

the leader in school communication



Communication Audit Report

Grand Rapids Public Schools

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Key Findings	12
SWOT Analysis	36
Benchmarking of Results	38
Recommendations.....	42
1. Support district goals by incorporating communication planning into all priority initiatives.	43
2. Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.	53
3. Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.	60
4. Build a culture of authentic engagement strategically supported by communications.....	65
5. Strengthen strategic storytelling and marketing to support enrollment, identity, and engagement.....	69
6. Strengthen and ensure consistency in digital communication practices across the entire school system.	73
7. Strategically enhance GRPS' social media presence.....	77
8. Build communication capacity through a key communicators network and communications staff professional development.....	82
Appendix.....	85

Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) has contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for an in-depth, independent review of the system'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 a 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, GRPS has areas of communication 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

- Families trust principals and teachers more than any other source of information, citing school-level communication as clear and responsive.
- The communications team is recognized for their professionalism, design quality, and commitment to staff support.
- The presence of a bilingual coordinator and translated materials helps serve multilingual families, though more proactive efforts are needed.
- District-level branding is polished and consistent, signaling a strong visual identity across key platforms.

- The GRPS Champions web series is well-received and can serve as a foundation for broader storytelling efforts.

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- Multiple apps and inconsistent school communication practices cause confusion and communication fatigue among families and staff.
- Families, staff, and community members feel disconnected from district decision-making processes and outcomes.
- Staff report feeling out of the loop, especially regarding leadership transitions and district initiatives.
- Many stakeholder groups feel their voices are not reflected in decisions, and there is little public evidence that their input is valued and considered.
- School websites vary widely in content, quality, and accessibility, affecting trust and access to timely information.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor suggests the following strategies for enhancing the GRPS communication program. For each of these recommendations, a series of practical action steps based on current best practices are included in the report.

1. Support district goals by incorporating communication planning into all priority initiatives.
2. Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.
3. Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.

4. Build a culture of authentic engagement strategically supported by communications.
5. Strengthen strategic storytelling and marketing to support enrollment, identity, and engagement.
6. Strengthen and ensure consistency in digital communication practices across the entire school system.
7. Strategically enhance GRPS' social media presence.
8. Build communication capacity through a key communicators network and communications staff professional development.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in GRPS, not just the Communications & External Affairs Department.

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

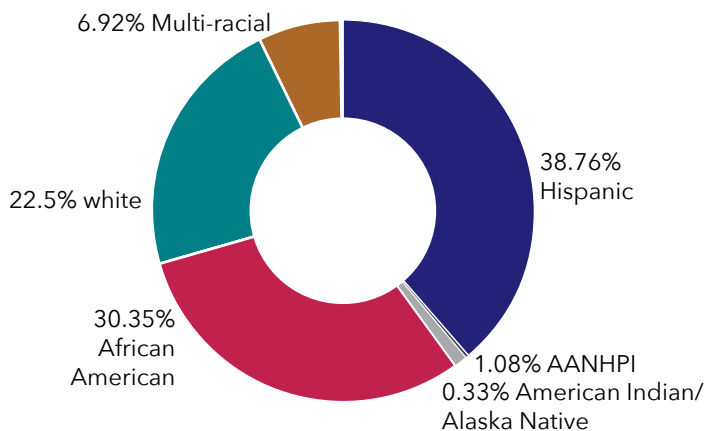
When assessing an organization's communication program, it is important to first understand the organization itself and its environment. That background is provided here.

About the District

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) is one of Michigan's largest and most diverse school districts, serving around 13,700 scholars across more than 40 schools. Similar to national trends, total enrollment has declined since the 2020 pandemic, though, by about 11 percent according to [state reported data](#).

The district enrollment reflects the rich cultural fabric of Grand Rapids, with students (referred to as "scholars") representing a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds:

- 38.76 percent Hispanic
- 30.35 percent African American
- 22.5 percent white
- 6.92 percent Multi-racial
- 1.06 percent Asian



- 0.33 percent American Indian/Alaska Native
- 0.02 percent Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

According to Michigan Department of Education reports for school year 2023-24, 80 percent of the scholar population comes from economically disadvantaged households, and 27.45 percent are English language learners. These demographics, coupled with the district's urban setting, shape the school environment and require a strong focus on equity, inclusion, and targeted academic support.

The community itself is known for its mix of historical neighborhoods, industrial legacy, and a growing healthcare and education sector. Major employers in the area include regional hospitals, universities, and manufacturing companies, all of which influence local career pathways and educational partnerships. The district has responded by offering a variety of educational options, such as theme schools and career-focused programs, to prepare students for post-secondary success.

The district's primary tagline is "GRPS: My Choice," and its brand identity elements include a logo (pictured above) with the district acronym and a flame in the style of an exclamation point.

Communication is clearly recognized as a strategic priority for the district. GRPS tries to embed stakeholder engagement and open communication as core elements of its long-range strategic plan. The district promotes

two-way communication with families and community partners and follows formal communication protocols to ensure that messages are timely, clear, and accessible. These practices are supported by a dedicated communications team that plays a key role in fostering trust, transparency, and responsiveness throughout the organization.

Together, these characteristics paint a portrait of a district committed to serving a dynamic and evolving student population through innovative programs and its commitment to community connection and continuous improvement.

About the Communications & External Affairs Department

The Communications & External Affairs Department at GRPS is led by Director of Communications Luke Stier, who has held the role for one year. Stier oversees all district-wide communications and reports directly to the superintendent of schools. He brings to the role stability, industry experience, institutional knowledge, and an understanding of the value of internal and external messaging across a diverse urban district.

Along with the director, the district's official communications functions are carried out by four staff positions:

- Communication and Visual Content Manager – manages storytelling across digital platforms, social media, photography, and video production.
- Project Coordinator and Web Editor – ensures timely and consistent messaging through website updates and internal project support.
- Bilingual Communications Coordinator – plays a critical role in ensuring equitable access to information for Spanish-speaking families and stakeholders.
- Webmaster and Multimedia Designer

– focuses on web accessibility, digital content creation, and design support across communication materials.

The department is responsible for enhancing and protecting the GRPS brand and reputation. Its core functions include internal and external communications, media relations, crisis communication, branding, web and social media content management, and multilingual family engagement, as noted on the [department webpage](#). The Communications & External Affairs team also supports district-wide initiatives related to enrollment, retention, and stakeholder engagement through targeted messaging and storytelling. Their work is meant to help further the broader GRPS mission to ensure all scholars are educated, self-directed, and productive members of society.

The communications team also collaborates regularly with departments such as Family & Community Engagement; Office of Opportunity, Engagement & Innovation; and Academics to support alignment, equity, and effectiveness in messaging and outreach.

Marketing efforts to support enrollment are currently contracted to outside services.

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 the GRPS mission, beliefs, and goals.

The [GRPS Strategic Plan](#) focuses on equity, student success, and community partnerships. It outlines five key priorities: academics, student well-being, staff support, family engagement, and operational excellence. The plan aims to ensure every student thrives in a safe, inclusive, and high-performing environment.

With these priorities in mind, this communication audit report aims to provide GRPS with a launching point for enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

Research Components

The NSPRA Communication Audit process incorporates several methods of research to capture both qualitative and quantitative data, as detailed in this section.

Research methods that are quantitative and qualitative complement one another. "Quantitative" research, like surveys, involves measuring responses from a certain number of participants in a way that the results can be projected to a wider population with a level of confidence. "Qualitative" research, like focus groups, involves fewer participants but a deeper, more intensive observation by researchers; this aids in the detection and exploration of topics not covered in specific survey questions.

NSPRA researchers use a variety of approaches to scientific observation, but all add value to their analysis and the overall communication audit process.

Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the Communications & External Affairs team submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., districtwide principal announcements, districtwide security update, 2022-27 Strategic Plan). The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

These digital and print materials were all examined for the 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 Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey™ to collect

feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff), and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey was conducted for GRPS from Feb. 10 to Feb. 23, 2025, in English, Spanish, Kinyarwanda, Swahili, Vietnamese, and Nepali. The results showed that 94 percent of respondents completed the survey in English, four percent in Spanish, and two percent in Kinyarwanda. The survey included questions regarding the following:

- How people currently get 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 margin of error for each audience, based on the total audience populations reported by the district and using the industry standard equation for reliability.

Parent survey:

- 474 surveys completed
- ± 4.5 percent margin of error (± 5 percent target exceeded)

Faculty/staff survey:

- 193 surveys completed
- ± 7.1 percent margin of error (± 5 percent target almost met)

Community survey:

- 30 surveys completed
- ± 17.9 percent margin of error (± 10 percent target not met)
- Due to less-than-desired participation among community members in the SCOPE Survey, there is a lower level of confidence in the community results and no recommendations are made based solely on community survey responses.

This same survey has been administered to more than 130 school districts across the United States, and the [Benchmarking of Results](#) section includes the SCOPE Scorecard, which compares GRPS' SCOPE Survey results with the results of other districts who have conducted the survey.

The platform used to host NSPRA's SCOPE Survey is provided by K12 Insight-Sogolytics.

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 of schools and the director of communications on March 4 and 5, 2025.

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

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

- GRPS parents (three groups)

- GRPS staff (two groups)
- Scholar Advisory Council (students)
- Community organizations
- Building administrators (elementary)
- Building administrators (secondary)
- Franklin Campus staff

The development and maintenance of an effective communication program should include opinion research through methods such as focus groups, interviews, and comments on surveys. Although anecdotal, this type of research can be valuable for measuring progress and assessing the effectiveness of communications.

NSPRA's research process aims to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives, providing a comprehensive view. While these public sentiments are often based on a smaller sample of the school community, the opinions shared remain valuable.

Public sentiment should not be the sole factor in a district's decision-making process, but it is an important component. In NSPRA's audit reports, these opinions are integrated with the auditor's expert evaluations.

Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

The NSPRA team who delivered these communication audit services included:

- Shawn McKillop, APR, Auditor
- Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP, NSPRA Communication Research Specialist
- Alyssa Teribury, Audit Assistant and NSPRA Communication Research Manager
- Mellissa Braham, APR, NSPRA Associate Director

Their vitae are in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including GRPS Superintendent Dr. Leadriane Roby and Director of Communications Luke Stier, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. It is intended to build on the positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Communications & External Affairs Department by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program.

Adhering to public relations standards is crucial for effective school communication strategies. Thus, an effective strategy in one school system may be applicable in another. As a trusted leader in school communication™, **NSPRA advocates for established industry best practices in school public relations.** While our communication audit findings are unique to each school system and our recommendations are tailored to those findings, industry best practices are applicable to and may be recommended across multiple school systems. With that in mind, the recommendations included in this report are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking GRPS' communication program to the next level.

When reviewing the report, it is important to acknowledge that:

- **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 GRPS would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the 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 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 district leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Communications**

& External Affairs team. NSPRA views communication as a function that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to formal communications staff, 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 district or the Communications & External Affairs 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



QUICK WIN



"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 GRPS 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, including employees and parents/caregivers, to demonstrate that district leaders prioritize two-way communication with stakeholders.

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from various [research methods](#), including the SCOPE Survey, focus group discussions, interviews with district leaders, and review of district materials.

At first glance, some findings in this report may appear to conflict—but in reality, they reflect different dimensions of the same topic. Understanding the data may require distinguishing between related but separate concepts. For example, understanding a message (e.g., “I know what you mean”) is not the same as satisfaction with a message (e.g., “I’m happy about what you said”) or knowing where to get answers (e.g., “I don’t know who to ask”). What may seem like contradictions are often signs of nuance. They highlight the importance of considering what aspect of the communications experience is being measured.

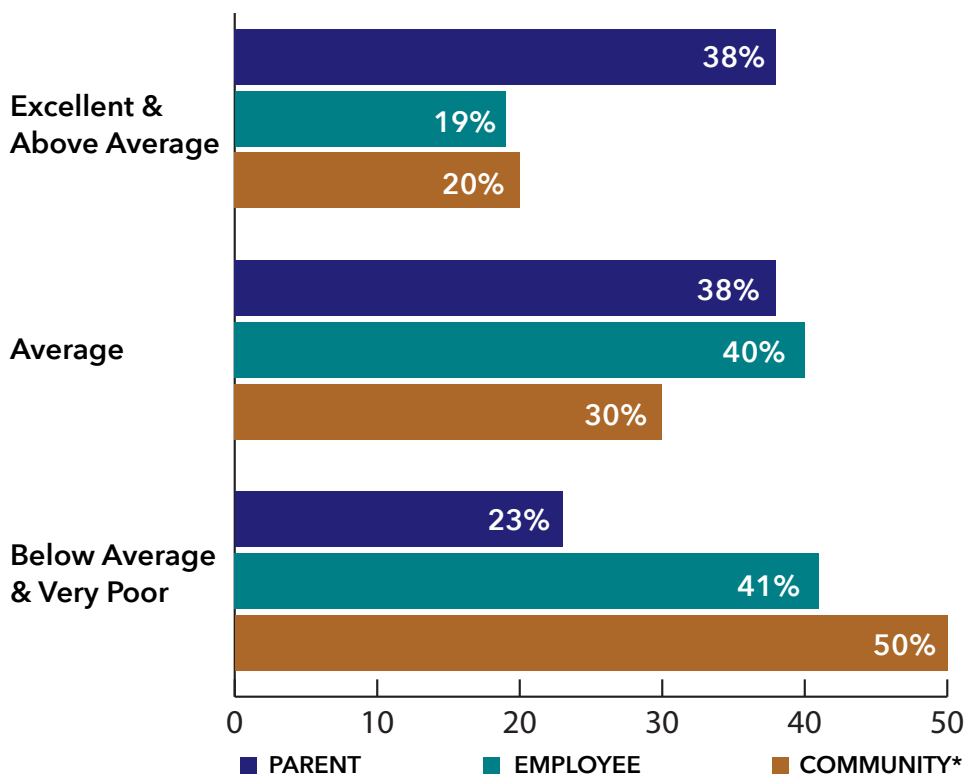
This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district’s image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders. Conversely, the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district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

When reviewing survey data charts, please note that percentages sometimes may not total 100 due to rounding or respondents’ ability to select more than one response to a question.

District Image/Brand

- **On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their perception of the school district.** As shown in the chart below, 38 percent of parents expressed excellent and above-average views of the district. Among employees, 19 percent rated their perception of the school district as excellent or above

Overall Rating on Perception of the District



** Due to less-than-desired participation among community members in the SCOPE Survey, there is a lower level of confidence in the community results and no recommendations are made based solely on community survey responses.*

Stakeholder Group	GRPS	National Average	National High	National Low
Parents	3.3	3.8	4.4	2.6
Employees	2.7	3.6	4.5	2.3
Community*	2.6	3.3	4.5	2.1

average, and among community members*, 20 percent rated the school district as excellent or above average.

When these results are converted to a five-point scale, stakeholders' perceptions of GRPS fall below the national average for districts that have conducted the SCOPE Survey, as shown in the chart above. However, scores that fall within the same numerical range – for example, the 3.5 GRPS parents rating and the 3.8 national average both fall within the range of 3-3.9 – suggest the same general sentiment.

- **The SCOPE Survey asked respondents how likely they were to recommend a school in GRPS to a friend, and their responses were used to calculate a Net Promoter Score (NPS),** which measures overall satisfaction and loyalty. The NPS process groups respondents into three categories: promoters, who are satisfied

and actively recommend the district schools; passives, who are satisfied but not enthusiastic enough to speak up about it; and detractors, who are dissatisfied and may share negative feedback about GRPS.

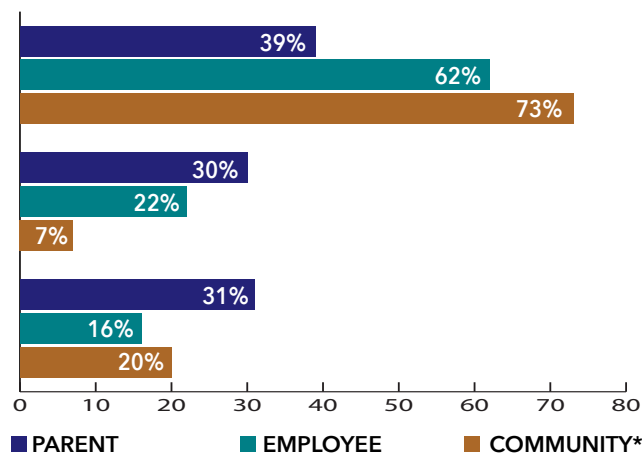
- NPS is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters, resulting in a score between -100 to +100. (Passives, who take no action, are not part of that calculation.) A score above 0 is considered good, with scores above 50 indicating strong loyalty and satisfaction, while a score below 0 suggests there are issues to address to reduce district detractors.
- As shown in the charts below, GRPS has an overall NPS of -21, indicating more detractors than promoters across the district and suggesting that reputational concerns may impact public confidence and advocacy.

Likelihood to Recommend a District School

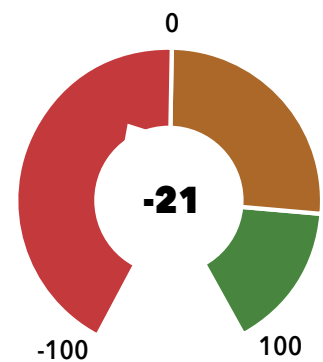
Detractors (dissatisfied, may share negative feedback about GRPS schools)

Passives (satisfied but not enthusiastic enough to speak up about it)

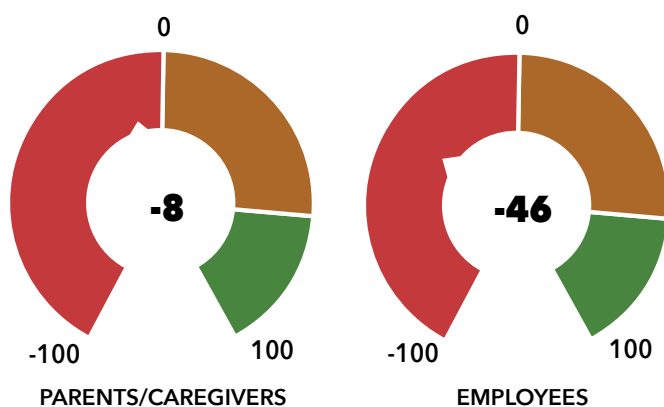
Promoters (satisfied and actively recommend GRPS schools)



Net Promoter Score (NPS) Overall



NPS by Stakeholder Group



- Among respondent groups, the NPS score of -8 for parents versus the NPS score of -46 for employees (see charts above) suggests that employees are more likely than parents to be expressing dissatisfaction with schools.
- When SCOPE Survey participants were asked to share two words that come to mind when thinking of GRPS,** the word used most often by parents and employees was “diverse.” Other words often used by these respondents were the similar “disorganized” and “unorganized.”

In focus groups and SCOPE Survey open-ended comments, “urban” and “struggling” were often used to describe the district. In addition, many participants shared the view that there are misperceptions about GRPS in the community. Following are two illustrative comments:

- “Internally, there’s pride, but externally, there’s still a gap in what people believe GRPS is about.”
 - “There’s so much diversity and opportunity in GRPS, but people don’t always see that from the outside.”
- Stakeholders acknowledged GRPS’ strengths, particularly in diversity, staff commitment, and equity-focused work, but expressed concern that these stories**

are not consistently shared. In staff and parent focus groups and in interviews with district leaders, participants consistently identified a need for more proactive storytelling to counter what they perceive to be lingering negative narratives, such as outdated perceptions of the district, concerns about safety and discipline, and comparisons that portray charter and private schools as more innovative or higher performing. They feel these narratives, often shaped by past challenges and a lack of visibility into current successes, continue to influence public perception. Following are three illustrative comments:

- “There are amazing things happening in my child’s school, but I don’t see those stories being told.”
 - “GRPS is doing the work, but we’re not getting the credit for it.”
 - “The narrative still feels stuck in the past.”

Efforts like the GRPS Champions web series, which highlights the contributions of staff across the district each week, and the superintendent’s annual State of the District Address have been positively received by stakeholders. These initiatives are seen as meaningful steps toward shifting perceptions and celebrating the dedication and impact of the GRPS community.

- A review of GRPS materials showed strong alignment in visual identity at the district level,** but limited use of narrative content or outcome-driven communication to share the district’s philosophies and priorities.
 - Many school websites and newsletters do not include visuals or messaging to promote achievements or community engagement.
 - The auditor observed inconsistency in the strength of branding between the traditional schools and the specialty

or themed schools. The specialty or themed schools were more effective in showcasing strong messaging and pride, while the traditional schools lacked outward-facing content that reflected their strengths.

- Community focus group members and partners shared that while they want to help amplify district messaging, they're unsure where to find content to share. One participant expressed the sentiment this way: "We want to help tell your story, but we don't always know where to find it."

