour of the district website and staff webpages, including where to find the employee handbook and a current staff directory;

  - The ambassador toolkit outlined in the previous action step;

  - An overview of school district and local community history;

  - The district's strategic plan;

  - A list of all communication vehicles (publications, websites, social media platforms, etc.), their purpose and when information or new issues are typically published or posted;

  - Where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor; and

  - A summary sheet of communication responsibilities so new hires know how to be appropriately responsive to parent and staff requests.

Recommendation 6:

Implement multimodal communication strategies to increase stakeholder knowledge about district finances.

In nearly every communication audit NSPRA conducts, the SCOPE Survey reveals that, among key issues, stakeholders feel least informed about district finances. This is also the case for GIPS, with 54 percent of parents, 56 percent of community members and 38 percent of staff indicating on the SCOPE Survey run in October 2023 that they were slightly informed or not at all informed about district finances.

Since then, the GIPS superintendent and communications team have taken numerous steps to strengthen financial communications. Examples include working collaboratively with principals on identifying reduction solutions between October 2023 and January 2024, and providing them with talking points; releasing a podcast focused on the 2023-24 district budget; releasing two op-eds on the budget that appeared in the local newspaper in November and January; sharing two video budget updates with staff in November and January; sharing in-depth updates on the budget at different stakeholder group meetings between November and February; conducting multiple interviews about the budget process with local print and TV news; and sharing budget-related updates through GIPS' website, newsletters and social media. Such efforts are commendable and vital as GIPS relies upon the financial support of its community to maintain a high standard of excellence in education.

The following action steps are offered as additional ideas for the communications team to continue to deliver a well-conceived and visible campaign that presents consistent budget information professionally and clearly.

Action Step 6.1

Incorporate a plan for educating the community about GIPS finances in the strategic communication plan.

Increasing stakeholder understanding of the district's financial situation should be a priority in the strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1) as it is developed. The objective should include specific strategies and tactics to broaden and deepen efforts to consistently share financial information. As public school finance can be a complicated issue, it will be important to simplify how GIPS receives its funding and what impacts the various revenue sources. The key will be to break these concepts and facts down into easily digestible pieces and to share them through a variety of channels over time.

Strategies to consider for the plan include:

- **Continuing to create brief videos** explaining potential upcoming financial challenges, how they may impact families and other residents, and where to go for additional information. These might feature soundbites from the superintendent and chief financial officer or animated illustrations of financial concepts for a more edutainment feel.

- **Continuing a social media campaign** to share financial information in bits over time through post text accompanied by graphics, photos or videos—with links to find more details on the district website.

- **Continuing to include information about the district's finances regularly in district and school newsletters.** An extensive article is not always required. Sometimes it can be as simple as including an

interesting financial fact or the answer to a frequently asked question about finances.

- **Continuing to make district finances a consistent topic of discussion** at staff, parent and community meetings.

- **Continuing to prepare talking points and "quick facts" sheets** for board members and administrators so they feel prepared to answer questions about finances. Also give them specific examples to share about how the district would be impacted by proposals or budget shortfalls. Staff, parents and even the broader community will care more about financial challenges and how to address them if they understand the personal impact it will have on students and staff.

- **Developing infographics** that use graphic images to explain financial information and concepts in a simple, engaging, colorful, at-a-glance format. As the auditor noted in reviewing GIPS' communication materials, the communications team is adept at this communication method.

- **Establishing a special page on the website** that includes the infographics, videos, financial FAQ's and a process for asking questions.

The idea is to keep the topic of the district's finances front and center for stakeholders over time and to give them the ability to absorb facts as they are presented or dive more deeply into the details.

Examples of how other districts have addressed these challenges can be found in the Budget Communications category of NSPRA's members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) at https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Budget-Communications.

#6

Implement multimodal communication strategies to increase stakeholder knowledge about district finances.

Action Step 6.2

Make understanding school finance information fun for staff.

As noted in Recommendation 5, educating and empowering staff to speak about district issues, including finances, should be a priority for GIPS. Districts have taken a variety of approaches to sharing finance information with staff: presentations during staff meetings, videos and statistics shared via staff emails, brochures and flyers in staff mailboxes. GIPS has already used a podcast with the CFO to discuss budget issues, and this medium can be used further.

In addition, consider introducing a gamification element to help increase staff members' interest in and retention of finance information. Start by evaluating their baseline knowledge in a fun, quiz-style manner so GIPS will know what information to provide during the year ahead. Questions might include:

- What is the size of the district's overall budget?

- What percentage of the budget goes toward employee salaries and benefits?

- Does the district have reserve funds (restricted and unrestricted)? What are they set aside to fund?

- What is the district's per-student funding level, and how does that compare to neighboring school districts?

- What are the district's sources of revenue to fund the education of students?

- What are the district's main areas of expenses each year?