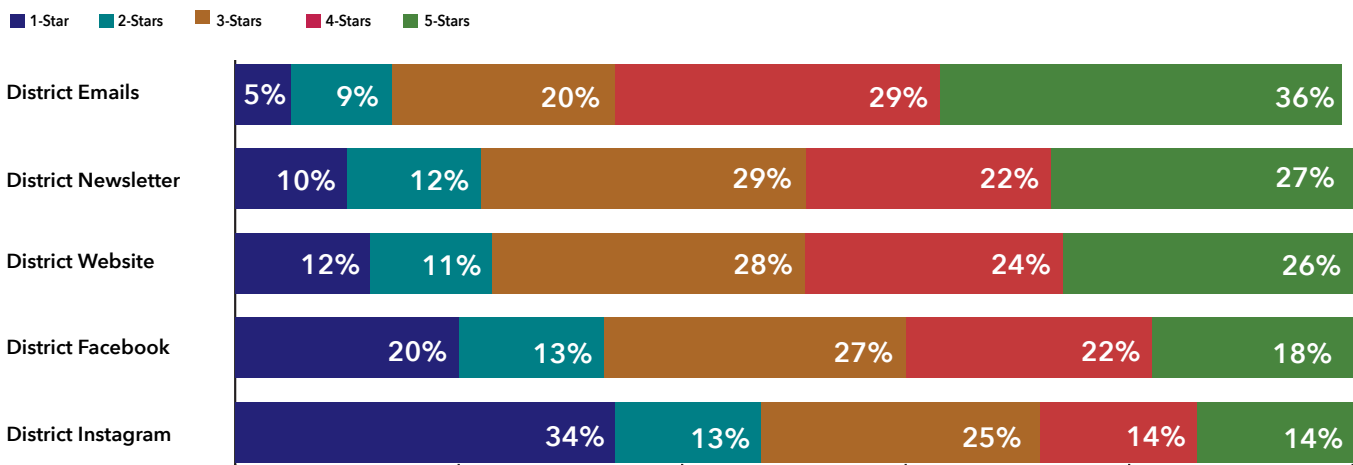
Communication Sources and Preferences

- GRPS has access to and utilizes a varied and inclusive array of communication tools, including email, robocalls, newsletters, social media, websites, and video. The auditor observed a high level of professionalism in GRPS' use of visuals, social media content, and digital storytelling to share the district's image and brand. However, despite the quality and variety of these tools, stakeholders expressed that they do not always see or hear enough about student success, staff impact, and program innovation. This suggests that while GRPS has strong

communication infrastructure, there is a need to amplify key messages more consistently, particularly to external audiences and less-connected families, to shift outdated perceptions and increase stakeholder engagement.

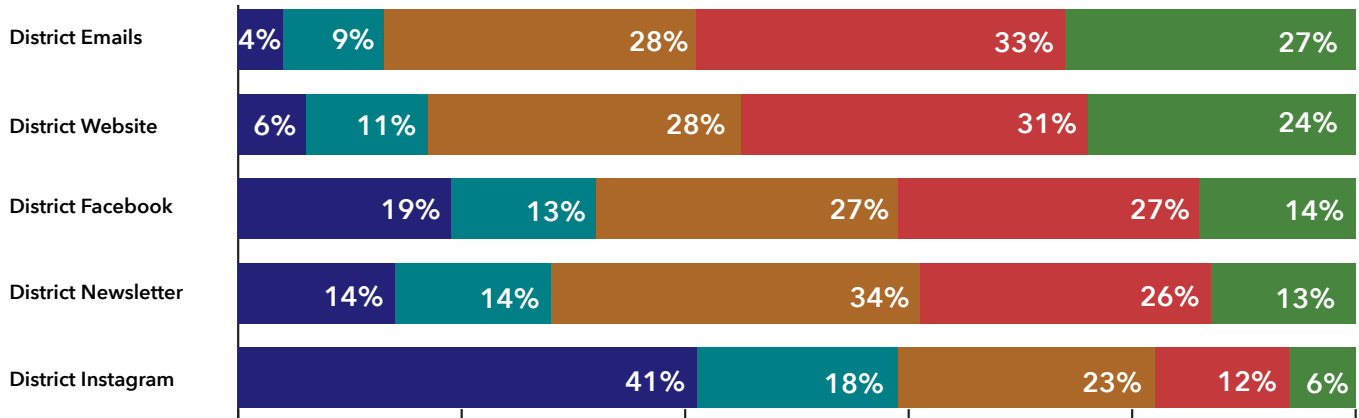
- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate the value of various informational sources for learning about the district and how they prefer to receive different types of information.**
 - As shown below and on the next page, parents and staff value email communications the most for information about the district, with 65 percent of parents and 60 percent of employees giving email four or five stars (out of five). Among these groups, Instagram was valued the least, with 28 percent of parents and 18 percent of employees giving it four or five stars.
 - Conversely, community members* value the district's Facebook page above all other sources of information about the district, with 60 percent giving it four or five stars. The district newsletter was viewed as their least valuable source, with 31 percent giving it four or five stars, likely because many don't receive it.

Value Rating of Informational Sources: Scale of 1-5 - *Parents/Caregivers*

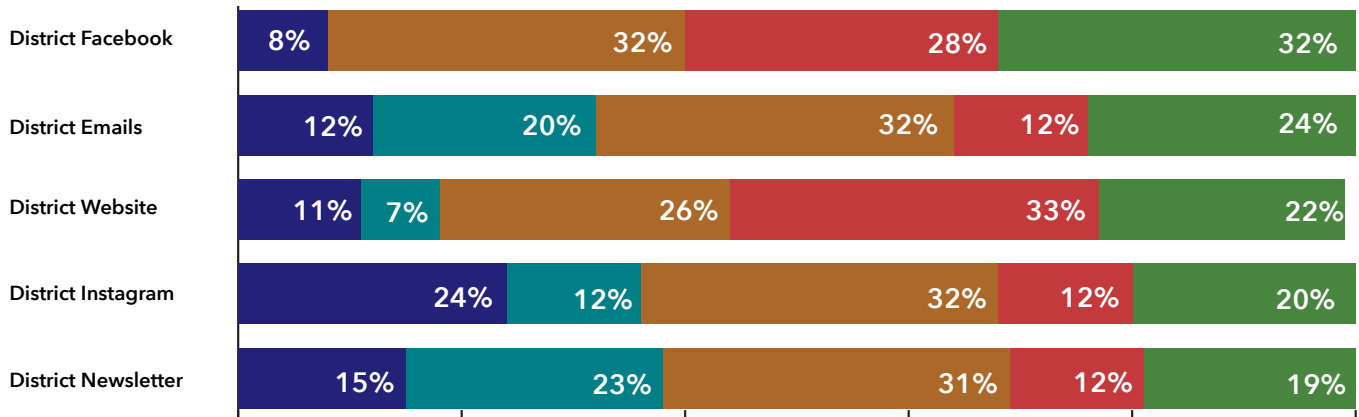


Value Rating of Informational Sources: Scale of 1-5 - *Employees*

1-Star 2-Stars 3-Stars 4-Stars 5-Stars

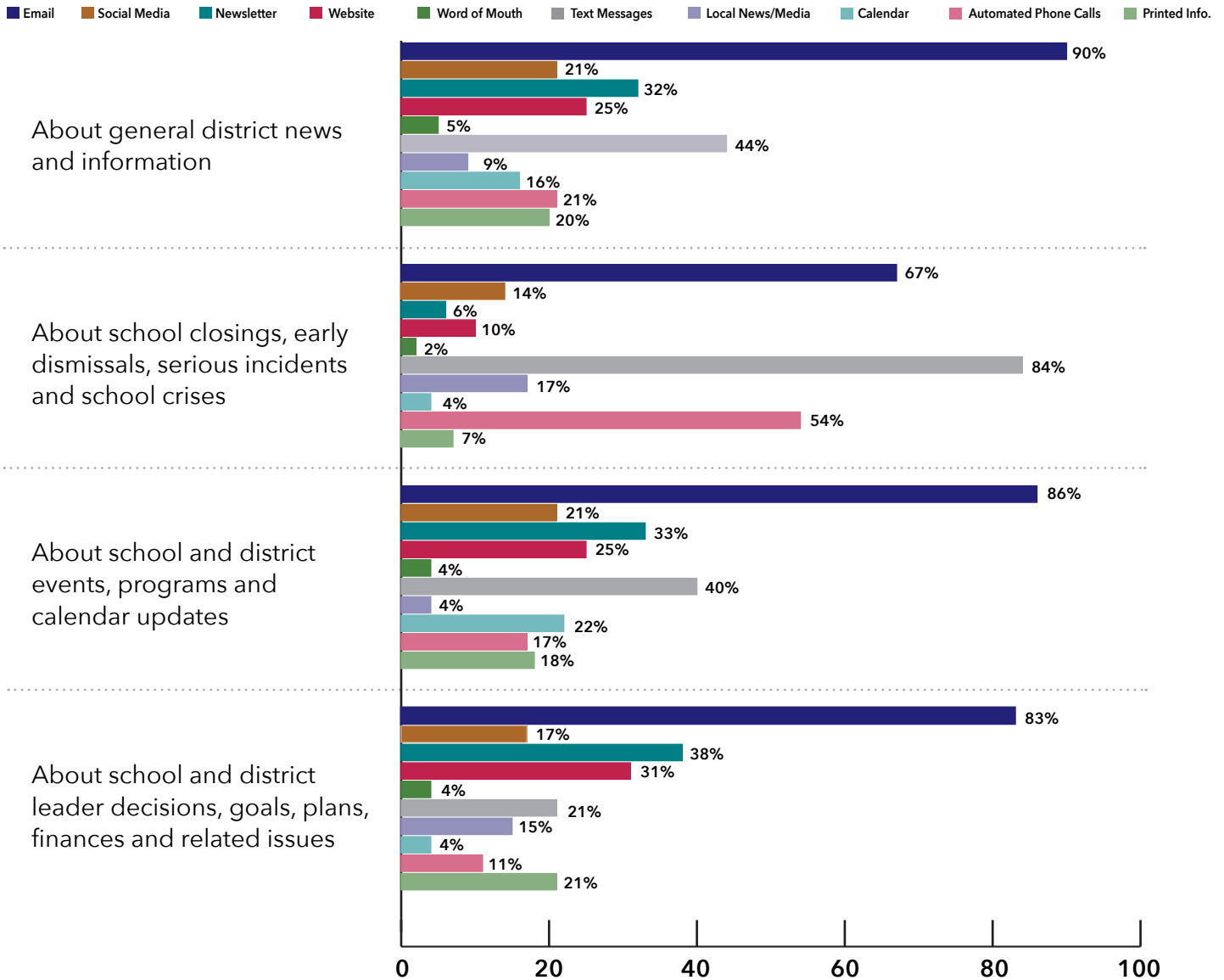
Value Rating of Informational Sources: Scale of 1-5 - *Community**

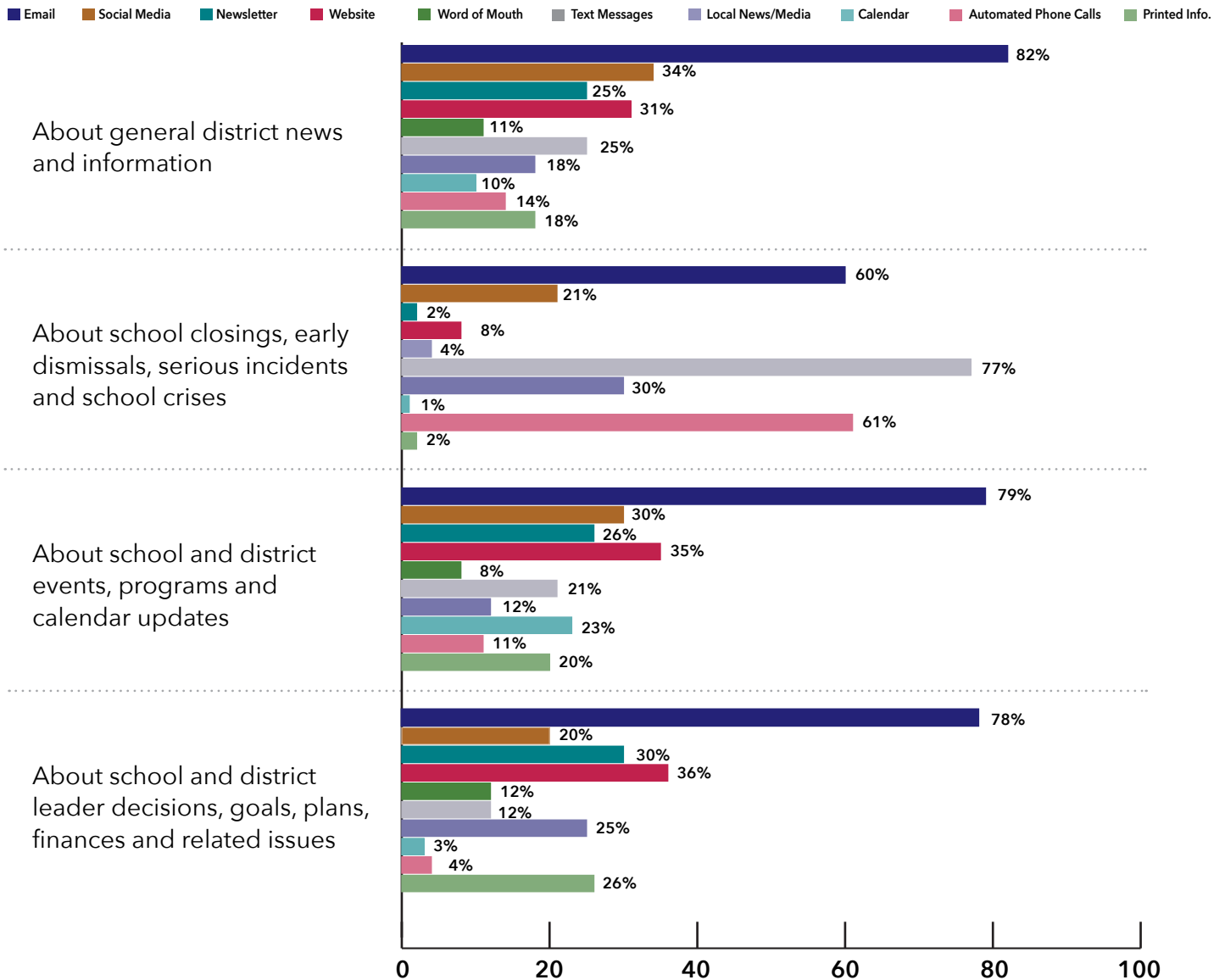
1-Star 2-Stars 3-Stars 4-Stars 5-Stars



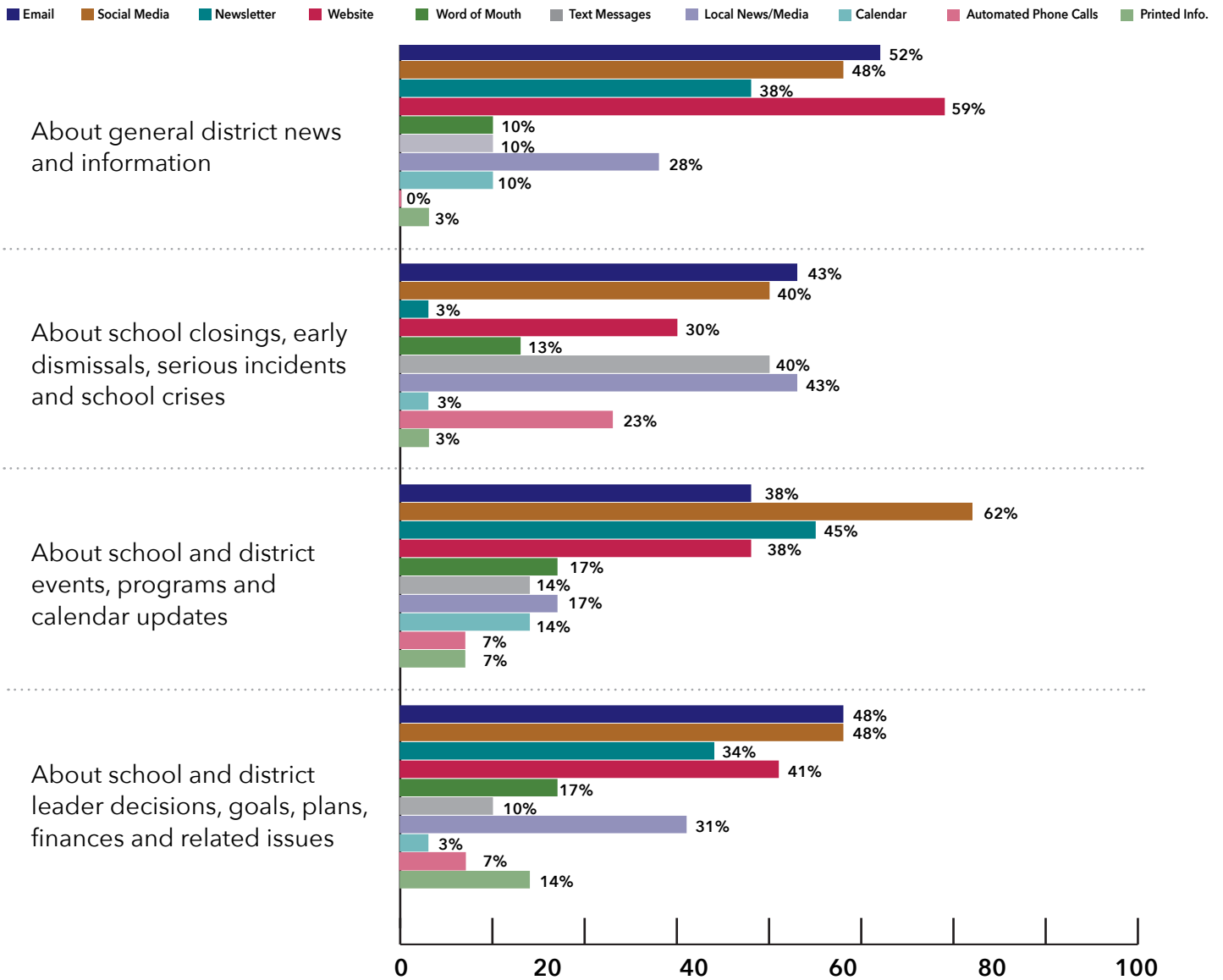
- **When SCOPE Survey participants were asked how they prefer to receive various types of information**, the results were as follows (see charts on [pages 17-19](#)):

- Parents prefer email for all types of information except for those regarding urgent matters, such as school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents, etc., where texts are preferred.
- Employees also prefer email for all types of information except for urgent matters, where texts as well as automated phone calls are preferred.
- Community members prefer email and social media nearly equally for all types of information except for communications regarding school and district events, for which social media is preferred above all other forms of communication.

Preferred Communication Methods for Different Types of Information – *Parents/Guardians*

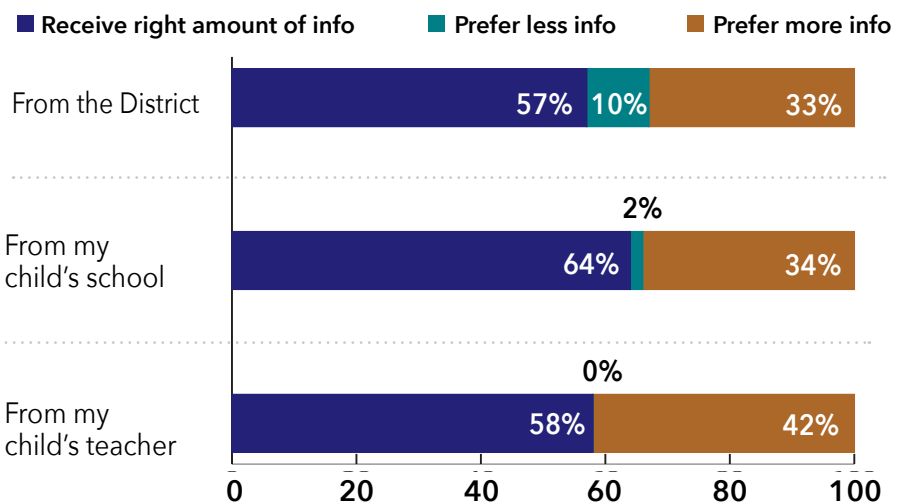
Preferred methods of communication for different types of information - **Employees**

Preferred methods of communication for different types of information - *Community**

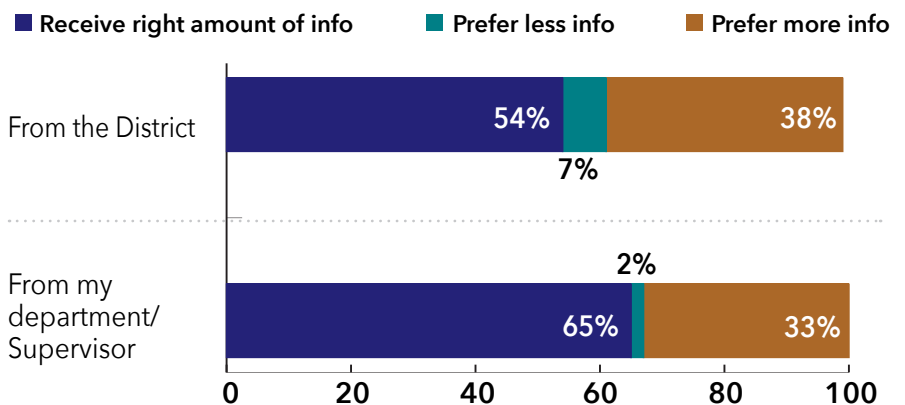


- **Parents are somewhat more satisfied with the quantity of information they receive from their child's school than from the district**, though a majority feel they receive the right amount of information. About a third of parents would like to receive more information from the district, their child's school, and their child's teachers, as shown in the top chart to the right.
- **Principals and teachers are seen as trusted and accessible sources of information for parents and students**, according to focus groups and survey comments. Parents described strong relationships with school leaders, and scholars consistently identified teachers as their primary source of information. Following are three illustrative comments:
 - "We trust our principal. That's who we hear from the most. I don't always know what's coming from GRPS versus the school." (Parent)
 - "I know what's happening at my child's school, but I don't always know why the district makes bigger decisions." (Parent)
 - "Teachers are the best communicators in the district. They're who I go to first." (Student)
- **While at least a third of employees would prefer to receive more information from the district and from their department/supervisor**, they are more satisfied with the

Quantity of Information - *Parents*



Quantity of Information - *Employees*



amount of information they receive from their department/supervisor than from the district, as shown in the bottom chart above. A representative employee comment was, "There's a disconnect between what's happening in my building and what I hear from downtown."

- **In focus groups, stakeholders expressed confusion and frustration over the number of communication tools in use and the lack of consistency in how they are used.** Parents shared a desire for more standardized formats and clarity about what each platform is used for.

Many reported receiving duplicate, inconsistent, or overwhelming volumes of communication from tools like ParentVUE, SchoolMessenger, and ClassDojo.

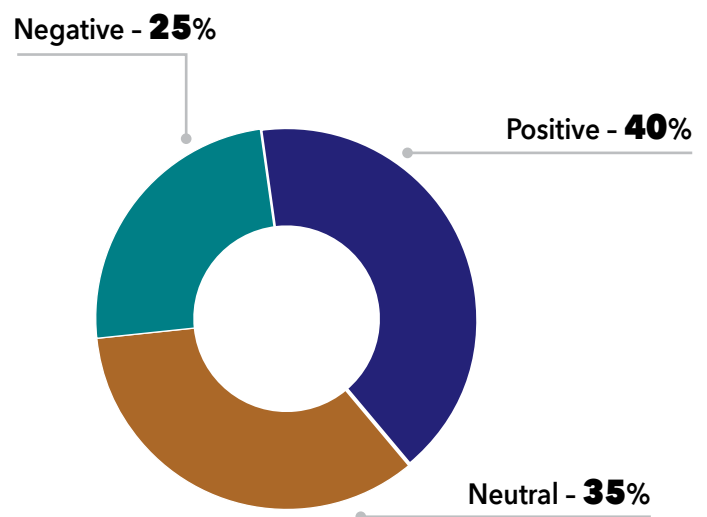
Following are two illustrative comments:

- "I get emails, texts, flyers, messages in the app... and sometimes they don't match."
- "It's not that we're not getting information. It's that we're getting too much from too many places."

- **One of the clearest frustrations revealed in discussions with parents and employees is the use of two separate email systems**—one for communication with families (Outlook) and one for communication among staff (Gmail).
- **GRPS supports multilingual and low-literacy families through translated materials, simplified language, and visual communication strategies. However, multilingual families emphasized the need for earlier, more culturally responsive outreach.** In open-ended survey responses and in focus groups, families emphasized the need for more translated messages, automated phone calls in multiple languages, and simplified access points such as centralized dashboards. A representative parent comment was, "We need to feel like the messages are written for us, not just translated after the fact."
- **The auditor observed that print and digital communication materials vary significantly across schools in quality, tone, and accessibility.** District-level materials were well-branded and current, but school-based newsletters and flyers showed inconsistency in frequency, formatting, and language accessibility. As a parent put it, "Some newsletters are really long, while others (schools) don't send them at all."

- **NSPRA used Meltwater, a media monitoring service, to analyze news coverage of GRPS** from Feb. 18, 2024, through Feb. 18, 2025. When looking at English-language news appearing in the United States and excluding coverage for sporting events, schedules, etc., the 104 articles revealed dual narratives: a positive, school-based stream of stories highlighting students, innovation, and community engagement, and a more critical district-level discourse focused on safety concerns, leadership decisions, and public trust. Meltwater's sentiment analysis algorithm classifies articles as positive, neutral, or negative, with the GRPS breakdown as follows:

- Forty percent were positive and included articles about student achievement, STEM, and electric buses.
- Thirty-five percent were neutral and included articles about infrastructure and weather.
- Twenty-five percent were negative and involved reports on safety incidents and critiques of district leadership.



- There was a spike in coverage in mid-February linked to the superintendent's State of the Schools address and simultaneous parent-led safety protests.
- The most frequently cited local outlets included: MLive; FOX 17; WOOD TV8/ WOOD Radio; School News Network; and Patch.com.

Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- Employees consistently praised the responsiveness of the communications team and the shift toward more proactive, event-based support.

- The [Communications & External Affairs Department](#) provides a detailed [brand guide](#) outlining approved logos, logo usage, color palettes, and fonts.

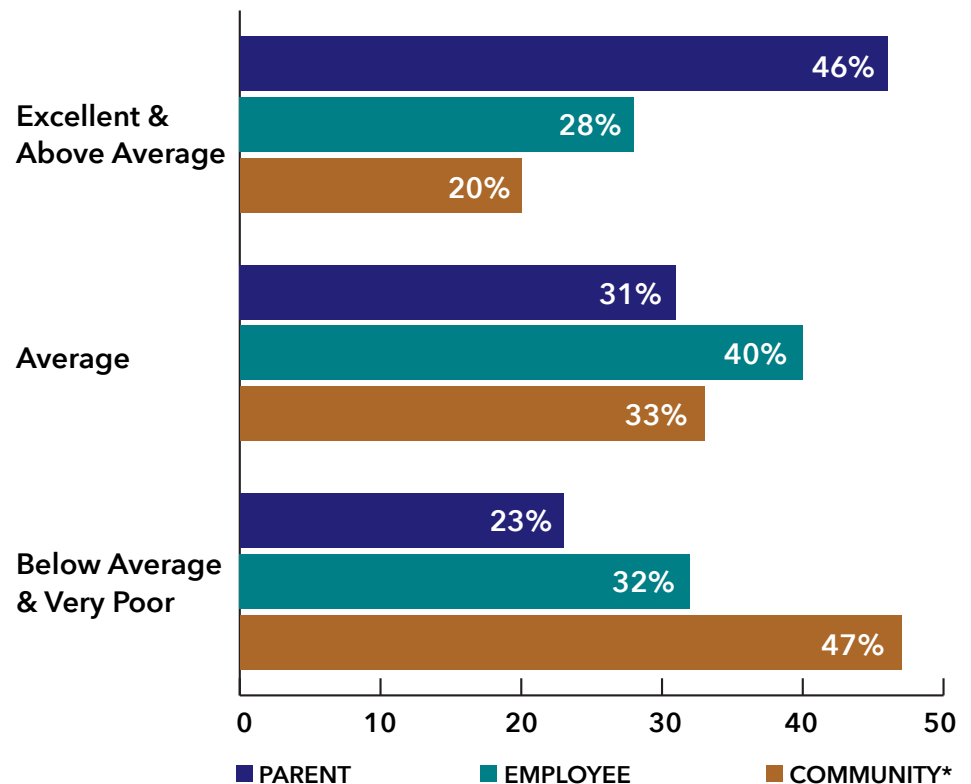
- The department webpage provides a "[Communications Protocol](#)" guide to help stakeholders determine whom to contact and in what order for different areas of concern.

It also offers a way for anyone to [subscribe](#) to a "We Are GR" weekly e-newsletter (not mentioned by either focus group or survey participants, though) and to a quarterly "We Are GR Magazine" published in collaboration with the City of Grand Rapids.

- The department does not yet have a strategic plan for communications to guide its work.

- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their

Overall Satisfaction With District Communications



overall satisfaction with communications from GRPS. As shown to the right, overall satisfaction is highest among parents, followed by employees and community members. Among parents, 46 percent rated GRPS communication as "excellent" or "above average," compared to 28 percent of employees and 20 percent of community members.

When these results are converted to a five-point scale, stakeholders' perceptions of GRPS communications fall below the

Overall Perception of District Communications	GRPS	National Average	National High	National Low
Parents	3.4	3.8	4.2	3.1
Employees	2.9	3.6	4.2	2.6
Community*	2.7	3.2	4.1	2.0

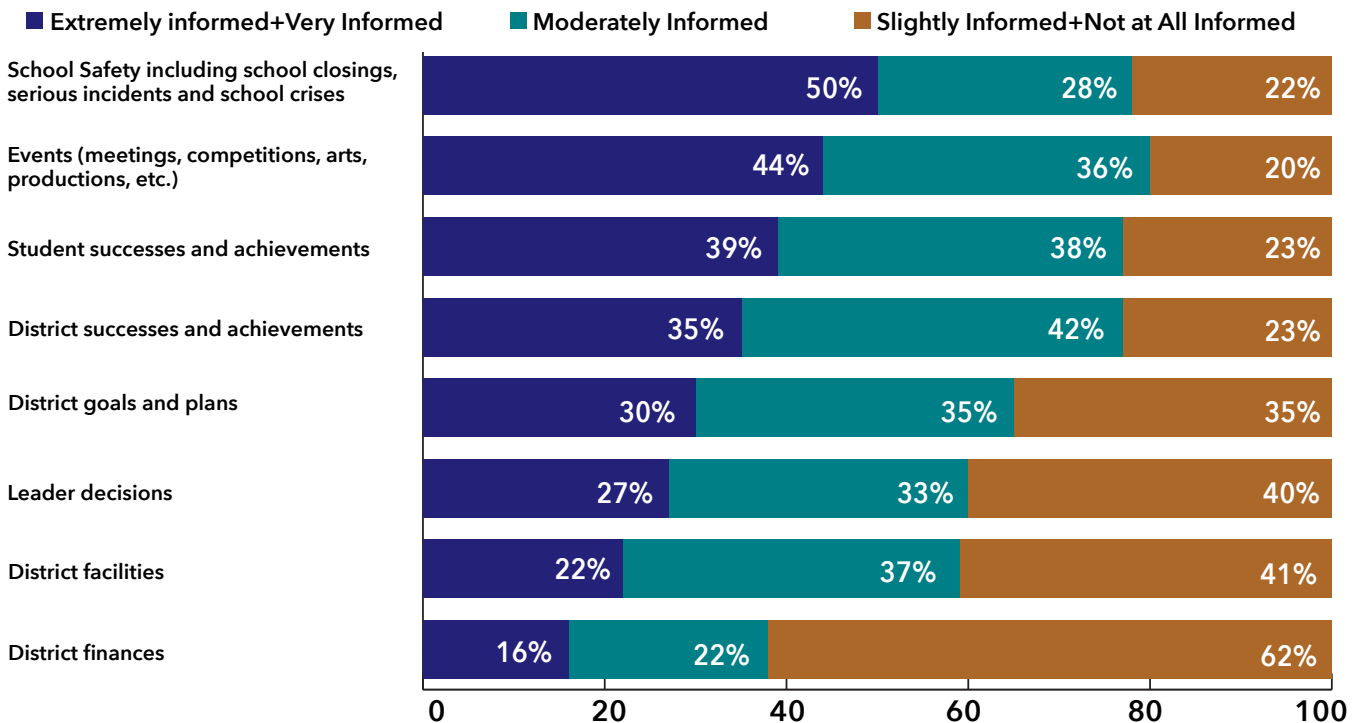
national average for districts that have conducted the SCOPE Survey, as shown in the chart above and on the [SCOPE Scorecard](#). However, scores that fall within the same numerical range suggest the same general sentiment, as happens in the chart above where the 3.4 GRPS parents rating and the 3.8 national average both fall within a range of 3-3.9.

- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked how informed they are in key areas.

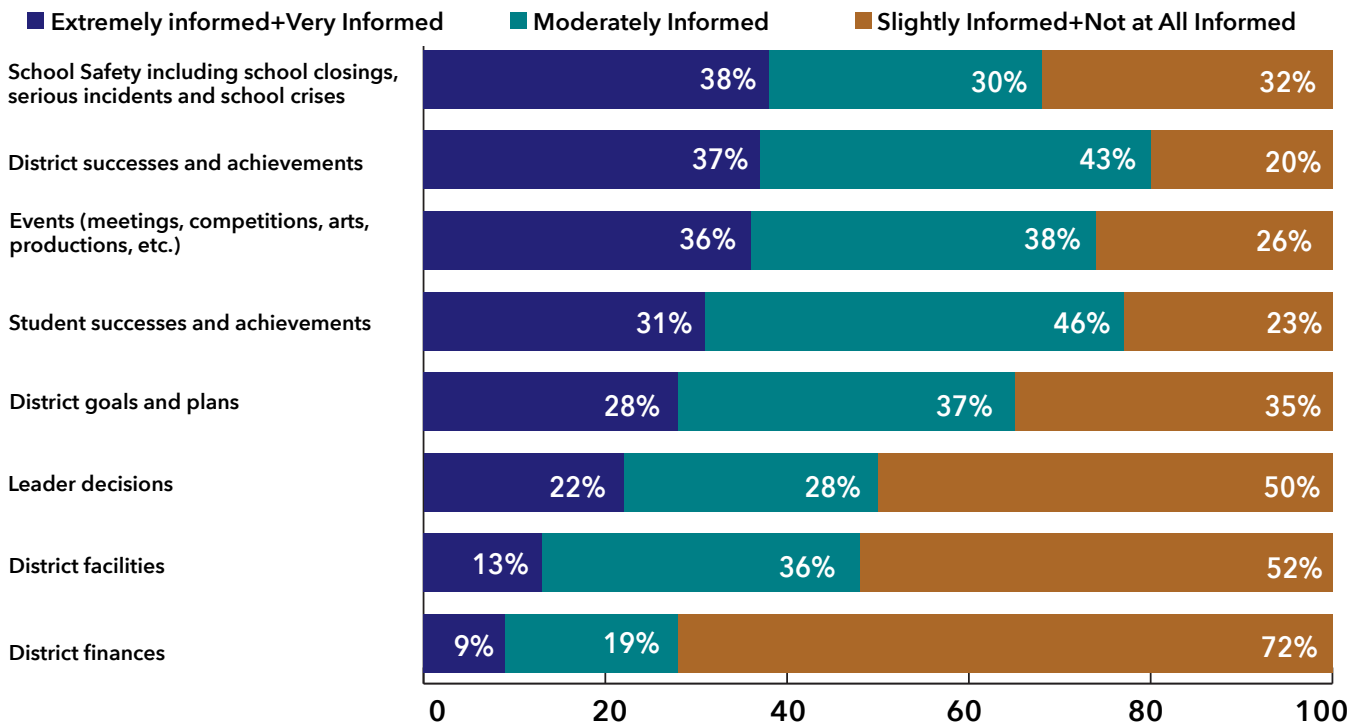
The results shown below and on [page 24](#), indicate the following:

- Parents felt most informed about events and school closings and crises, with approximately 80 percent saying they feel moderately, very, or extremely informed on these topics. They felt least informed about district goals, leader decisions, district facilities, and district finances.

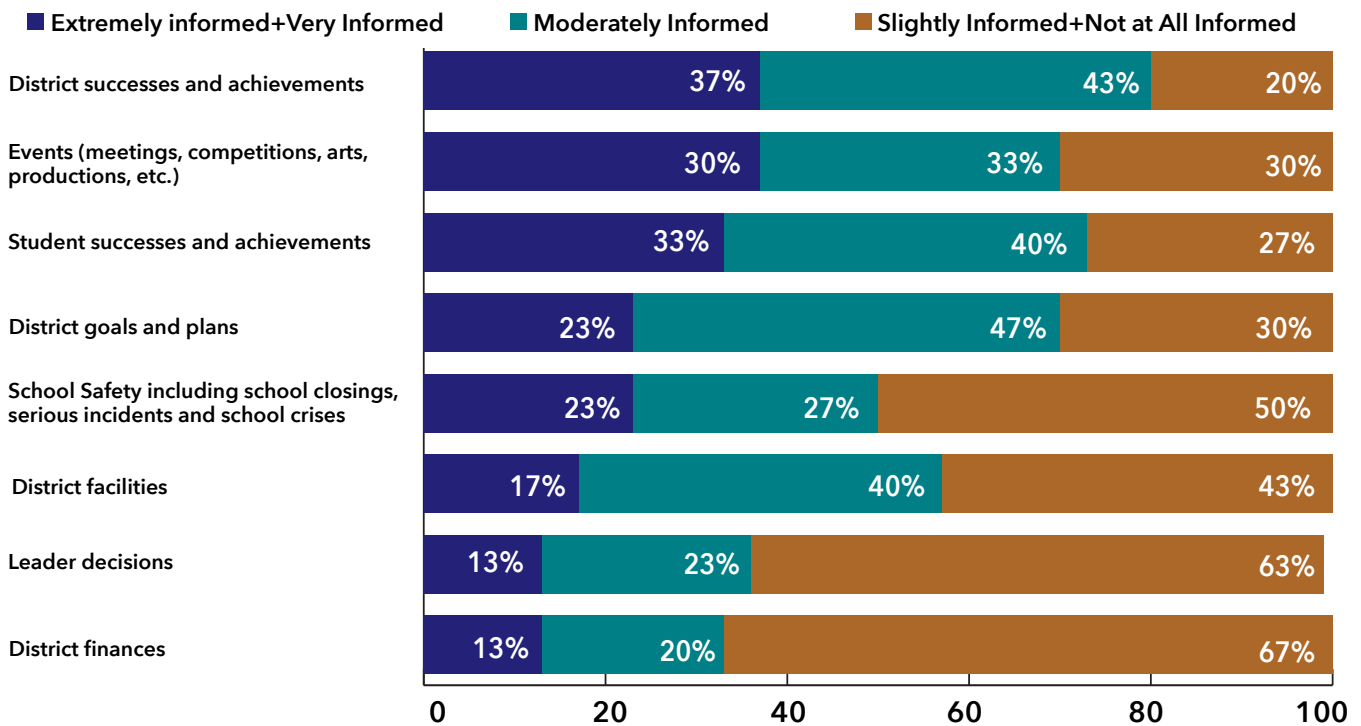
Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics – *Parents*



Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics - *Employees*

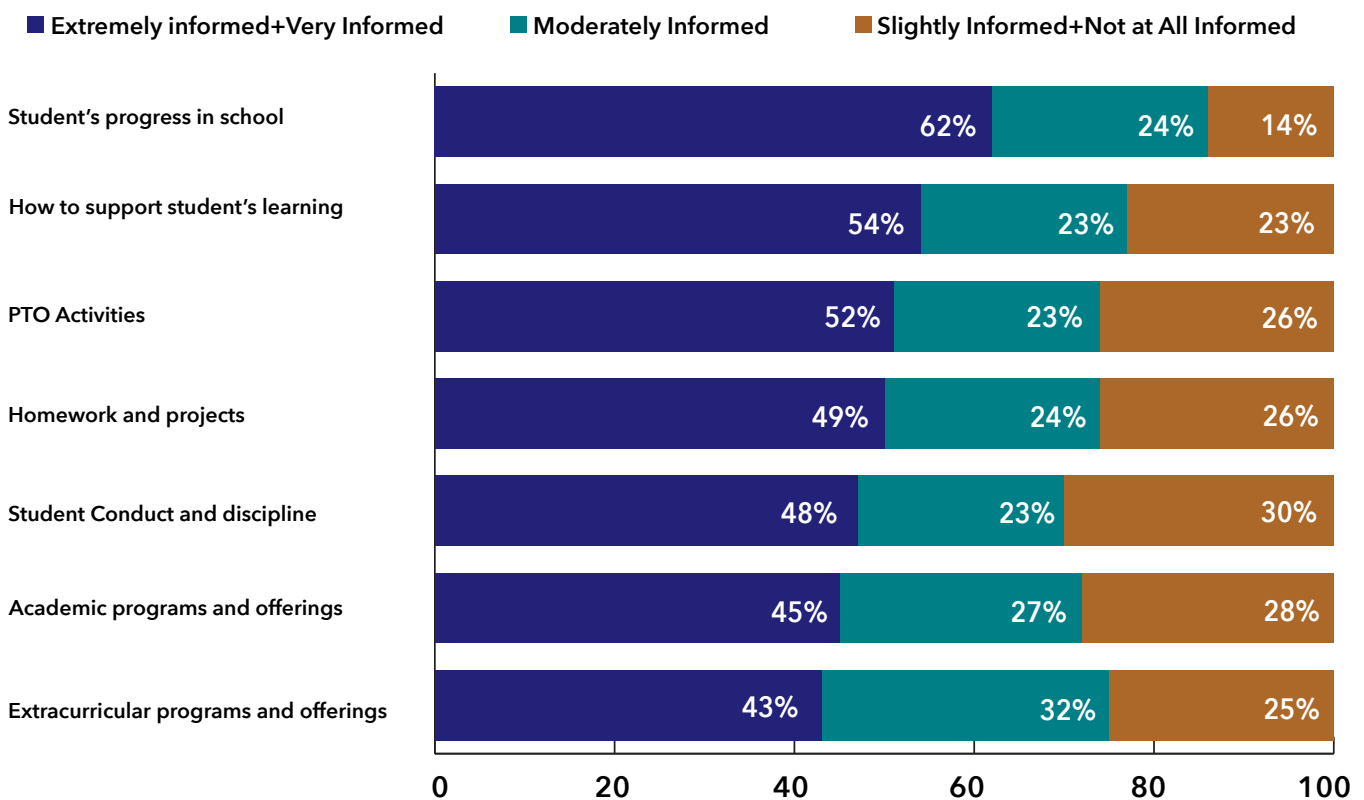


Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics - *Community**



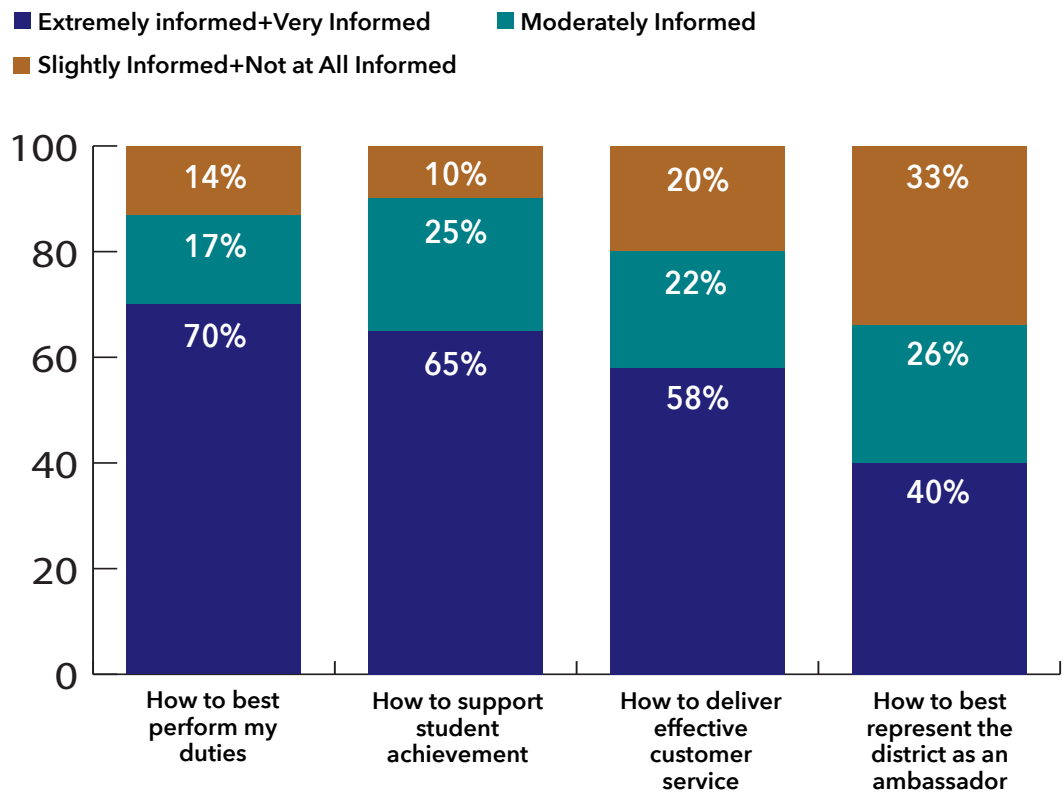
- Employees felt most informed about district successes and achievement, events, student successes and achievements, and school safety, with approximately 70 percent or more saying they felt at least moderately informed on these topics. They felt least informed about leader decisions, district facilities, and district finances.
- Of community member participants, 70 percent or more expressed feeling at least moderately informed about district successes and achievements, events, student successes and achievements, and district goals and plans. They felt least informed about district facilities, leader decisions, and district finances.
- In focus group and open-ended survey comments, participants expressed a lack of knowledge in the area of district decisions, facilities, and particularly finances.
- **When parents/caregivers were asked how informed they feel about matters pertaining to their child, they indicated they feel most informed about their child's academic progress, with 62 percent responding that they are very or extremely informed in this area. More than half (54 percent) reported feeling very or extremely informed about how to support their child's learning at home. Parents feel least informed about extracurricular programs and academic programs and offerings, as shown in the chart below.**

Level of Feeling Informed on Areas Pertaining to Role as a Parent



- When employees were asked how informed they feel about topics pertaining to their jobs, 70 percent indicated feeling well-informed about how best to perform their duties. However, only 40 percent were confident that they know how to represent the district as an ambassador, as shown in the chart to the right.