Use budget trivia memes in advance to build excitement for the quiz. Then make it an online, multiple-choice quiz they can take independently or an interactive group polling experience during a meeting. Consider offering prizes to the top scorers (i.e., the most informed staff). Once it's known what staff knows and does not know about the budget, a framework for providing education can be developed. The idea is to build a team of ambassadors who are armed with accurate information that they can share when questions arise with family members and neighbors.

Action Step 6.3

Weave the district's history and story into budget communications.

Founded in 1867, GIPS is more than 100 years old, and using photos from throughout the district's history will show a steady progression of how past challenges were addressed responsibly. It also will provide an opportunity to celebrate the many successes along the way. Talking about the district's history from a "then and now" perspective, and reminding stakeholders that times are continuing to change, is a good way to communicate that it is just as important for adults in the community now to ensure strong resources for today's

children as it was in the past when they themselves were children.

Look for story lines that run throughout the district's history, and communicate their themes as taglines to define GIPS as a wise steward of the community's financial resources.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Participants

1. What do you perceive as the school system's strengths?

2. What are the areas needing improvement?

3. What is the current image of your school system in the community?

4. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating on important issues that affect schools such as funding, legislation and curriculum or operational changes?

5. Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?

6. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis (e.g., bomb threat, student misbehavior, employee misconduct, social justice protests)? How might the school system improve on that?

7. When school system leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made? What makes you feel that way?

8. Do you feel like the district is accommodating to the different cultures and languages?

9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. How do school system communications affect your ability to be successful in your job? Do you need more support?

2. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community?

Additional Question: Board of Education

1. How can communications staff best support you in your leadership role?

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

- **Connect and Grow:** This unique professional community includes the NSPRA Connect online forum, Mentor Match, APR Learning Cohort, and national leadership and service opportunities.

- **Expand and Elevate:** Through digital e-newsletters and alerts, free PR Power Hour webinars on tactics, free Leaders Learn webinars on strategies, on-demand learning and National Seminar scholarships, members expand their knowledge and elevate their work.

- **Share and Learn:** Members have access to best practices at www.nspra.org, which offers the online NSPRA Gold Mine; resources on topics such as crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.; salary and career surveys; and more.

With more than 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. The association offers useful communication products and programs as well as an annual NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America. NSPRA also offers a National School Communication Awards program, which recognizes individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

To join this vibrant, national association and reap the benefits of being an NSPRA member, visit www.nspra.org/membership.

Audit Team Vitae

Frank Kwan, APR
Consultant Auditor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sheba Clarke, APR
Audit Assistant

Sheba Clarke, APR, heads the Public Relations Department for the Grandview C-4 School District near Kansas City, Missouri. With a foundation in broadcast journalism, she seamlessly transitioned into PR, leading successful initiatives, including the district's inaugural communication plan and a historic rebranding effort, earning the 2023 Greater Kansas City Golden PRISM Award.

Sheba is an active member of the Missouri Schools Public Relations Association (MOSPRA), a former MOSPRA Regional Director and serves on the Board of Directors for the Greater Kansas City Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Additionally, she plays a key role on the Inez Y. Kaiser Memorial Scholarship committee, honoring the trailblazing figure who founded

the first major PR agency led by a Black woman in 1950.

An accredited public relations professional (APR), Sheba studied journalism and mass communication at Iowa State University.

Mellissa Braham, APR
NSPRA Associate Director

Mellissa Braham, APR, has more than 25 years of experience in public relations, working primarily in the education and healthcare sectors. As NSPRA associate director since 2018, she is responsible for coordinating NSPRA's research services, managing staff, coordinating programming for the NSPRA National Seminar, overseeing chapter relations, contributing to member resources and developing association products. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR).

Learn more about Mellissa at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Associate-Director.

Susan Downing, APR
NSPRA Communication Audit Coordinator

As NSPRA's communication audit coordinator, Susan Downing, APR, handles the logistics for all audit projects as well as audit report editing and layout. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR), who has spent her career in marketing and communications. Prior to joining NSPRA in 2021, she served as a school communications director for 11 years, spent five years serving on a school board and enjoyed a communications career in the financial industry.

Learn more about Susan at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Audit-Coordinator.

Naomi Hunter, APR
NSPRA Communication Surveys Manager

As NSPRA's communication surveys manager, Naomi Hunter, APR, oversees the association's in-house SCOPE Survey service for communication audits. She is an accredited public relations professional (APR) with 30 years of experience in strategic communications and public relations in the public, private and non-profit sectors. She joined the NSPRA staff in October 2022 as the communication audit surveys manager after previous work with the association as a consultant auditor while operating her own consultant services, following a decade as a school communications director.

Learn more about Naomi at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Surveys-Manager.

Alyssa Teribury
NSPRA Communication Research Specialist

As communications research specialist, Alyssa plays a key role in NSPRA's research efforts such as developing communication audits, data reports and whitepapers. She joined NSPRA in 2023 after serving as a school public relations professional for 10 years—an award-winning career that included being named to NSPRA's 2022-23 Class of 35 Under 35.

Learn more about Alyssa at https://www.nspra.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Research-Specialist.

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