Level of Feeling Informed on Areas Pertaining to Role as Employee



- Stakeholders across all focus groups and survey participants expressed the need for more clarity and consistency in how decisions are communicated, especially those that affect school buildings, budgets, or classroom experiences. What many described as a “lack of transparency” has led to confusion and mistrust, especially when decisions felt sudden, inconsistent, or insufficiently explained.

Examples raised during the audit process included concerns about how policies like the student dress code are communicated and enforced, how families are informed about program changes, and how timelines for key decisions are shared with schools. In many cases, the issue was not the decision itself but the absence of clear, timely communication and visible opportunities for participation.

Stakeholders also want to feel more confident that their feedback matters. Employees, families, students, and community partners described a gap between being asked for input and seeing how that input influences outcomes.

- During focus groups, employees shared that while GRPS has handled past crises with professionalism, the experience has varied widely across schools and departments. Some praised the district’s ability to respond quickly and calmly, especially during building-level incidents. However, others noted a lack of clarity around who communicates what, when updates will be shared, and how messaging reaches different audiences.

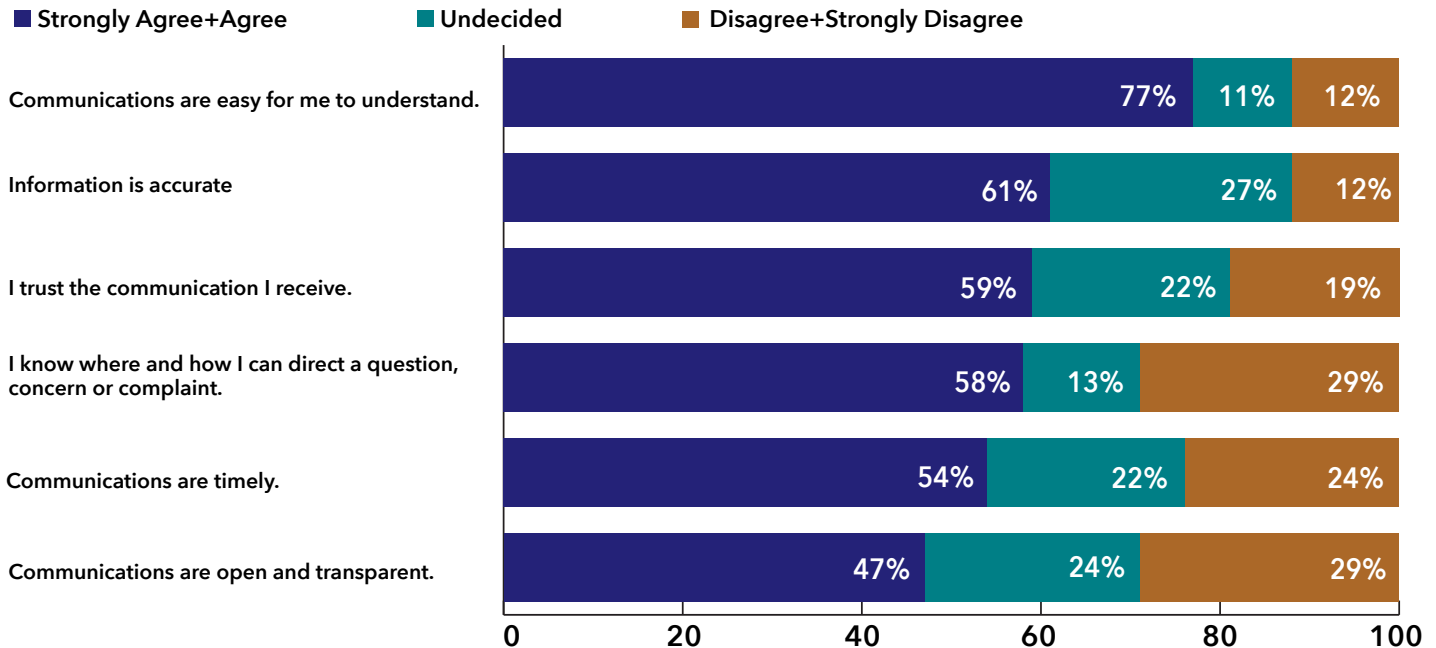
Several staff expressed frustration that they sometimes learn about incidents from social media or families before hearing

from their supervisors. Internal stakeholders emphasized the need for more consistent training, clearer protocols, and a stronger emphasis on using communication as a support tool, not just to inform, but to reassure, explain, and maintain transparency throughout the crisis.

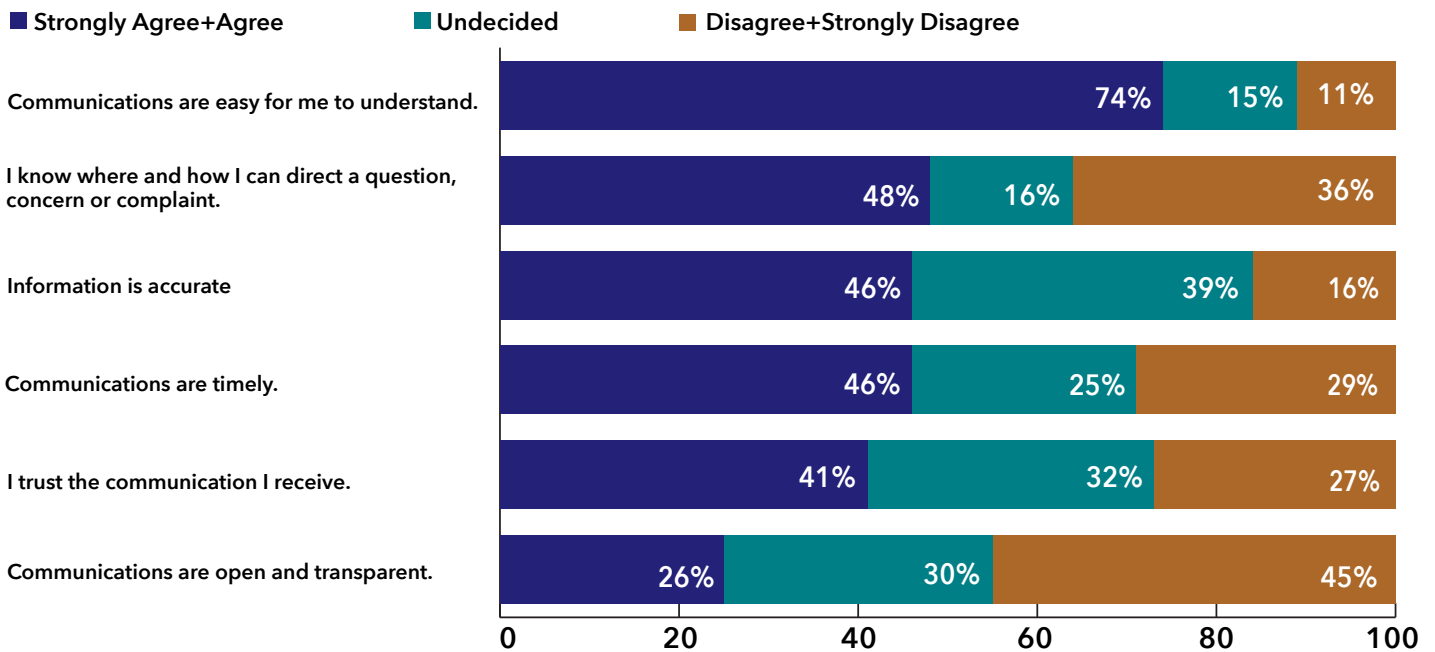
- **In focus groups, parents consistently raised concerns about imbalanced attention, transparency, and access to information about school offerings.** Families shared that they often felt left to “figure it out” on their own, with limited understanding of how theme-based programs work, how to apply, or how their neighborhood school compares.

- **In the SCOPE Survey, all stakeholder groups were asked their level of agreement with statements regarding various aspects of communication quality, with the results shown below and on the next page.**
 - Of parents, 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed that communications are easy to understand, and approximately 60 percent indicated that they agree or strongly agree that the information they receive is accurate, they trust the communication they receive, and they know where and how to direct a question, complaint or concern. The lowest rating was given to “communications are open and transparent, with 47 percent either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

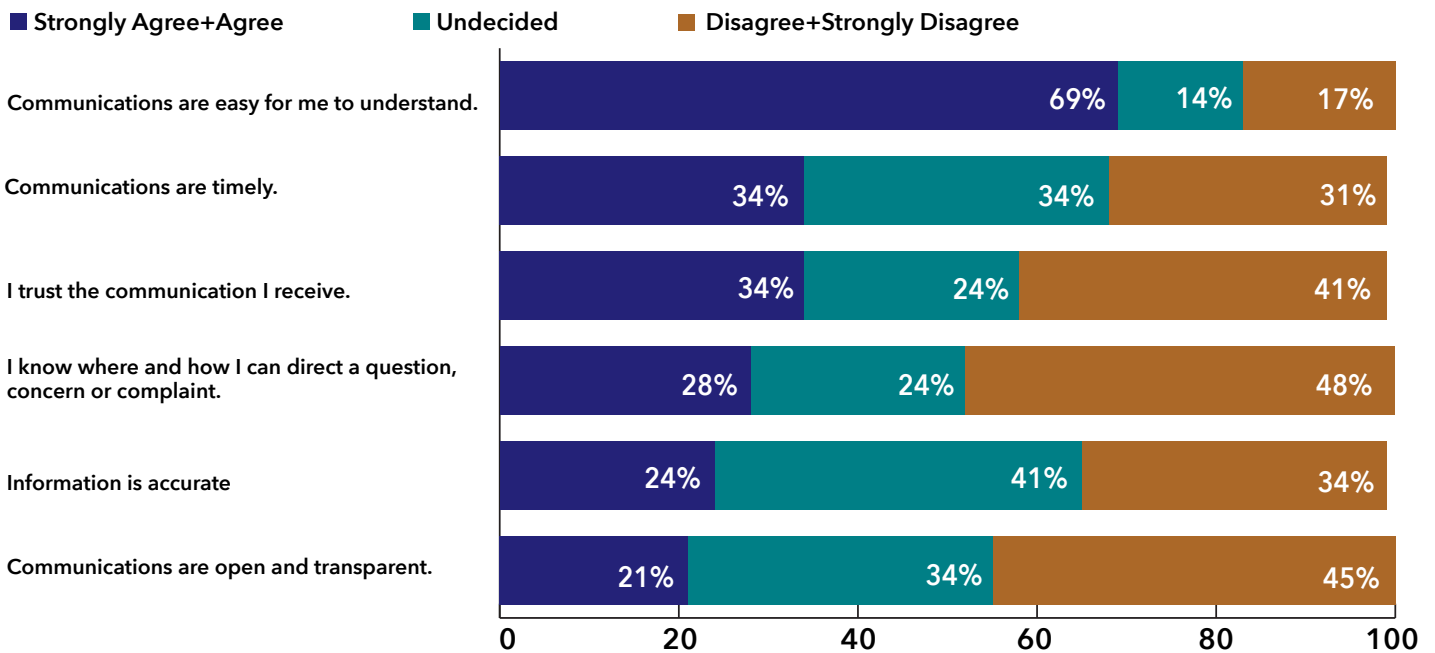
Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communication – *Parents*



Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communication – *Employees*



Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communication – *Community**



- Of employees, 74 percent agreed or strongly agreed that communications are easy to understand, but less than half agreed or strongly agreed with any of the other statements regarding the quality of district communications.
- Of community members, 69 percent agreed or strongly agreed that communications are easy to understand, but less than 35 percent agreed or strongly agreed with any of the other statements regarding the quality of district communications.

• **In focus groups, when discussing the quality of internal communications from the district, employees shared the following concerns:**

- Many employees expressed the opinion that the current weekly messages are overwhelming and overly long, with important information often “buried” beneath less urgent messages.
- Employees expressed a lack of confidence that district information

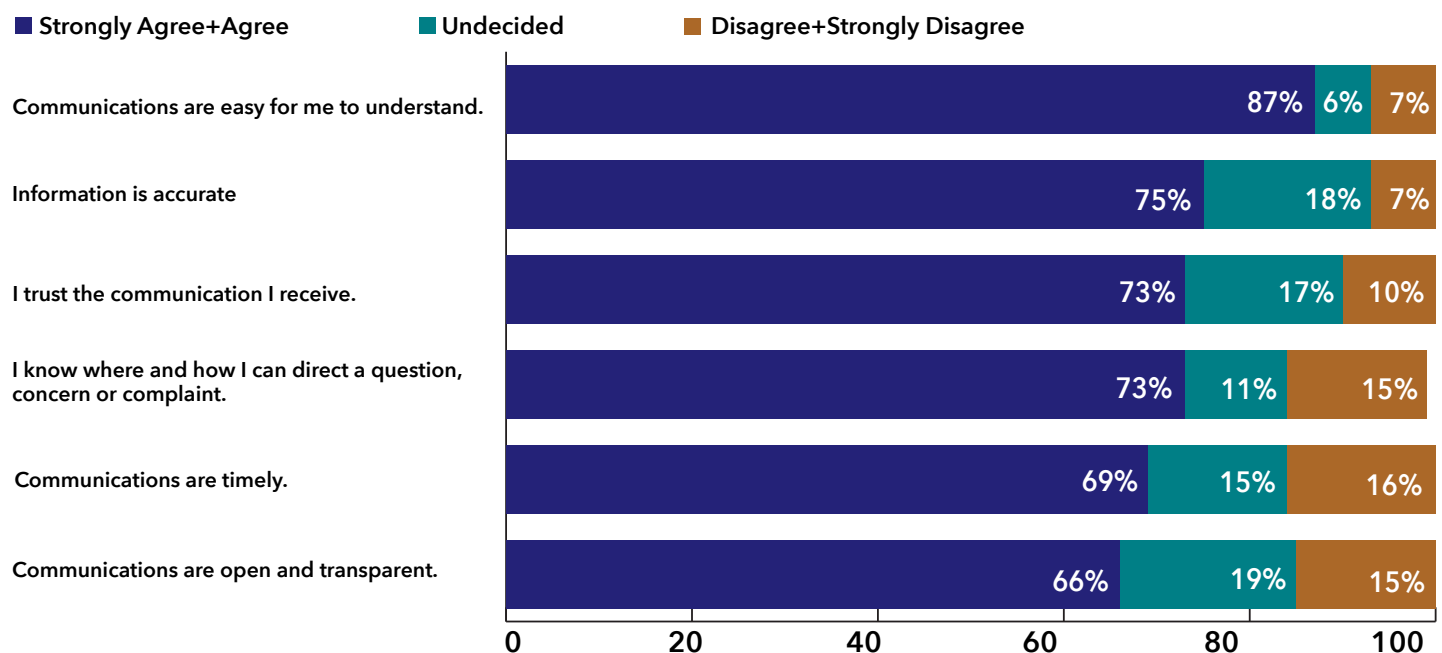
is distributed consistently across all employee groups and locations. Some front line staff indicated they do not receive them at all.

- Staff voiced confusion and concern around how leadership transitions and role changes are communicated.

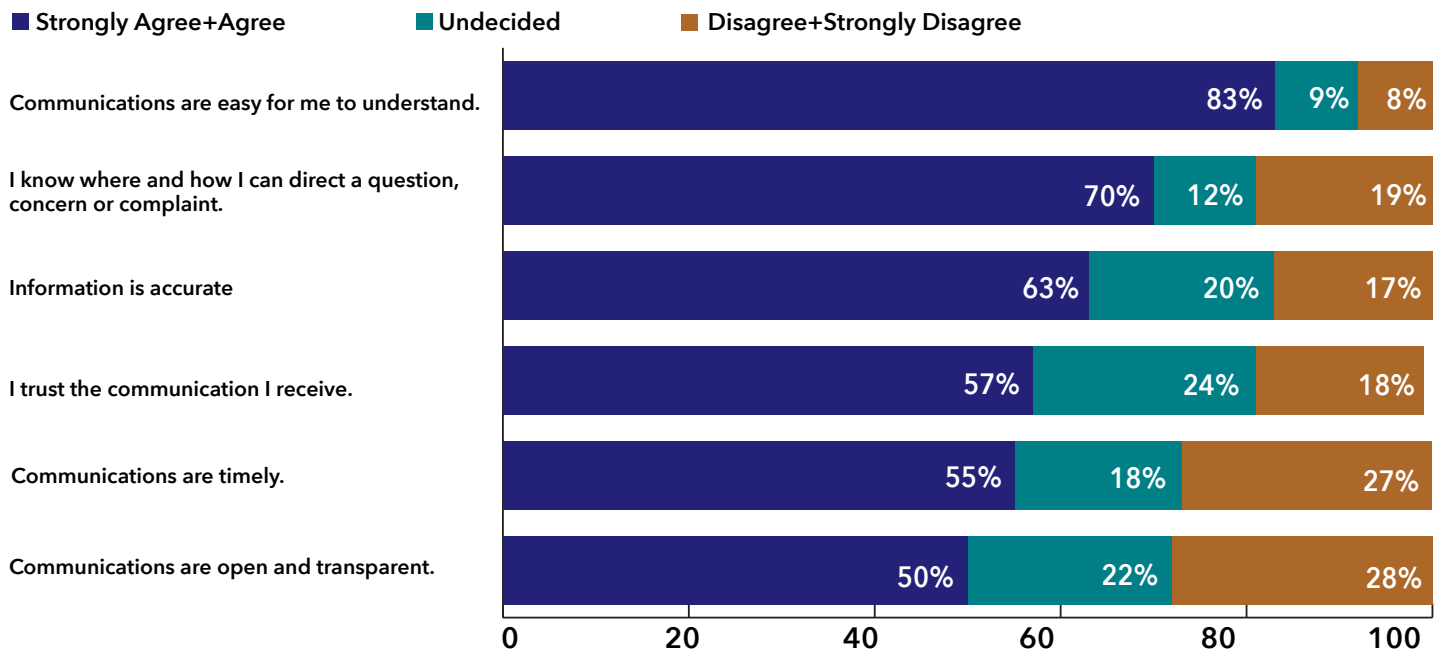
• **Statements regarding various aspects of communication quality were rated higher at the school level than at the district level by both parents and employees, as shown below and on the next page.**

- At the school level, the statement “communications are easy for me to understand” received the highest rating by parents, with 87 percent indicating agreement or strong agreement. At least two-thirds of parents agreed or strongly agreed with all other statements regarding communication quality at the school level. (These results may be influenced, at least in part, by their greater familiarity and more frequent connection with schools than the district.)

Level of Agreement With Statements About School Communication – *Parents*



Level of Agreement With Statements About School Communication – *Employees*



- The statement “communications are easy for me to understand” received the highest rating for employees as well, with 83 percent indicating agreement or strong agreement, and 50 percent or more of employees indicating agreement or strong agreement with all other statements regarding communication quality at the school level.
- **In focus groups, GRPS employees consistently named their principals, front office staff, and supervisors as their most trusted and frequent sources of information.** However, they perceive that inconsistent communication practices from the district and across schools sometimes lead to confusion, misinformation, or gaps in understanding.
 - Employees shared that inconsistent communication makes them feel out of the loop or undervalued, which they perceive to be a cause of low morale.
- Employees, as well as parents, mentioned wanting more timely updates about projects that impact their daily routines, such as renovations, closures, relocations, and health or safety repairs.
 - Employees consistently expressed a desire for clearer guidance around when they are responsible for communications. Staff who are responsible for communicating at the school-level also expressed a desire for more training and clarity around their communication responsibilities.
- **In focus groups, parents observed a lack of consistency in communication across schools and departments,** as well as inconsistencies in the frequency, tone, and clarity of communications. Some families reported receiving well-structured updates regularly, while others report little or no communication.

- **Overall, parents and employees feel a greater sense of connection to their school than to the district**, as indicated by their level of agreement with a series of questions on the SCOPE Survey related to whether they feel their involvement, input, and opinions are welcome and valued. As shown below, parents comparably feel more connected than employees to their schools and the district.
 - Among parents and employees, a greater percentage feel that their *involvement* is welcome and valued than that their *input and opinion* are welcome and valued, at both the district and school levels.
 - While nearly half of parents and employees agree or strongly agree that their input and opinion are welcome and valued by their school (or department), they show far less agreement about getting a similar welcome at the district level.
- In focus groups, parents and employees shared that, while they feel welcome to participate in school events and district surveys, few believe their input influences decisions at the district level. Following are two illustrative comments:
 - We get “surveys, but I’m not sure anything happens with them.” (Parent)
 - “I give feedback when asked, but I don’t know if it changes anything.” (Employee)
- **Parents and staff expressed concern about the lack of responsiveness to emails**, indicating that it varies widely from person-to-person and department-to-department. Employees, in particular, indicated that what they termed “email avoidance” can often result in them not being able to fulfill their responsibilities. Others indicated that they perceive the lack of responsiveness to be due to other employees’ fear of “putting it in writing.”

LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS	PARENTS (AGREE, STRONGLY AGREE)		EMPLOYEES (AGREE, STRONGLY AGREE)	
	...the District	... my child's School	...the District	...my School/ Department
<i>Statement about feelings of connection with...</i>				
I see people who look like me/my family.	77%	81%	72%	69%
My involvement is welcome and valued.	56%	71%	36%	56%
My input and opinion are welcome and valued.	41%	65%	24%	53%



WELCOME TO
Grand Rapids Public Schools

Digital Communication Tools

District/School Websites

- **Platform and Management.** GRPS utilizes the Foxbright website platform to host its public website at <https://grps.org/>. Management of the public site is the responsibility of the Communications & External Affairs Department. A staff intranet also exists, but it was described to the auditor as severely outdated and largely unused.
- **Website Design, Functionality, and Accessibility.** The district website presents a welcoming tone and strong branding, but some visitors report struggling with inconsistent navigation.
 - The district and school websites are mobile-responsive, and parents in focus groups shared that they often access the sites through mobile devices. (The auditor did not have access to back-
 - end analytics on the district and school websites source traffic, but the district should be able to determine whether focus group feedback aligns with those analytics.)
 - A homepage template design used across the individual school websites helps to maintain consistency in district branding and in the navigation of the uppermost menu and the footer. The inclusion of principal welcome messages, school building photos, virtual tour tabs, and a space for school logos allows each school website to still feel tailored to its likely visitors.
 - The auditor used the [WebAIM website accessibility tool](#) to assess the district website's homepage for accessibility issues. This tool checks for barriers that might affect users with disabilities, including visual, hearing, motor, or cognitive impairments. The evaluation revealed no errors and no color contrast concerns. There were some

alerts (59), primarily for underlined texts, the improper use of table formatting, and redundant links. There were also some structural elements recommended for review such as unordered lists. A [website accessibility statement](#) is present in the footer of all pages, as part of the template design.

- **Content Quality and Currency.** District-level pages reflect timely news and a professional tone. The homepage of the district site is rich with student-centered imagery, but it is visually dense, with key information often pushed 'below the fold.'
 - School site content lacks consistency. While some school sites (available at <https://grps.org/schools/>) share engaging, localized content, others include outdated calendars, missing directories, or inactive pages. This inconsistency creates confusion and weakens the district's overall digital presence for families.
- **News and Storytelling Opportunities.** The district website features celebratory stories that highlight scholar success and district progress. While these are generally well-written, navigation could be improved with topic tags or categories.
 - Focus groups and survey responses expressed a desire for more classroom-based stories and authentic scholar experiences, highlighting opportunities to expand content across both district and school pages.
- **Value and Usefulness.** The SCOPE Survey invited respondents to provide feedback on the district website. About half of employees (55 percent) and parents/caregivers (50 percent) gave the district website 4 or 5 out of 5 stars for its value as an informational source. However, when asked how they like to learn information

about the district, their preferences varied:

- About 1 in 4 parents identified the website as a top source of information about school and district events (25 percent) and general district news and information (25 percent), while about a third saw it as a top source to find information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, and finances (31 percent).
- About 1 in 3 employees identified the website as a top source of information about school and district leader decisions, goals, plans, and finances (36 percent); school and district events (35 percent); and general district news and information (31 percent).
- When it comes to school closings, early dismissals, and serious incidents or school crises, very few parents (10 percent) or employees (8 percent) identify the website as a top preferred source of information.

District/School Social Media and Video

- **Management.** Responsibility for social media is primarily managed by the Communications & External Affairs team, with some schools maintaining their own accounts. GRPS uses a centralized scheduling and analytics tool, and social media content is submitted by schools and departments to Communications & External Affairs for posting to ensure brand consistency and coordinated messaging across platforms.
- **Activity and Engagement.** GRPS maintains a visually consistent and active presence across its platforms:
 - [Facebook](#) (19,000 followers)
 - [X \(Twitter\)](#) (4,100 followers)

- [Instagram](#) (3,100 followers)
- [LinkedIn](#) (4,000 followers)
- [YouTube](#) (3,600 subscribers)

The auditor conducted a sampling of GRPS social media activity, selecting different two-week periods between January and March 2025 based on the availability of posts and the specific platform or account. The review assessed posting frequency and audience engagement based on publicly available data and in light of [national trends](#), with the following observations:

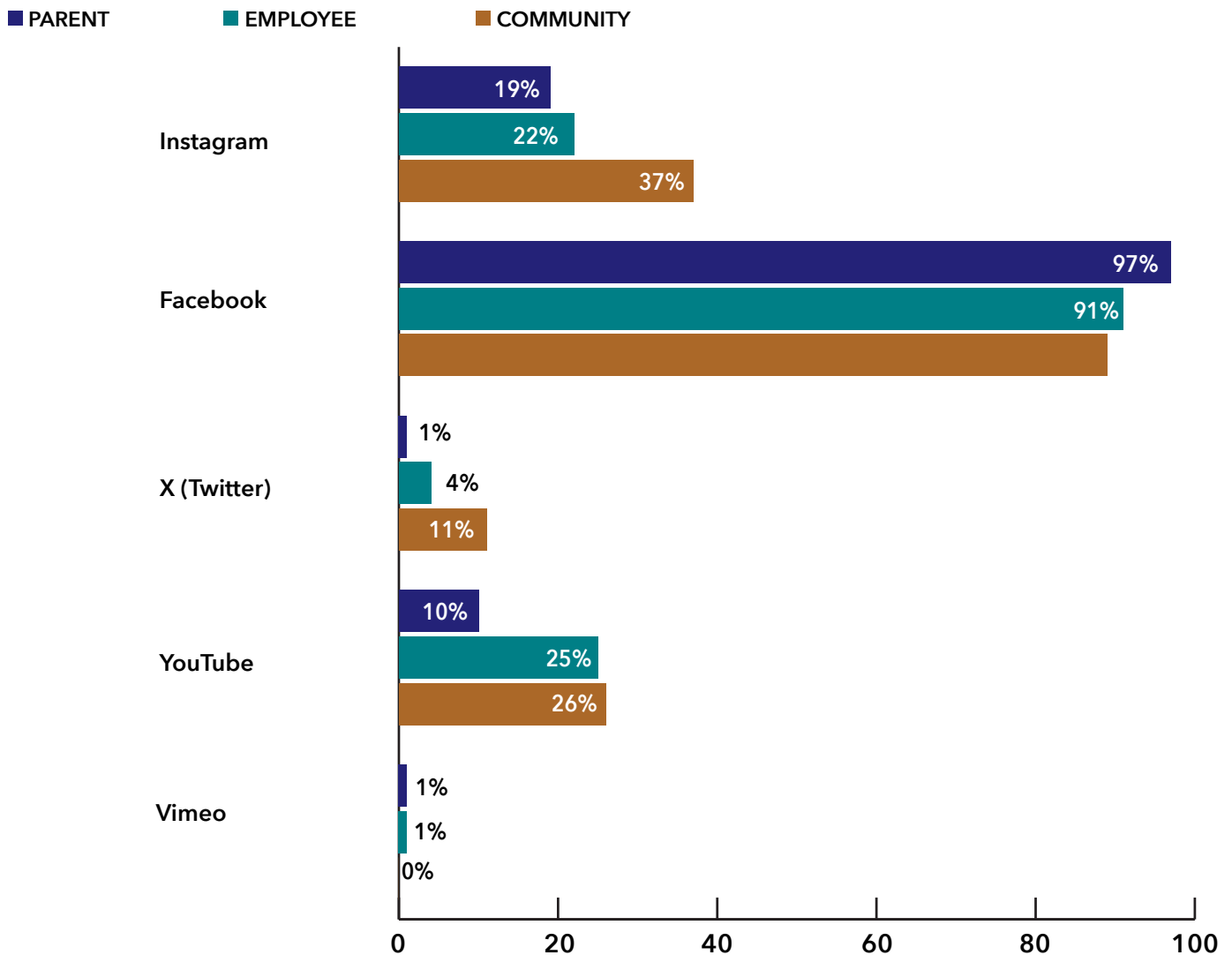
- Facebook posts had an average engagement rate of 0.24 percent, which is below the education industry average so far in 2025 of 2.2 percent.
- Instagram posts had an average engagement rate of 2.23 percent, which is below the education industry average so far in 2025 of 4.2 percent.
- X (Twitter) posts had an average engagement rate of 0.12 percent, which is below the education industry average so far in 2025 of 2.4 percent.
- LinkedIn posts had an average engagement rate of 0.31 percent, which is below the education industry average so far in 2025 of 2.8 percent.
- YouTube videos had an average engagement rate of 0.30 percent, which is above the average rate between January and March 2025 of 0.10 percent. Notably, one video achieved exceptional reach with over 126,000 views in April 2024. The "GRPS Enroll Today - 2024 Eng" video promotes school enrollment by showcasing diverse programs, student success, and welcoming environments.
- Among SCOPE Survey respondents who use social media, Facebook is by far the most used platform, with nearly 90 percent or more indicating they use



it for information about the district. As shown on pages [16](#) and [19](#), some community members value and prefer social media above other sources for information about the district.

- **Post Content Strategy.** Social media content is updated frequently and highlights events, celebrations, and student photos.
 - The posting strategy appears to be largely announcement-driven, with fewer stories that build long-term engagement. During the time period of the auditor's review, there was minimal storytelling to elevate student

Which social media platforms do you use for school related information?



and staff voices across the various social media platforms.

- Most post content is cross-posted without adaptation, except for on Instagram. GRPS does not appear to utilize many platform-native features, such as Instagram Stories, carousel posts, and LinkedIn professional tools, to engage segmented audiences.
- During focus groups, parents and staff expressed a desire for more authentic, diverse, and consistent storytelling across platforms, particularly on

Instagram and YouTube, where they say younger and bilingual families are more active.

- **Recognitions.** Three videos produced in house by the Communications & External Affairs Department earned awards in NSPRA's 2024 Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards program. (Note: Entries are judged by experienced communication professionals from around the country using a set of established criteria based on industry best practices. NSPRA staff do not serve as judges.)

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) of the school system and external opportunities (O) and threats (T) in the wider environment – known as a SWOT analysis

– affecting the ability of GRPS to achieve its communication goals.

These items are addressed, either as things to build on or to try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

INTERNAL (i.e., attributes of GRPS)	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
	- Employees consistently praised the responsiveness of communications team members and the shift toward more proactive, event-based support. - Communication methods are varied and inclusive, including email, robocalls, newsletters, social media, and video. - Graphics, board-meeting visuals, social content, and digital storytelling are professional and enhance brand perception. - The GRPS Champions video series and staff highlights are highly valued across stakeholder groups, especially by principals and teachers, who feel their work is elevated by the communications team. - GRPS provides communication support for multilingual and low-literacy families through translated materials, simplified language, and visual strategies. - Principals and teachers are consistently cited by parents and students as their most reliable sources of communication. - GRPS handles crisis communications well at the district leadership level. - The communication infrastructure across GRPS has many available tools.	- District-wide messages sometimes lack context or are shared after decisions are made, contributing to employee confusion and a sense of disconnection. - Employees and families report confusion and fatigue due to the overwhelming number of communication tools across the school system, with no clear guidance on which to use and when. - Employees report inconsistency around what gets communicated, when, or how, leading to a knowledge inequity across schools. They want a clearer system of communication standards with expectations for school, classroom, and district-level contact. - Some multilingual families report inaccessible formats, such as untranslated PDFs or dense language not adapted for cultural responsiveness - Communication roles and expectations for school leaders in a crisis are not clearly understood, risking inconsistent or delayed communication. - Staff managing school communication (e.g., social media, newsletters) often lack guidance or clear job expectations. - The communication infrastructure across GRPS at times struggles with priority alignment and consistency in practices. - Employees and families are skeptical about whether survey feedback leads to real change.

EXTERNAL (i.e., attributes of the environment in which GRPS operates)	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	• The momentum from internal engagement efforts (like “GRPS Champions”) can be expanded through a staff-led ambassador network to boost morale and unify messaging to the community. • Featuring community partners in communication materials, newsletters, and events could increase external support and foster trust. • Reaching English Learner families and those with low literacy could be enhanced through the use of video, with subtitled, bilingual content to bridge information gaps. • Stakeholders want to know how their input was used from surveys. Formalizing “what we heard/what we did” loops can rebuild trust. • Elevated school-based storytelling to external audiences can counter outdated public perceptions and promote future enrollment. • High-performing public platforms such as Facebook and YouTube can be easily leveraged to share enrollment stories, student and staff successes, and district impact.	• Families cite miscommunication, lack of clarity, and school reputation as perceived reasons for leaving GRPS and as contributing to declining enrollment. • Multilingual families and new residents sometimes struggle to navigate district information, creating barriers to equitable access and full engagement. • Longstanding concerns persist among external stakeholders about unequal investment, attention, and prestige between the GRPS theme schools and neighborhood schools. • Media narratives are often split between school success and district-level criticism, complicating public trust. • Some key partners who provide vital community services feel invisible and underappreciated, threatening future collaboration. • A perceived manipulation or disregard of feedback has fostered some community skepticism. Partners voiced concerns that transparency is performative and expressed fatigue from giving feedback without updates or next steps. • Inconsistent visibility of decision-making and planning processes has and could continue to lead to stakeholder mistrust.

National Benchmarking

SCOPE Survey and Scorecard

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support, and administrative staff) and community members. The auditor used this data to identify strengths and weaknesses of the GRPS communication program. An additional value the SCOPE Survey brings is the ability to compare the district's survey results on issues that matter the most in school communications with results of surveys conducted by the 130+ school districts across the United States that have participated in the survey since its inception.

Interpreting Ratings

The ratings 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 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 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 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

Interpreting Score Differences

With SCOPE Survey responses presented on a 5-point scale, a district's average score for a question is the average of all points, or responses, received for that particular question.

When comparing a district's unique score with the national average score, the meaningfulness of the difference depends on the context of the question and its response options. A difference of 0.5 between one score and another—for example, between 3.0 and 3.5—represents a 10 percent difference in the response range. If two scores fall within the same numerical range (3 in this example), they might both suggest the same general sentiment (“moderately informed”). However, if two scores fall into different numerical ranges, they indicate very different sentiments (e.g., 3 is “moderately informed” but 2.5 is “slightly informed”).

In reviewing the SCOPE Scorecard, keep in mind that GRPS had smaller [margins of error](#) for parent and employee responses to the survey, offering a higher level of confidence in those results. For community responses, GRPS had a significantly larger margin of error, and there is a lower level of confidence in those results.

It is worth noting, though, that error margins are less significant for a survey measuring preferences, attitudes, and beliefs than they are for a poll that measures support for a specific candidate or finance proposal. When measuring satisfaction with quality of communication or preferences for how information is received, differences of a few percentage points are unlikely to drastically change the selection of communication strategies.

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

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 GRPS' communication program compares to national, benchmarked 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, they 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 initiatives—creates a respectful, inclusive culture that encourages individuals to share their thoughts and experiences without fear of backlash.

Benchmarking Scale

As noted previously, each benchmarked area is assessed on a progressive scale:

- **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.

GRPS and the Rubrics

When considering the GRPS communication program in light of the benchmarking scale and essential program components outlined in the *Rubrics of Practice*, the auditor found the district's overall efforts to be progressing, with areas of strength and others still emerging.

- Three areas are rated at the Emerging level – Internal Communications (CFA 2), Marketing and Branding (CFA 4), and Bond/Finance Communications (CFA 6) – and would benefit from more structured planning, consistent implementation, and stakeholder engagement.
- Crisis Communication (CFA 5) is approaching Established, with strong leadership-led response strategies but lacking consistent training and follow-up processes across all staff levels.
- Two areas are rated as Established: Comprehensive Professional Communication (CFA 1) and Parent/Family Communications (CFA 3). GRPS demonstrates consistent foundational practices in these areas.
- Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications (CFA 7) stands out as very close to Exemplary, driven by inclusive messaging, translation supports, and a growing district-wide commitment to equity in communication.

Together, these findings point to a communication program that is steadily maturing, with strong leadership and a solid base from which to build more consistent, strategically aligned communications.

To compare GRPS' program in greater detail, find the 2023 edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* in the NSPRA Online Store at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023>.

Recommendations

GRPS is defined by its diversity, resilience, and deep commitment to students and families. From school leaders to frontline staff, there is a shared desire to tell the district's story with pride and purpose. The Communications & External Affairs team has made meaningful progress in doing so, but as enrollment shifts and expectations rise, GRPS must begin taking a more strategic, proactive, and unified approach to communication system-wide.

The [Key Findings](#) outlined in this report reflect both strengths to build on and challenges to address in support of a highly effective communication program. In response to NSPRA's research, the following eight recommendations offer a clear path forward. Grounded in national best practices and customized for GRPS, they are designed to improve clarity and access, strengthen internal systems, elevate the district's identity, and foster trust through two-way engagement.

The recommendations are listed in the auditor's suggested order of priority, but the GRPS communications team and district leaders may choose to address them in an order and through tactics other than those outlined. Each recommendation is accompanied by action steps that provide tactical ideas for how it might be accomplished. Many action steps include real-world examples of their implementation by other award-winning school districts.

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. Support district goals by incorporating communication planning into all priority initiatives.
2. Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.
3. Enhance decision-making processes to maintain and build upon the growing sense of trust in district leadership.
4. Build a culture of authentic engagement strategically supported by communications.
5. Strengthen strategic storytelling and marketing to support enrollment, identity, and engagement.
6. Strengthen and ensure consistency in digital communication practices across the entire school system.
7. Strategically enhance GRPS' social media presence.
8. Build communication capacity through a key communicators network and communications staff professional development.

Recommendation 1:

Support district goals by incorporating communication planning into all priority initiatives.

The work of building and strengthening district relationships with stakeholders through effective public relations rests formally with the Communications & External Affairs Department. The department and its five-person team is seen by GRPS employees as highly responsive to requests, as noted in the [Key Findings](#). That responsiveness has kept them largely focused on day-to-day activities, leading to a more reactive than proactive service model overall.

The director of communications has expressed interest in planning their priorities and daily efforts more strategically in support of department and district goals. This would allow the team to move beyond currently informal practices, where planning is more ad hoc, informal and often verbal. Planning efforts backed by data, as offered in this report, offer the potential to increase both efficiency and effectiveness while also giving the team a way to measure the real-world impact of their work.

As the auditor noted in survey and focus groups feedback, GRPS stakeholders want to better understand the rationale behind district decisions and have opportunities to be more involved in shaping the future. That means the district as a whole will benefit from the Communications & External Affairs Department's development of plans with clear, measurable objectives for communications aligned to the district's strategic priorities: student achievement, enrollment, facilities, equity, and financial transparency.

As outlined in the following action steps, the centerpiece of this planning should be a comprehensive, strategic communication

plan that outlines in detail why and how communication activities will be carried out to support overall internal and external communications, issues management, and community engagement year round. As components of this comprehensive plan or as separate specialized plans, the department should also develop communication plans to support crisis response, budget education and initiatives, facility improvement updates, and other priority initiatives or major campaigns.

Action Step 1.1

Follow the four-step strategic public relations planning model for developing communication plans, known as RPIE.

There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan, but following the four-step strategic communication planning process of research, plan, implement, evaluate (known as RPIE) has proven successful for many school districts and is a best practice for accredited public relations practitioners.

Developing a formal, strategic communication plan will help GRPS ground its efforts in best practices that are mission-oriented, cost-effective, and community-informed. Without such a plan, communications may remain reactive, fragmented, or inconsistent, which can undermine stakeholder trust. Following this strategic framework will create a road map to a highly effective GRPS communication program.

Research

Research (R) and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' information needs and wants. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant, top-line findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit Report, including the

SCOPE Survey data, provides an excellent starting point and a deeper understanding of internal and external stakeholders' communication sources, preferences, and perceptions than the district had previously.

The following are some additional data types worth researching when communicators are creating a strategic communication plan:

- Reports specific to the school system: Enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by 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/cedsci/>), 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/schooling-in-america-survey-dashboard/>).
- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (<https://www.edchoice.org/schooling-in-america-survey-dashboard/>) and Gallup Workplace Insights (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/insights.aspx>).

As part of the research phase, determine all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in GRPS. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics, such as managing website content, district e-newsletters, building e-newsletters, social media postings, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, etc. The materials

#1

Support district goals by incorporating communication planning into all priority initiatives.

gathered and provided to the auditor for this audit are an excellent starting point.

Be sure to also include any regular staff efforts to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, advisory groups, business partnerships, open house programs, news media relations, participation in community organizations, etc.

Compiling these details will provide a more accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations. It will also indicate the scope of responsibilities and tasks related to the communications functions, allowing for better determinations of where (and if) they fit into the comprehensive communication plan.

Research should be an ongoing process in the development of a school district's communication plans and strategies.

Plan

Planning (P) is at the heart of the RPIE process because it is where the communications road map takes shape:

- **Identify Goals and Develop Measurable Objectives:** In the planning phase, begin by articulating clear long-term goals that the communication program will help to achieve and shorter-term measurable objectives based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions, and behaviors of key

audiences. Think of objectives as desired outcomes from communication efforts, stated in a way that can be measured later, which builds trust by establishing accountability. When developing objectives, make sure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound).

Example of a measurable objective:

"By the end of the 2024-25 school year, at least 60 percent of all stakeholder groups will say they are moderately to extremely informed about the district's finances."

- **Identify Stakeholder Groups:** Stakeholder groups, also sometimes referred to as constituents or target audiences, are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district and its initiatives. A strategic communication plan ideally has a unique set of strategies, tactics, and key messages for each stakeholder group. Major audiences may change from year to year depending on challenges and opportunities identified through the research phase, but some common stakeholders for school districts include:

- Parents (broken down by grade levels or another identifier such as "active/involved" or "non-English-speaking")
- Employees (sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff, and paraprofessionals)
- Business and community partners (civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents, and others active in the schools and community)
- Elected officials (town, county, state, and federal levels)
- Non-parents (including empty nesters, retirees, and community members without children in GRPS schools)

- Students (such as those participating in student government)
- Media representatives (radio and television stations, local newspapers, and magazines)

- **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 spans and time are limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused, and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed.

Key Message Example: Taxpayers invest 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 for the community.

- **Determine Strategies:** Strategies are the approaches used to achieve objectives; they 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 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 communications staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness.

Example of a strategy and related tactics:

If the measurable objective is to increase the percentage of all stakeholders who say they are moderately to extremely informed about district finances:

Sample Strategy: Make easy-to-understand financial information available via multiple communication channels.

Sample 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.
 - Provide financial advisory committees with communication materials such as infographics to help members act as ambassadors who can explain district finances in the community.
- **Identify Needed Tools:** Consider any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned. Expenditures might include specialized equipment, software, subscriptions, materials, supplies, printing, duplicating, paid advertising, or contracted services for example.

Consider the needs of families whose primary language is other than English. As GRPS experiences an increase in students and families whose first language is not English, addressing this communication challenge should be an integral part of the strategic communication plan. (See [Recommendation 6](#) for more on this topic.)
 - **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. Formal evaluation will come at the end of implementation, but the plan should also identify key times to assess progress during the implementation phase to see if modifications are necessary.
 - **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 staff; other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. Further, the SCOPE Survey showed that teachers, principals, and employees are key sources of information for stakeholders, so it is important that employees understand major issues and initiatives, can answer questions, and know when they are responsible for disseminating information.

As the Communications & External Affairs Department works through the planning process, be sure to address the following questions for every major district initiative:

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

Implement

Implementation (I) is when the plan is put into effect. This is often the easiest part of the process because the research and planning phases will have identified what needs to be done, when, by whom, with what tools and resources, and on what timeline.

Evaluate

When creating the strategic communication plan, identify evaluative (E) measures to be used later to determine success in achieving

the stated goals and objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. This data should inform future updates to the strategic communication plan.

NSPRA offers many resources to help the Communications & External Affairs Department develop a strategic communication plan. First, team members might watch and discuss the NSPRA PR Power Hour on “Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan,” available on the NSPRA website in the Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans (<https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Plan-District-Communications>). The webpage also contains communication plan templates, including one for use with an NSPRA Communication Audit Report.

For additional inspiration, review and reflect on these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans:

- Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan: https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1675894676/acpsk12vaus/k7wz2y76pwuxfu1fuj78/ACPS_Strategic_Communicationsand_CommunityEngagementPlan.pdf
- Shelby County Schools (AL) ShelbyCS – Empowering and Inspiring Excellence (PDF) <https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/Awards%20Section/Award%20Winners/School%20Comms%20Awards/Gold%20Medallion/11018-ShelbyCS-Empowering-Inspiring-Excellence.pdf>
- Rockwood School District (Missouri) <https://www.rsdmo.org/departments/communications/comprehensive-communications-plan>

Action Step 1.2

Include proactive issues management as a strategy in the plan.

Establish an “issue radar” process to monitor community sentiment and track concerns before they escalate. Identify common topics, such as safety, budget cuts, and curriculum, and proactively prepare messaging, FAQs, and internal talking points. Review and update this list regularly in collaboration with Cabinet, school leaders, and the superintendent.

Proactive issues management allows a district to shape public understanding before false information and misunderstandings arise. It also allows communicators to help district leaders predict and prepare for potential controversies. It involves scanning for early warning signs, coordinating internal briefings, and equipping leaders with consistent information to guide conversations in schools and neighborhoods.

In support of the long-term goals eventually set for the communications program, consider including a measurable objective related to issues management in the strategic communication plan. Initially, that objective might be simply to establish a formal process for proactive issues management by the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year.

Equip school and district leaders to frame the conversation on GRPS’ terms, not others’. Use [NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice](#) to benchmark readiness, especially in areas like internal communication, media relations, and stakeholder engagement.

Action Step 1.3

Incorporate two-way communication as a specific component of the strategic communication plan.

As noted in the [Key Findings](#), stakeholders want more than opportunities to be heard; they want to know that their input helped to influence decisions. Survey results showed the lowest agreement with statements like “my involvement is welcome and valued,” echoed by focus group participants who questioned whether feedback leads to change.

To build trust and deepen engagement, GRPS should embed two-way communication into its strategic communication plan. This means going beyond outreach to create feedback loops that are authentic, timely, and clearly connected to district action.

- **When planning for public engagement, reflect on these gateway questions,** inspired by the democracy research of the Kettering Foundation. Consider a potential audience member’s likely response to assess when public input is appropriate:
 - Does this issue/topic affect me?
 - Can I do something about it?
 - If so, will others join me in doing something?

Answers to these questions can help planners determine whether engagement will be meaningful to participants.

- **Effective engagement requires structure and follow-through.** GRPS should:
 - Use trained facilitators when hosting advisory groups or community forums. Consider having communications staff trained as moderators/facilitators, and then they can train other volunteers as needed for major engagement events.

- When forming and using advisory groups, clarify the group’s role, who makes the final decision on an issue, and what participants can expect. Reinforce ground rules and purpose throughout the process so participants understand their influence.
- Follow up consistently; participants in advisory groups, community forums, or other engagement opportunities should see how their input shaped the outcome or decision.
- In addition to project-specific engagement, GRPS should adopt ongoing strategies to encourage regular feedback:
 - **Digital tools.** Use platforms like Let’s Talk, ThoughtExchange, or simple e-forms to collect comments and ideas. Allow for anonymous responses, and categorize them for efficient follow-up and trend tracking.
 - **Superintendent listening sessions.** Host regular in-person or virtual events where staff or families can share input on specific topics. Align these with district priorities, and ensure accessibility across locations. (See [Action Step 4.2](#)). Be clear that these sessions are for input, not problem resolution, and respect the chain of command for individual concerns.

Action Step 1.4

Develop and implement a comprehensive crisis communication plan.

GRPS must expand its crisis response efforts beyond operational procedures to include a robust, districtwide crisis communication plan. Well-planned crisis communication efforts support school safety by increasing understanding, building trust, and minimizing

misinformation and misunderstandings. This also helps to ensure staff, families, and the community receive timely, accurate updates during high-stress events.

During focus groups, staff shared that while GRPS has handled past crises with professionalism, the experience has varied widely across schools and departments. Some praised the district's ability to respond quickly and calmly, especially during building-level incidents. However, others noted a lack of clarity around who communicates what, when updates will be shared, and how messaging reaches different audiences. Several staff expressed frustration that they sometimes learn about incidents in the schools from social media or families before hearing from their supervisors. These stakeholders emphasized the need for more consistent training, clearer protocols, and a stronger emphasis on using communication as a support tool, not just to inform but to reassure, explain, and maintain transparency throughout the crisis.

Broad elements of crisis communications are often worked into district and school safety plans, but it is common for highly effective communication programs to develop a dedicated crisis communication plan. In support of the goals for GRPS' communications program, consider including an objective related to the development of a crisis communication plan in the year-round plan.

Crisis communication plans clearly define:

- Communication responsibilities during a crisis at the district and school levels.
 - Processes for internal updates, including staff-first communication protocols.
 - Approaches to using digital tools such as a designated crisis webpage and opt-in alert system.
 - Media response protocols, including designated spokespersons and student privacy guidance.
 - Relevant training expectations for administrators and frontline staff.
- Following are some best practice components of crisis communications to work into a plan as strategies and tactics:
- **Crisis alert tools:**
 - Develop a pre-built Crisis Alerts Webpage, also known as a dark site, that is activated only during emergencies. It should include a template framework for key elements to communicate during a crisis.
 - Create and promote (at least annually) an email or text opt-in list for all interested stakeholders to receive urgent updates in real time.
 - **Message templates and internal briefings:**
 - Develop and share with school leaders pre-approved templates for common emergency scenarios (e.g., weather closures, lockdowns).
 - Develop and provide front-office staff with scripts and talking points for urgent situations to maintain message accuracy and consistency.
 - Prioritize staff-first communication to build internal trust and to support greater message accuracy when they are communicating via word of mouth with other audiences.
 - **Training and readiness:**
 - Include communication protocols in districtwide emergency training, and involve communications staff in those training events. (Read the *Campus Safety* magazine article "[Transform Your Communications Team into a Crisis Response Powerhouse](#)" to learn how a university communications team trains for crisis communications.)
 - Train and annually remind building-level administrators and office staff

on crisis messaging expectations and crisis communication processes.

- Develop and maintain a standard “go bag” or digital toolkit for communications staff that includes login credentials, key contacts, media lists, chargers, and portable devices.
- **Media protocols:**
 - Define when and how the media are engaged during a crisis.
 - Establish clear jurisdictional boundaries for statements between GRPS and law enforcement.
 - Designate authorized spokespersons and protocols for managing student and staff privacy.
- **After-crisis communication:**
 - Use follow-up emails, social media posts, and newsletters to reaffirm the facts, explain next steps, and thank those affected.
 - Update the Crisis Alerts Webpage with a timely after-action summary to close the loop and retain transparency.

A comprehensive plan should be shared across all schools and departments and updated annually. Regular tabletop exercises or simulations can ensure all teams are familiar with their roles and confident in execution.

On the NSPRA website, members have access to a Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on Crisis and Safety Communications with sample messaging, webinars, award-winning plans, and more at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Crisis-and-Safety-Communications>. A PR Power Hour webinar on “Crisis Preparedness” from October 2023 is also available to watch at <https://www.nspr.org/Professional-Development/Webinars/On-Demand/On-Demand-Professional-Development-Library>.

By approaching crisis communication as a system, not just a moment, GRPS can ensure its staff and families feel supported, informed, and safe when it matters most.

Action Step 1.5

Use a simplified version of the strategic communication planning framework for all major district initiatives.



Stakeholders across all focus groups and survey participants expressed the need for more clarity and consistency in how decisions are communicated, especially those that affect school buildings, budgets, or classroom experiences. For GRPS to effectively advance its strategic goals, particularly around transparency, enrollment, facility modernization, and financial stewardship, communication must be embedded into the planning and execution of all major initiatives.

Whether facility-related, instructional, financial, or operational, each major initiative should have its own tailored communication plan that outlines:

- **Audiences affected:** Parents, staff, students, community leaders, elected officials, etc.
- **Key messages:** Purpose, timeline, rationale, and benefits tied to GRPS’ strategic goals
- **Preferred tools and tactics:** Materials that align with stakeholder needs (e.g., multilingual newsletters, robocalls, infographics, town halls)
- **Roles and approval workflows:** Clear responsibilities for crafting, reviewing, and deploying content

The following are examples of tactics that could be incorporated into tailored plans for two of the areas stakeholders identified as needing improved communication.

- **Facilities Updates.** Families and staff want timely updates about projects that impact their daily routines, such as renovations, closures, relocations, and health or safety repairs. Focus group feedback and website review identified inconsistent and delayed updates. GRPS should:
 - Create a dedicated webpage for all facilities-related updates (e.g., timelines, renderings, committee notes, board decisions).
 - Provide quarterly progress updates to prevent information gaps.
 - Develop a clear communication release structure (e.g., board/facilities committee briefings followed by public-facing updates) and opportunities to provide feedback.
 - Example: Omaha (Neb.) Public Schools: Bond Program at Work (<https://bit.ly/3KQIRFK>)
- **Budget and Finance Updates.** Focus group and survey feedback revealed a widespread lack of understanding of GRPS finances. To strengthen budget transparency, GRPS should:
 - Educate staff on district finances using videos, trivia, and professional development to improve knowledge of funding, expenditures, and the reasoning behind budget priorities.
 - Engage the community through listening tours and budget presentations to civic groups, families, and elected officials.
 - Use visuals and storytelling like infographics and “then and now” narratives to simplify complex concepts and build shared context.

- Host small-group forums that facilitate discussion and capture public values and priorities.
- Create an employee budget communications committee to share updates, provide peer education, and inform leadership on staff perspectives.
- Example: Columbia (Mo.) Public Schools, District Financial and Budget Transparency (<https://bit.ly/3KNUf5m>)

These tactics, as well as those for any other plans created, should be coordinated with a district-wide communication calendar and supported with accessible, reusable templates. Reference [NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning entries](#) for models and templates that exemplify clear, proactive, and audience-focused project communication.

Action Step 1.6

Integrate district and school leaders in the communication process.

During the audit process, GRPS employees consistently named their principals, front office staff, and supervisors as their most trusted and frequent sources of information. At the same time, feedback revealed that inconsistent communication practices across schools sometimes lead to confusion, misinformation, or gaps in understanding. With a limited number of staff in Communications & External Affairs, the district’s ability to provide a highly effective communication program depends heavily on the involvement and coordination of school and department leaders.

Build communication skills across all district and school leadership groups. GRPS should provide training and ongoing support to help district leaders, principals, and administrative support staff understand their informal roles

in the communication process and how to represent the district's key messages effectively. This will help ensure a more consistent experience for staff and families districtwide.

- Host an annual communications orientation session for building administrators and their administrative assistants, outlining:
 - The structure and goals of the strategic communication plan.
 - How their responsibilities in sharing district-level updates with staff and families support the plan.
 - Clear guidance on what to say, when to escalate, and how to align with district messaging.
- Develop a short reference guide or video overview of What Every GRPS Leader Should Know About Communication, drawing on various NSPRA resources. Another helpful source, available in [NSPRA's online bookstore](#), is *The Communicating Principal: Practical Strategies for School Leaders* by Trinetta Marquis and Natalie A. Nash.
- Use a portion of regular Superintendent's Council or leadership team meetings to:
 - Review progress on measurable communication objectives.
 - Discuss updates to messaging, challenges, and successes.
 - Reinforce consistent internal communication strategies.
- Provide simple templates on common school communication topics and approved talking points on major initiatives that building leaders can adapt for newsletters, social media, staff meetings, and family communication. Some districts do this via a shared drive folder that administrators know they can access as needed.

- Clarify when and how leaders should engage with Communications & External Affairs for support, media inquiries, or crisis communication coordination.
- Reference the strategic communication plan as needed to reinforce why some communication support requests may not be feasible due to strategic priorities or staff capacity. This can help all leaders understand how to prioritize communication projects that align with GRPS' district and communication goals.

Building leadership capacity in this area will ensure that communication efforts are distributed, sustainable, and deeply embedded in the day-to-day experiences of GRPS students, families, and staff.

Provide opportunities for leaders to review and provide input on communication plans.

As plans are created, it is important to engage district, department, and school leaders in identifying potential strategies for achieving the goals and objectives of the plans, particularly those tailored to collaborative initiatives. It is also important to clarify communication roles, responsibilities, and the expected flow of information for administrators, who serve as communicators in their leadership positions. (See [Recommendation 2](#).) The director of communications can review preliminary communication plans with the Cabinet and school administrators as a way to familiarize them with the district's communication priorities and to get feedback on strategies that may require their support.

Once a comprehensive plan has been developed, it may also be beneficial to formally present it to the Board of Education. This reinforces the district's commitment to communication as a strategic function and allows for alignment with other major district priorities. An annual update to the board can also serve as an accountability checkpoint and progress report.

Recommendation 2:

Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.

Internal communication emerged as a critical need across GRPS focus groups, interviews, and SCOPE Survey results. Employees consistently expressed confusion about where to find information, how decisions are communicated, and who to turn to with questions. Administrative changes and inconsistent messaging further deepened a sense of disconnect.

Some staff shared that inconsistent communication makes them feel out of the loop or undervalued, contributing to lower morale. Strengthening internal communication is about efficiency as well as about trust, dignity, and building a culture of respect and support. The following strategies will assist GRPS in increasing its efficiency and effectiveness in this area.

Action Step 2.1

Prioritize staff as the first audience for key messages.



To foster trust and reduce the spread of inaccurate information, adopt an employees-first approach to communication at all levels. When the district, departments, or schools are sending information, ensure that employees, especially front-office staff and administrative assistants, receive timely updates before messages are sent to families or the public. Employees inevitably will get questions or hear conversations about the topics in their workplaces, homes, and social spaces, and others will perceive them as having some level of expertise on GRPS topics given their jobs: Prepare them for that expectation.

- Distribute district-wide updates through emails timed when staff are most likely to be able to access them.
- Notify principals and administrative assistants in advance, at least an hour or more if possible, about significant pending announcements to help them prepare to answer staff and community questions.
- Create internal-only versions of announcements when appropriate, explaining rationale or sensitive context that may be necessary to appropriately respond to or redirect external questions.
- Use meetings, internal newsletters, and recorded videos to explain complex initiatives. Meetings are particularly useful for allowing employees to ask questions and get immediate responses that clear up any confusion.
- Designate a dedicated internal communications lead to coordinate and elevate all employee-focused content and communication efforts across departments.
- Encourage the superintendent to use direct communication sparingly and strategically, focusing only on urgent matters or messages that elevate the district's strategic plan.
- Leverage video messages from leadership to foster connection and highlight strategic progress.

Action Step 2.2

Launch a new staff intranet and shared system calendar with shared governance.

NSPRA researchers have found over the years that too many staff intranets for school systems become document dumping grounds

that employees rarely visit and find difficult to navigate or not particularly helpful. It was therefore unsurprising for the auditor to hear the GRPS staff intranet described as outdated and largely unused.

When designed well and for maximum employee engagement, though, a staff intranet can increase collaboration across departments, improve the employee experience, provide opportunities for recognition and celebration, reinforce the district brand and values, deliver personalized content and benefits information, and enhance workplace culture.

It is thus recommended that GRPS begin researching and designing a new, modern, mobile-friendly staff intranet that functions as a daily-use hub for internal communication, collaboration, and operational updates.

A key feature of this intranet should be a centralized system calendar, a master calendar that supports planning, coordination, and transparency across the district by:

- Providing a single source of truth for internal scheduling.
- Reducing scheduling conflicts and duplicate communications.
- Supporting planning across departments, school sites, and central offices.

The system calendar should be accessible via Microsoft 365 (Outlook or SharePoint), integrated into the staff intranet homepage, and have a designated owner to maintain accuracy and oversee calendar governance. Contents of the calendar should include:

- District-wide events (e.g., board meetings, holidays, exams, report card deadlines)
- Staff professional development days and training sessions
- Strategic initiative milestones
- Leadership availability, including Cabinet visits and scheduled site engagements

#2

Make internal communication and employee engagement a strategic priority.

- Key department deadlines (e.g., budget submissions, staffing timelines, communications planning)

Additional features to consider include:

- Customizable dashboards by role
- Alerts, news feeds, announcement hubs
- “Who Does What” profiles and a searchable staff directory
- Searchable repository for employee-relevant policies, forms, and FAQs
- Access points for collaboration tools
- Online community forum for sharing good news and collaborative problem solving

Maintaining and updating the intranet will be key to its success. The district does not currently have a dedicated internal communications position, though such a role if created could certainly lead content management for a new staff intranet (see [Action Step 2.7](#)). In the meantime, consider the following alternatives:

- Conduct a targeted survey or focus group to identify specifically what types of content and features employees would find most helpful on a staff intranet.
- Form an Intranet Governance Committee with representatives from the communications team, IT, HR, and instructional staff. Assign content owners

to each section of the intranet, and define responsibilities for calendar maintenance.

- Use card-sorting or other user experience-centered design techniques to guide intranet navigational structure.
- Ensure alignment with other tools, such as internal newsletters, staff updates, and FAQ repositories. Where possible, use the same content tagging system across tools to support personalization features based on employees' areas of interest.

For inspiration, read the Ragan article "[The Art of Intranet Naming](#)" and see the following descriptions of award-winning district intranets:

- "SISD Insider" staff intranet, Spring Independent School District (Texas): <https://vimeo.com/springisdtx/insider>
- Staff intranet, West Vancouver Schools (Canada): <https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/PR%20Resources%20Section/NSPRA%202024%20Submission%20-%20new%20intranet%20.pdf?ver=ZvdwsQUtnTsG0rWAbIJ0vA%3d%3d>

Action Step 2.3

Revamp and refine weekly internal communication vehicles.



In addition to clarifying processes for internal communication (see [Action Step 2.1](#)), GRPS should revamp and rethink an internal newsletter co-produced by members of Cabinet and the Communications & External Affairs. During focus groups, staff shared that the current weekly messages can feel overwhelming, overly long, or limited in distribution. Many frontline staff or school-based teams reported not receiving it at all.

A consistent internal newsletter could serve

as a tool to inform, engage, and recognize staff across all roles and locations, but it should complement, not duplicate, the existing weekly memo or update email. If this were to happen, it would be important to do the following.

Clarify the role of each internal communication tool.

- The weekly memo/email from Communications & External Affairs (short-form, weekly) should include:
 - Timely announcements and reminders (e.g., upcoming deadlines, events)
 - Urgent updates or leadership messages
 - Links to press releases or external media coverage
 - Logistical details related to district operations
- Internal newsletter (digest-style, bi-weekly or monthly) should include:
 - Superintendent and Cabinet updates with context (e.g., "why this matters")
 - Strategic plan progress or major initiative milestones
 - Staff highlights, promotions, and celebrations
 - Answers to commonly asked questions
 - Policy reminders or HR updates with plain-language summaries
 - Links to intranet-based stories or department updates

To ensure important messages receive the attention they deserve:

- Redesign the weekly memo workflow to align with staff roles. Segment content by audience (e.g., principals, school-based staff, central office) to reduce overload and increase relevance.
- Condense the weekly memo into a visual "This Week at a Glance" format with bold

headers and short bullets to reduce scroll fatigue and make key information easier to digest.

- Use video messages from the Cabinet or principals quarterly. Keep them under 90 seconds and send them before big changes.
- Move non-urgent updates to the intranet instead of email. It reduces inbox overload and makes the intranet a go-to source.
- Keep layouts clean and skimmable, using a consistent structure with bold headers, short sections, and bullet points.
- Apply “3-30-3” writing principles: 3 seconds to engage, 30 seconds to inform, 3 minutes to explore deeper content.
- Ensure mobile-friendliness for staff without regular computer access.
- Collect and reflect on analytics (e.g., open rates, click-throughs) to improve effectiveness over time.

For additional resources and examples, go to the Internal Communication category of NSPRA’s Samples and Resources website section: <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Internal-Communications/Newsletter>

Action Step 2.4

Establish and follow a consistent process for how key information is shared with staff.



Throughout the focus group sessions, staff members reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and supervisor. The leadership team should work closely with the director

of communications to clarify the process for internal communications, create a list of available tools for staff communications, identify which tools are preferred for which situations, and set expectations for the timeliness of releases to internal audiences relative to announcements with external audiences.

SCOPE Survey data found GRPS employees most frequently get district information from emails, but focus group participants also referenced feeling that important information is “buried” in lengthy emails.

In their 2023 book *Writing for Busy Readers*, Harvard researchers outlined a four-step process that readers go through with written content: deciding whether to engage, whether to engage now or later, how much attention to allocate, and whether to respond. This underscores the importance of clarity in subject lines and succinct summaries at the top of email messages to staff.

For message clarity, use effective formatting and prioritization.

- Follow the [Smart Brevity](#)-style of formatting to support fast reading.
- Place a clear summary or “key points at a glance” at the top of all staff emails.
- Label messages with action codes such as:
 - ACTION: Response required
 - AWARENESS: Important information
 - REVIEW: For discussion
 - INFO: General update

Time and sequence staff communications consistently.

- Ensure all major announcements (e.g., leadership changes, program shifts, board decisions) are shared with staff before external release, particularly those impacting their jobs and ideally with at least 30 minutes’ lead time.

- Use internal newsletters, recorded video explainers, or Question & Answer summaries to supplement formal memos and clarify rationale behind changes.

The director of communications should also work with senior leadership to develop and annually review a guidance document outlining preferred communication channels and timelines. The document should include:

- Guidelines for who distributes which types of information and which tools to use. (Consider using a chart like the sample provided below).
- A system for drafting and vetting talking points on major initiatives.
- Expectations for the timing of communications (as noted previously).

Standardize the use of email systems.

One of the clearest frustrations identified in the audit is confusion caused by GRPS' use of two separate email systems: Outlook for staff and Gmail for scholars. Many families do not know which email to use, and staff often receive messages across platforms without clarity on expectations. To address this:

- Audit the current use of Outlook and Gmail across schools to understand inconsistencies and to identify whether the value of having the two systems outweighs the challenges they present.
- Create a protocol that clarifies:
 - The official system for communication with families districtwide.
 - Expectations for automatic forwarding to avoid missed messages.

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Superintendent's Executive Assistant	Board meeting agendas	Website, Superintendent newsletter
Director of Communications	District updates, newsletters, urgent alerts, video stories	District emails, website, social media, text alerts, news releases
Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations	Budget updates	Annual Report, website, emails, community meetings
Superintendent and Executive Assistant	District policy changes	Website, mailed letters, community meetings
School Board President and Superintendent	Policy questions, Board decisions	Direct responses, phone calls, newsletters
Principals	School site updates, emergencies	Texts, phone calls

- Standardized email signatures with clear reply addresses.
- Update orientation materials and training sessions for new employees and families with simple explanations and communication guidelines.
- Add a note in family newsletters or welcome packets, such as, “To ensure you receive timely responses, please use your child’s teacher’s Outlook address for all school-related communication.”

Establish response timelines and etiquette.

- Establish and reinforce response-time expectations for all GRPS staff such as:
 - Central departments: within 48 hours
 - Teachers to families: within 24 hours
- Provide annual customer service training and protocols for all departments to ensure professionalism, clarity, and helpful tone in email and phone communication.
- Address concerns heard in focus groups about “email avoidance” by modeling transparent, timely, and respectful communication at all leadership levels.

Action Step 2.5

Communicate leadership updates with clarity and context.



Staff voiced confusion and concern around leadership transitions and department roles. Transparent, affirming, and consistent messaging, paired with accessible context, can reduce uncertainty and foster trust.

- Develop a protocol for announcing leadership changes (e.g., who announces, when, and how).

- Pair announcements with FAQs or background to explain decisions.
- Introduce leaders via intranet profiles, staff meetings, videos, and welcome emails.
- Use the intranet for less urgent updates; reserve direct emails for strategic announcements from senior leadership.

Action Step 2.6

Promote two-way communications between employees and leadership.

Building and maintaining trust requires both intentional opportunities for employees to share input and greater familiarity through a meaningful, visible leadership presence. This can be achieved through activities such as the following, which are centered in two-way communication practices:

- Conduct regular staff pulse surveys or use tools like ThoughtExchange, and be sure to summarize input and share how it has or will inform decisions.
- Provide easy, anonymous-optional digital methods for staff to offer feedback, and use automated technology to quickly route feedback to appropriate leaders.
- Schedule regular site visits by Cabinet and department leaders to schools and facilities to provide listening opportunities, not just observations. Principals might serve as co-hosts of the listening sessions or host their own separate sessions.
- Include non-instructional staff in key meetings and communication touch points to ensure all voices are heard.

Action Step 2.7

Create or designate a position to focus on internal communications.

As staffing and budget resources allow, consider giving internal communication efforts more dedicated support to demonstrate responsiveness to the challenges and opportunities identified in this report. In NSPRA's [2024 Membership Profile Survey Report](#), the results among districts enrolling 10,000 - 24,999 students indicated that about half (54 percent) have 2-4 staff in their communications office, a quarter (23 percent) have 5-7 staff, and about 9 percent have 8 or more staff. Within that same group of respondents, more than a third (38 percent) indicated that internal communications is among their top five responsibilities.

The goal is to centralize and strengthen staff-facing communication across the district. This position should report directly to the director of communications and work in partnership with the chief of staff and the executive director of public safety and school security, serving as the primary point of contact for internal messaging. Responsibilities might include the following:

- Managing staff newsletter and news feed
- Coordinating department announcements
- Supporting message alignment across internal communication platforms
- Leading content maintenance and governance efforts for the staff intranet
- Serving as a resource to school and department leaders for training, toolkits, and advice that ensures two-way internal communication practices across all sites

This position can act as a strategic bridge between district leadership and staff, ensuring that all employees, regardless of role or

location, feel informed, connected, and valued. This helps to maintain an engaged, transparent, and trust-based workplace culture.

Action Step 2.8

Implement customer service standards and training for central department staff supporting schools.

GRPS employees expressed frustration with inconsistent expectations and responsiveness across departments, indicating that they often experience delays in internal responses that directly affect their ability to support scholars and families. Feedback from staff and families indicated that some central departments do not consistently return calls or respond to emails, leading to frustration and delays in resolving matters, as noted in the [Key Findings](#),

Leaders can address these concerns through modeling and by making it clear that professional email communication is both appropriate and expected. Provide all central department staff with customer service protocols that include email and phone etiquette, clear expectations for response times to emails and phone calls, how to route inquiries efficiently, and guidance on tone, clarity, and follow-up. Communications staff can assist leaders in this area by developing and providing training on best practices.

The article "[The Link Between Customer Service and District Success](#)" from the June 2023 issue of NSPRA's *Elevation* member e-newsletter provides more insights on this topic. Another resource for association members is the NSPRA PR Power Hour on "Effective Practices for Internal and Cross-Department Communications" from June 2024 available on demand at <https://www.nspr.org/Professional-Development/Webinars/On-Demand/On-Demand-Professional-Development-Library>.

Recommendation 3:

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

Across focus groups and survey responses, GRPS stakeholders voiced a common theme: They want to better understand how district decisions are made and to feel more confident that their feedback matters. Staff, families, students, and community partners described a gap between being asked for input and seeing how that input influences outcomes. This lack of transparency about the role of input has, at times, led to confusion and mistrust, especially when decisions feel sudden, inconsistent, or insufficiently explained for stakeholders.

Examples raised during the audit process included concerns about how policies like the student dress code are communicated and enforced, how families are informed about program changes, and how timelines for key decisions are shared with schools. In many cases, the issue was not the decision itself, but the absence of clear, timely communication and visible opportunities for participation.

GRPS is making progress in building trust, and stakeholders clearly want to be part of the district's future. To build on this momentum, GRPS should take intentional steps to clarify how decisions are made, who is involved, and how community input is used. When people understand the process, even if they do not agree with every outcome, they are more likely to feel respected and stay engaged with the district and its schools.

The following action steps provide ways to increase transparency, involve more voices in decision-making processes, and strengthen confidence in leaders through communication that is clear, consistent, and inclusive.

Action Step 3.1

Set a framework for when 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, use a consistent framework with 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 leaders have already decided on a direction for a particular issue. Instead of feeling included in the decision-making process, they may 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 is that the district should involve its stakeholders in the decision-making process.
 - If a decision is routine, innocuous, or predetermined due to mandates or budget constraints, 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.
 - 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

#3

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

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 stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision.
- When reflecting on public input, be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a 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 offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. Explain why the group's input is being sought, how it will be used, and who will make the final decision.

Action Step 3.2

Develop and implement a system for communicating pending decisions.



The process of keeping stakeholders informed begins before the decision-making process has begun and continues during and after a decision is made. Consider having the superintendent, Cabinet, and director of communications collaborate on identifying a preferred system for communicating pending decisions. Then to ensure consistent use of it, review the preferred process with district, department, and school leaders annually.

- **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 leadership meetings at the department and school levels as well. When discussing potential decisions to be made, ask leaders 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, department, and/or schools 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.
- **Develop and implement feedback loops.** Create regular features in various district and school communications to highlight the status, results, and next steps regarding pending decisions and recent public input requests. These might take the form of brief articles or videos on websites and social media, or verbal updates as leaders share input highlights with staff during meetings. 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. Consider designing a reusable “What We Heard / What We’re Doing” graphic that can be used across email, social, and print after any engagement event.

Action Step 3.3

Elicit informal input from staff quickly through rounding conversations.



The practice of rounding is a quick way to gather input internally from employees while building leaders’ familiarity with frontline issues and demonstrating that leaders care about staff

input. Some superintendents use rounding as a two-way communication tool for better understanding the strengths and challenges of their team, as reported in the 2021 article “[The Leader Rounding Protocol](#)” for AASA, and it is a popular [employee engagement tactic](#) in the healthcare industry. 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 leadership team is discussing an issue or idea where employee input is needed to inform the decision.

- The leadership team identifies 3-5 questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue or idea.
- Members of the leadership team each find 5-10 employees in their school building or department to answer the questions. (If the district leadership team is discussing an issue or idea, they might instead ask principals and department supervisors to ask their staff the questions.)
- Leaders share the responses they heard with the leadership team for consideration in the decision-making process.

By purposefully engaging employees to seek multiple perspectives, GRPS 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 3.4

When gathering input, ensure representation by seeking a variety of voices.

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 GRPS to be intentional about who is invited to participate in its decision-making processes.

When a decision is likely to impact a variety of stakeholders, it is important to engage a fairly representative sample of those stakeholders. 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/caregivers, 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 stakeholder groups are reflected among the voices heard during the input-gathering stages.

Action Step 3.5

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 standing "Decision Transparency" section on the GRPS website or on dedicated topic pages could be developed.

Whatever communication methods are used, 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, 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 GRPS to show how input regarding communications will be used.

Action Step 3.6

Use the annual report to summarize key decisions and community input.



GRPS should leverage its existing [Annual Report](#) as a platform to share a transparent, accessible summary of major decisions, the input that informed them, and the outcomes that followed. This annual report, already a strong communication tool, can be expanded to serve as a "State of GRPS Decisions" summary, connecting progress updates to the decision-making processes behind them.

This updated approach would reinforce transparency and show stakeholders how their voices influence district direction. It also builds

on the momentum of the superintendent's State of the District address, which received positive feedback from staff and families. By aligning these two efforts and sharing the report across channels (e.g., newsletter, website, intranet), GRPS can offer a consistent and trusted touch point for reflecting on the past year and looking ahead.

Recommended elements to include:

- Major district decisions made in the past year
- Engagement efforts tied to each decision
- Outcomes or lessons learned
- Clear connections to strategic goals

Maximize reach through strategic distribution.

To ensure the report reaches all key stakeholders, GRPS should develop a distribution plan that includes:

- Printed copies for school buildings, family engagement offices, and community partners (e.g., libraries, faith groups, neighborhood associations)
- Digital promotion through a prominent feature on the homepage, a dedicated email blast, and social media highlights
- Segmented messaging for different audiences (e.g., tailored summaries for families, partners, employees)
- Integration into events, including a presentation at the superintendent's address, staff meetings, and Board of Education sessions

Using the annual report as both a communication tool and a transparency touchstone will strengthen community trust, increase understanding of district decisions, and reinforce GRPS' commitment to two-way engagement.

Recommendation 4:

Build a culture of authentic engagement strategically supported by communications.

The school community has pride in GRPS, with some parents/caregivers (38 percent) and employees (19 percent) even rating the district as above average or excellent on the SCOPE Survey, but these stakeholder groups also want more meaningful opportunities to provide input and stay connected. Feedback from the survey and focus groups revealed that engagement often feels inconsistent or unclear. Notably, only about half of parents (56 percent) and about a third of employees (36 percent) feel their involvement is welcome and valued at the district level, a significantly smaller percentage than those who feel that about their schools and departments, as detailed in the [Key Findings](#).

Numerous studies have shown that strong family engagement in schools contributes to improved student learning outcomes and that effective communications contributes to greater family and employee engagement. In the Brookings Institution report [“Collaborating to Transform and Improve Education Systems: A Playbook on Family-School Engagement,”](#) for example, communication is shown to be an effective lever of engagement. In the [2024 Workforce Trends Report: Career Wellbeing](#) by risk management firm Gallagher, “communicate in a way that fosters trust and confidence” was a popular tactic to improve employee engagement for 43 percent of the more than 3,500 participating organizations.

Building a stronger culture of engagement districtwide requires intentional communication practices that are proactive, inclusive, and transparent. This recommendation focuses on creating consistent systems that invite dialogue and make more stakeholders feel they have a place in shaping the future of GRPS.

Action Step 4.1

Embed a public engagement mindset across GRPS.



To ensure meaningful engagement across the district, GRPS should adopt and embed a public engagement mindset into everyday communication practices. This mindset focuses on fostering open dialogue, building trust, and ensuring relevance and transparency. To better integrate this approach into communication efforts, use the following strategies:

- Clarify the purpose of your engagement:** Decide whether the objective of an engagement initiative is to inform, consult, involve, or empower stakeholders. This helps guide the communications strategy.
- Understand the audience that needs to be engaged:** Consider factors like audience familiarity with the district, schools, or topic, their access to communication channels, and any engagement barriers they may face (e.g., language, limited transportation or internet access, daytime work hours) when planning communications. Try to shift perspectives and think about what topics or activities are most likely to be of interest to the potential audience, rather than to the district or schools. For inspiration, read the article [“Engaging Non-English Speaking Stakeholders of School Communities”](#) from the March 2022 issue of NSPRA’s *Elevation* member e-newsletter.
- Communicate transparently and with the “so what” in mind:** Because GRPS stakeholders perceive information gaps, avoid withholding key details that might invite greater engagement. Communicate clearly why the topic or activity for engagement is relevant to the audience and how they could personally benefit

from their involvement. In the most recent [membership profile survey](#), nearly half of NSPRA members (48 percent) reported “lack of interest in district communications among families” as a top barrier to engaging students’ families.

- **Engage early when audience involvement may influence decisions:** Begin engaging the community early in the decision-making process, not just when decisions are close to being finalized, as detailed in [Recommendation 3](#). After involving audiences and collecting their input, always report back: Thank them for their contributions and explain how their feedback influenced decisions or actions.

Use tools like the [IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#) to help identify the level of public engagement appropriate to each initiative.

Action Step 4.2

Create engaging campaigns and initiatives that show GRPS is a good neighbor in its community.

To strengthen engagement in the district and its relationship with the wider community, the Communications & External Affairs Department should lead the development of community outreach campaigns and initiatives that show how GRPS is a good neighbor to all. Emphasize transparency, accessibility, and community benefits from the district’s work. Efforts like the following will help ingrain narratives about GRPS’ positive impact for all stakeholders.

- **Good neighbor mailings to residents and businesses near schools:** Create a customizable flier template that can be shared with school principals, and have them customize and mail it to those within a certain radius of their building at least once a year. In addition to space for the

#4

Build a culture of authentic engagement strategically supported by communications.

name, address and logo of a school, the template should include space for a calendar of upcoming events open to the public, points of pride for the school that locals can also be proud of, and common questions that might come up among neighbors to schools. [View an example letter](#) from Madrona Middle School in California that is part of an engagement initiative by its district’s superintendent.

- **Student-voice storytelling campaigns on social media:** Continue to use videos and social media to share the district’s story publicly in relatable, engaging ways. A weekly social media series featuring short video clips of scholars sharing what they love about GRPS, its programs, or specific experiences could highlight the district’s strengths, amplify student voices, and showcase the value of GRPS from those who experience it firsthand.
- **Employee-voice storytelling campaigns on social media:** Create a monthly feature on “Why I Love Working with Kids,” rotating between teachers and support staff. Promote employee submissions of selfie-style videos and photos with captions based on the theme, or collaborate with principals to identify employees to feature, ensuring diverse voices from across the district are represented. These stories help humanize the district and highlight the staff’s dedication to student success.

- **“Meet Us at the Market”:** Host booths at community events and farmers markets to reach families and other community members in informal settings. Bring copies of the annual report, scannable QR codes encouraging people to follow GRPS on social media, branded swag to distribute, and enrollment marketing materials. Consider having a school food services team provide small, sample-size versions of food served in schools for distribution.
- **Seeing is Believing Tours:** Host school tour days for community members, particularly senior citizens, where they can sign up to see teachers in action and observe scholars engaged in learning. Give the community a first-hand look at the educational environment in GRPS.
- **Top Local Education Investors Luncheon:** Invite the CEOs or top managers from the district’s largest taxpayers to join the superintendent for a special luncheon hosted at a school facility. Many of these individuals may not have a direct reason to engage with the district unless invited, so this creates an opportunity for meaningful conversation and relationship-building between local business leaders and the district leadership.
- **Volunteerism Day:** Many high schools today organize service days, but consider organizing a community volunteer day where district leaders and employees also work on service projects that benefit the local area. This collaborative effort not only strengthens the district’s connection to the community but also demonstrates the district’s commitment to giving back.

Action Step 4.3

Implement a digital feedback system for stakeholder input.

Establishing a straightforward method for staff, parents, and the community to submit comments, ideas, and concerns is essential for maintaining open communication channels and addressing emerging issues in a timely manner. By utilizing online platforms like K12 Insight’s Let’s Talk (pictured below), Qualtrics XM, PowerSchool AI or AlwaysOn AI (now part of Apptegy), the district can offer a convenient way for stakeholders to submit feedback, whether on specific topics or district-wide initiatives. These automated tools allow responses to be categorized and routed to the appropriate administrators for a timely and relevant reply.

In addition, this approach provides a clear avenue for families and staff to voice their concerns or ideas, giving them confidence that their input is being heard and addressed.

These tools would allow district leaders to analyze trends in feedback over time, helping to identify issues and adapt communication and customer service strategies as needed.

Another idea is to install a digital comment box on the district homepage with rotating prompts. The resulting responses can then be used to inform the development of future communications, activities, and discussions.

The screenshot shows a digital feedback interface titled "Ways to connect" with a close button (X). Below the title are two buttons: "Chat" (selected) and "Email". There are links for "Terms of Use" and "Privacy Policy". The main text asks, "What can I help you with today? (We appreciate your patience as we work to improve this feature.)". Below this is a question: "First, can you tell me how you're connected to Scottsdale Unified School District?". There are five buttons for selection: "Parent/Guardian", "Employee", "Student", "Community Member", and "Other". At the bottom is a text input field labeled "Enter your message here" and a "Send" button. The footer says "Let's Talk! Assistant by K12 Insight".

Action Step 4.4

Host a superintendent's listening tour.

While most common during a new superintendent's first year in the role, it may be beneficial to bring back this practice on a semi-annual or quarterly basis. Familiarity builds trust and understanding, so increase the accessibility of the superintendent and other senior leadership through strategically planned face-to-face engagement opportunities with families and other community members.

Components might include:

- Series of community meetings in schools, community centers, or houses of worship
- Presentation on GRPS priorities, achievements, and challenges
- Open Q&A and listening session
- Partner outreach toolkit for cabinet members and principals
- Internal prep briefings so staff are equipped to reinforce messages

To support this collaboration, consider the following strategies:

- Create a shared calendar between the FACE and Communications & External Affairs teams to align engagement events, campaigns, and community messaging efforts.
- Co-develop multilingual, culturally responsive materials for key initiatives such as enrollment, school choice, and family events.
- Coordinate strategies for increasing visibility of FACE liaisons and supports across GRPS platforms, including social media, the website, and newsletters.
- Ensure FACE team input is included when designing community feedback tools (e.g., surveys, town halls, digital comment forms).
- Highlight FACE team successes and family partnerships in regular storytelling efforts to reinforce GRPS' commitment to authentic community engagement.

Action Step 4.5

Strengthen collaboration between Communications & External Affairs and Family & Community Engagement (FACE) departments.

The FACE department plays a central role in building trust with GRPS families, coordinating outreach, and supporting school-level engagement. To maximize impact, FACE and the communications team should collaborate strategically on public messaging, outreach campaigns, and community listening efforts.

Recommendation 5:

Strengthen strategic storytelling and marketing to support enrollment, identity, and engagement.

The work of communications staff in a school system often encompasses marketing, but communications and marketing are distinct disciplines. Communications focuses on building trust, promoting transparency, and engaging stakeholders through two-way dialogue, while marketing aims to attract new families and staff by highlighting what valuable features set a district and its schools apart from competitors. In GRPS, the Communications & External Affairs Department handles official district communication efforts and marketing efforts to support enrollment are contracted to outside services.

Similar to national trends for most public schools, GRPS has seen declines in enrollment since the 2020 pandemic. Societal shifts mean public schools today face more competition than ever for students. About a quarter of NSPRA members now report their top five responsibilities include marketing, according to the most recent [membership profile survey](#).

GRPS has made visible progress in telling its story, particularly through the GRPS Champions web series and consistent visual branding on social media. However, these efforts often feel reactive and disconnected from broader district goals. Strengthening strategic storytelling and integrating a marketing mindset into the communications team's storytelling efforts will help GRPS communicate a clear value and unified identity that builds pride among current scholars, families, and employees while supporting future enrollment goals.

Looking ahead, GRPS should explore new strategies for telling compelling stories about its

schools, students, and staff, using the platforms and formats most relevant to its audiences. At the same time, Communications & External Affairs can better support district priorities by maximizing the impact of existing channels and refining storytelling efforts already underway.

This recommendation outlines ways to make storytelling more intentional, align marketing and communication efforts, and engage schools and staff in elevating the GRPS story together.

Action Step 5.1

Clarify and promote the GRPS brand and value proposition.

To strengthen its public perception and perceived value, GRPS must clarify its current brand in light of the [findings](#) of this report and elevate strategic storytelling and marketing to promote its unique value proposition.

Focus group feedback revealed a lack of clarity in how the district is perceived. Survey responses to calculate a [Net Promoter Score](#) also indicated there are more detractors than promoters across the district. Comments such as, "We have quality teachers," or, "We have great community support," were encouraging to the auditor but vague, highlighting the need for a more defined and cohesive identity that can anchor all communications.

A strong brand encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, including the district's history, values, personality, and visual identity. According to [The Branding Journal](#), this brand shapes how an organization is perceived and sets it apart from others.

Currently, GRPS represents its brand in part through a primary tagline of "GRPS: My Choice" and identity elements that include a logo with the district acronym and a flame in the style of an exclamation point. The logo is well designed, easy to reproduce as needed on materials, and

accompanied by an easy-to-remember tagline. It is possible, though, that the district's unique value proposition is not fully perceived by audiences through existing brand elements.

The auditor did not meet with the district's contracted marketing service providers, but it was clear that marketing efforts are relatively siloed from the day-to-day work of the Communications & External Affairs Department. To support greater alignment between the communications and marketing functions, consider having the department staff engage in activities to clarify GRPS' value proposition. The result should be a clear statement that articulates the district's promise to students, families, and employees – something that highlights what sets GRPS apart from other school districts – and that can serve as a guide for the selection of district stories to spotlight.

For a deeper understanding of the branding process, watch the webinar “Defining Your District Brand” presented by the Park Hill and Belton school districts and located in the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on Marketing/Branding under Webinars/Learning Opportunities at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Marketing-Branding>.

Communications staff might also consider doing a book discussion of *The Ed Branding Book: How to Build Educational Leadership with Social Influence* by Renae Bryant, Ed.D., and Lynette White. As a team, reflect on how educational organizations can build and maintain a strong, authentic brand that resonates with their community. Identify practical strategies and case studies within it that can guide GRPS in elevating brand awareness in the community.

These steps should better position GRPS to integrate branding elements into its strategic storytelling in ways that will ultimately support enrollment marketing efforts.

#5

Strengthen strategic storytelling and marketing to support enrollment, identity, and engagement.

Action Step 5.2

Create marketing strategies for theme-based and neighborhood schools.

One of the most urgent and sensitive communication challenges GRPS faces is how to equitably promote all of its schools, both theme-based and neighborhood, without reinforcing perceptions of privilege or division. Focus groups consistently raised concerns about imbalanced attention, transparency, and access to information about school offerings. Families shared that they often felt left to “figure it out” on their own, with limited understanding of how theme-based programs work, how to apply, or how their neighborhood schools compare.

This tension risks undermining the district's vision of equity and unity. GRPS must take an intentional approach to marketing that uplifts all schools, combats assumptions about “better” or “lesser” options, and reinforces that every school is a GRPS school. Each school is valued, supported, and excellent in its own right.

To do this, the auditor recommends the following:

- Build equity-centered marketing profiles for every GRPS school, both theme-based and neighborhood. Clearly communicate each school's strengths, signature

programs, outcomes, and student experience using a consistent, translated template.

- Develop a family-friendly decision guide or digital navigation tool that brings together all school options. Include application details, transportation supports, and side-by-side comparisons of programming, community ties, outcomes, and extracurriculars.
- Celebrate the unique value of neighborhood schools by telling stories of student success, innovative programs, and strong community involvement. Provide regular spotlight opportunities on the district website, at board meetings, and through newsletters.
- Dispel myths about school access by explaining application, transportation, and school choice processes in plain language. Share this information across multiple formats, including web, print, in-person events, and short videos.
- Capture authentic student and staff testimonials that reflect racial, linguistic, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity across all schools.
- Provide messaging training and tools for school leaders to help them tell their school's story as part of the broader GRPS narrative.
- Host unified enrollment nights or districtwide "school showcase" events where all schools are featured equally. Ensure these events are inclusive and highlight that families are choosing among a diverse portfolio of strong options, not a hierarchy of better or worse.

Action Step 5.3

Align external marketing vendors with GRPS' communications strategy.

Currently, GRPS contracts an external agency to support enrollment marketing and outreach efforts. While this partnership can extend reach and capacity, it is essential that all external vendors work in close collaboration with GRPS' Communications & External Affairs Department to protect brand integrity, support enrollment growth, and deliver unified messaging. To ensure alignment:

- Require vendors to follow GRPS brand guidelines and messaging frameworks.
- Establish a formal review and approval process for externally produced content.
- Involve the Communications & External Affairs staff in project scoping, content development, and final approvals.
- Clarify roles between in-house and vendor teams to streamline workflows and avoid duplication.
- Prioritize internal capacity-building for marketing strategy and outreach to reduce long-term reliance on external support.

Action Step 5.4

Expand digital marketing efforts with data-driven strategies.

GRPS has a strong foundation for digital engagement and can significantly increase its reach and visibility by employing more data-informed marketing strategies.

- Use web, social media, and email analytics to track content performance and refine

timing, format, and messaging based on audience behavior.

- Develop marketing personas to tailor messages more effectively, such as new families exploring enrollment, Spanish-speaking households, alumni, or prospective staff.
- Invest in short-form video content, such as Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts, which are high-performing formats across multiple generations.
- Launch targeted digital ad campaigns, particularly during enrollment and hiring seasons, on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google Search.
- Assign staff to regularly review and update GRPS profiles on school rating sites like GreatSchools.org and Niche.com to ensure accuracy, highlight awards, and correct misperceptions.

Action Step 5.5

Build a districtwide storytelling strategy.

To move beyond reactive storytelling and ensure consistent, authentic content across all schools, GRPS should create a coordinated, districtwide storytelling strategy. This approach should support school-based contributions, reflect the diversity of the district, and align with key district goals, including enrollment growth, equity, and community trust.

Consider the following to give structure to this storytelling strategy:

- Maintain a coordinated editorial calendar aligned with key events, strategic goals, and seasonal themes, and assign each school a specific month or theme to contribute a story.

- Provide school leaders and staff with easy, fast access to a storytelling submission toolkit with guidelines for writing, visuals, and permissions. Include access to a centralized content portal to submit stories. (e.g., Google Forms, OneDrive folders, Canva templates). Also provide training videos or guides for staff on content creation and consent, and offer recognition or small incentives for schools that submit regularly (see [Action Step 7.4](#)).
- Use submitted content across multiple online and in-person communication spaces (e.g., social media, newsletters, website, board meetings), but be sure to tailor the content sizing, messaging, headlines, etc. to the primary audience reached through that method.
- Translate key stories and newsletters into the top spoken languages across GRPS.
- Encourage student journalism or digital media clubs to help produce and share school stories.

Be sure to curate a wide variety of content that provides evidence of the district brand:

- Capture students and staff providing community service.
- Celebrate academic excellence and student leadership.
- Feature voices of multilingual learners, newcomers, and underrepresented communities.

For more inspiration, visit the [on-demand webinar library](#) for NSPRA members to watch the February 2022 PR Power Hour “Messages That Resonate: Five Easy Steps to Write the Perfect Message, Every Time.” Also, check out the award-winning video and social media series “[I Am Pittsford Schools](#)” developed by the Pittsford Central School District in New York.

Recommendation 6:

Strengthen and ensure consistency in digital communication practices across the entire school system.

GRPS stakeholders like and depend on digital communication tools to access timely, relevant, and accurate information about the district and its schools. While the district has worked to improve its website and social media presence, auditor findings and stakeholder feedback identified inconsistencies in how and where information is shared, especially at the school level. Parents reported difficulty navigating school webpages, receiving conflicting messages through different channels, and feeling unsure where to find reliable updates. These gaps in consistency, clarity, and accessibility undermine trust and contribute to frustration, particularly among multilingual families and mobile-first users.

To address these issues, GRPS should develop districtwide standards that define at all levels – across departments and schools – the expectations for digital communication channels such as email, websites, e-newsletters, texts, and social media. Clearer standards can help to align practices, which will reduce confusion, improve access to information, and reinforce an equitable communication experience for all stakeholders. Continuing to strengthen digital infrastructure will ensure that all families, regardless of language, location, or device, can stay connected to GRPS.

Action Step 6.1

Define and implement districtwide digital communication standards.

Currently, communication practices vary significantly across schools and departments, leading to uneven access to important information and inconsistencies in frequency, tone, and clarity. Some families report receiving well-structured updates regularly, while others report little or no communication. Staff also expressed a desire for clearer guidance around when and how to communicate key updates.

Establishing districtwide communication standards, particularly for digital outreach, will help align expectations for how and when GRPS communicates. These standards should apply to all internal and external platforms and serve as the foundation for consistent, inclusive, and effective messaging across the system. They will also support greater clarity and trust among staff, students, and families by creating a shared understanding of what to expect from the district and its schools.

The following are suggested ways to standardize digital communication practices across the district:

- Establish clear expectations for school and department-level communication.** Define baseline standards for the frequency and content of newsletters, required components on school webpages (such as welcome messages, calendars, contact information, and translated materials), and consistent formats for family updates. During the back-to-school season, communicate expectations to employees and communicate to families what types of information they can expect to receive and through which platforms. These expectations should also be made visible

through school welcome materials, websites, and employee and parent handbooks to build consistency across the district. (For expectations regarding staff response times to emails, phone calls, and other inquiries, refer to the internal service standards outlined in [Action Step 2.8](#).)

- **Clarify the use and availability of translation tools and multilingual access.** Ensure significant communications are accessible to GRPS' linguistically diverse community. Use district-supported communication translation tools to translate newsletters, recorded announcements, video captioning, and webpage content into the top spoken languages across the district. Provide employees with guidance on when and how to get their classroom, department, or school communication materials translated before distribution, including cautions about over-reliance on automated tools without human verification.

A good rule of thumb is to offer translations if 10 percent or more of the population living in an area speaks the same non-English language. (This aligns with the federal threshold for translations related to the healthcare industry.) According to the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts (2019-2023), 16.8 percent of Grand Rapids residents aged 5 and older speak a language other than English at home.

GRPS already has a strong foundation for translation services, but explore opportunities to expand support for multilingual families through contracted translation services, like Alboum Translation Services (<https://alboum.com/>), Hanna Interpreting Services (<https://hannais.com/>), and Homeland Language Services (<https://homelandlanguageservices.com/>).

#6

Establish consistent communication standards and improve digital accessibility.

- **Develop a communications reference hub for employees.** The Communications & External Affairs Department already offers an online GRPS Logo and Brand Guide. When developing a staff intranet ([Action Step 2.2](#)), include a centralized hub for communication standards like guidance on tone, inclusive language, accessibility, and platform-specific tips. The hub should include message templates, visual branding guidance and image downloads, examples of high-quality communications, and tools and training resources to make it easy for employees to meet expectations.
- **Provide communications professional development and continuous support.** Offer communications-focused workshops during employee professional development days and on-demand learning opportunities focused on effective communication strategies, digital communication tools, visual storytelling, and audience-specific messaging. Consider hosting "Communications & External Affairs Hours" for one-on-one support. Recognize schools that demonstrate strong practices, and encourage peer learning by showcasing model communication practices from employees and schools across the district.

Action Step 6.2

Improve school-level website usability and consistency.

The district website is well-branded and engaging, but usability and consistency at the school level are a challenge. Parents shared that they often visit individual school pages for updates, only to find outdated content, broken links, or missing information. This contributes to inequity in information access and knowledge.

Consider developing a concise checklist of “Top Must-Haves for a Great School Website” that clearly communicates expectations for consistent content across schools, with differentiation as needed by grades served. Reinforce these expectations through training, tools, and quarterly reminders. Additionally, the auditor recommends taking the following steps:

- Plan to annually conduct a usability and accessibility audit of all school-level homepages to ensure compliance with federal standards and district expectations. Early summer is often a good time to start this process.
- Standardize the key content elements required on every school home page and the sub-pages commonly expected by school website visitors.
- Provide content management system training and ongoing support to school-based staff involved in web maintenance.
- Institute a regular update schedule, prompt system, and/or auto-expire feature to ensure freshness of content.

Action Step 6.3

Align digital tools and practices with stakeholder needs.



GRPS uses a range of digital tools to communicate with stakeholders, including websites, newsletters, email, text alerts, portals, and social media. While the variety is useful, audit data revealed that families often feel confused about where to find different types of information and overwhelmed by poorly formatted or inconsistent communications.

Upon reviewing various newsletters and the feedback from parent and staff focus groups and surveys, it is evident that there is room for improvement in the following areas:

- **Content Organization.** Use targeted subject lines and headers, meaningful subheadings, and tables of content to clearly categorize information as critical, informational, or optional. According to [Harvard University researchers](#), readers go through this four-step process each time they encounter a communication: decide whether to engage, decide when to engage, decide how much time to spend, and decide whether to respond. With the volume of daily communications, that quickly adds up to decision fatigue. Well-organized content reduces decision fatigue by making this process easier for message recipients.
- **Quantity and Length.** Keep newsletters concise. In the article “[3 Ways to Reach People on Their Smartphones](#),” writing expert Ann Wylie notes that message recipients spend an average of 11 seconds reviewing each email they receive. With email newsletters, people skim 69 percent and read only 19 percent.

- **Language.** Use clear, jargon-free, and inclusive language written at or below an eighth-grade reading level.

Establishing formatting expectations and clearly defined purposes for digital tools will improve communication clarity, strengthen engagement, and support consistent delivery across the district. To begin the alignment of digital tools with stakeholder needs, the auditor also recommends the following:

- Determine which digital tools and communication platforms are being used for what purposes across the district.
- Clarify and communicate the purpose of each tool, such as using text apps for urgent alerts but email for academic updates.
- Provide newsletter templates and plain-language style guidance for staff and school leaders.

Action Step 6.4

Prioritize mobile optimization and equitable access of digital content.

As NSPRA has observed in other school systems nationwide, many GRPS families today access school and district communication through mobile devices. However, formatting and loading issues, PDF overuse, and lack of multilingual features reportedly limit the effectiveness of these tools, especially for families with limited data plans and multilingual households.

Optimizing all digital content for easy, inexpensive, and equitable mobile access will ensure families can find the information they need. The auditor recommends the following:

- Conduct user testing, particularly on major annual communication materials, with users of iOS and Android devices that use

different carriers, in areas of varying signal strengths, to identify potential barriers.

- Review and revise formatting as needed to prioritize mobile-friendly layouts.
- Limit the use of PDFs, and convert materials to HTML when possible. While PDFs can be made accessible (through a sometimes time-consuming process), they are not auto-responsive to differently sized mobile screens. To make this a less daunting task, begin by converting one high-use PDF into a mobile-friendly webpage each month, starting with enrollment, calendars, and food service.
- Ensure mobile-friendly translations and accessibility features are embedded and functional.
- Use analytics to track mobile usage and adjust digital strategy accordingly.

In August 2022, Peoria (Ariz.) Unified School District launched a communications review to evaluate the effectiveness of its existing tools and determine if modernization was needed. This initiative, aligned with the district's updated strategic plan, supported the priority of strengthening community connections, one of four key focus areas aimed at reestablishing the district as a national leader in PK-12 education. To learn more about this process and how GRPS might benefit from a similar approach, review the district's NSPRA Golden Achievement Award-winning entry at <https://bit.ly/43Or8Go>.

Recommendation 7:

Strategically enhance GRPS' social media presence.

GRPS has laid a solid foundation for digital storytelling, particularly on Facebook, where consistent content and high-quality visuals have attracted strong engagement. However, social media strategy remains largely reactive, with limited use of platform-specific tools, limited staff training, and few formal systems for content planning or engagement tracking. Feedback from the SCOPE Survey and focus groups revealed that while parents and staff appreciate the GRPS Champions web series and celebratory posts, there's a desire for more authentic, diverse, and consistent storytelling across platforms, including Instagram and YouTube where younger and bilingual families are more active.

Social media presents a unique opportunity to reach and inspire a wide cross-section of the GRPS community, especially when used strategically to tell stories that reflect every school, neighborhood, and student voice. To do so effectively, the district must align content with its broader communication goals, equip staff with the tools and training to contribute, and invest in reaching audiences who may not currently follow or engage with GRPS online.

Social media and video use is high among U.S. adults and teens today. Among all adults ([Pew Research Center](#), 2024), 83 percent use YouTube, 68 percent use Facebook, 47 percent use Instagram, and 22 percent use X (formerly known as Twitter). The center found that younger adults differ slightly, with 93 percent using YouTube, 78 percent using Instagram, 67 percent using Facebook, and 42 percent using X. A 2023 survey from [Gallup](#) shows similar usage patterns, with 76 percent of U.S. adults saying they use Facebook and 89 percent saying they use YouTube.

GRPS maintains a presence on Facebook, X/ Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as noted in the [Key Findings](#). While social media was not selected by most stakeholders as a preferred source of district information, the district Facebook page was rated at 4 or 5 out of 5 stars for value as a district information source by 41 percent of SCOPE Survey respondents. A quarter of respondents felt similarly about the district Instagram page. While engagement rates appear to be a bit lower than industry averages except on the YouTube page, GRPS social media is professional in appearance, easy to read, and contains high-quality photography. Facebook specifically has a good mix of announcements, recognition, and news.

As the Communications & External Affairs Department develops its new comprehensive communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)), the team should consider how social media can be leveraged for online engagement strategies and tactics that support objectives. This does not mean social media communications is ideal for every objective, only that its potential role should be considered.

Action Step 7.1

Increase community engagement through enhanced social media strategies.



Social media is one of the most visible tools for shaping public perception, yet its power lies not just in broadcasting information but in creating online dialogue about information that builds relationships. GRPS should take a more intentional, audience-specific approach to content creation to ensure that all schools and stories are represented.

Key strategies to increase engagement with posts include:

#7

Strategically enhance
GRPS' social media
presence.

- **Avoid cross-posting identical content across platforms.** Tailor messaging, tone, and visuals based on each platform's primary user demographics. Consider a data asset management system for visuals that would allow for faster identification of the best-fit visuals for tailored posts. Association members shared some of their ideas for this in a fall 2024 post in the NSPRA Connect online community at <https://connect.nspra.org/discussion/media-asset-management-system>.
- **Use Instagram Reels, Stories, and YouTube Shorts** to share quick, authentic snapshots of classroom learning and student life.
- **Add supportive commentary** when resharing content from schools to signal pride and alignment. As appropriate, mention when school-level activities demonstrate district values in action or the fulfillment of district goals.
- **Prioritize "learning in action"** and showcase real student work, collaborative projects, and behind-the-scenes classroom moments rather than posed images.
- **Make it easier for more employees to quickly share education stories from their classrooms and schools.** Use a social media management platform that allows for moderated employee contributions from their smartphones such as Class Intercom or Sprout Social, or establish a secure, user-friendly online site (such as Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, or a dedicated school intranet) where staff can upload and share multimedia content from a smartphone or computer. Association members shared some of their ideas for this in a summer 2022 post in the NSPRA Connect online community at <https://connect.nspra.org/discussion/social-media-management>.
- **Share information about the system in communications guidance for employees** (see [Action Step 6.1](#)), with tips on types of photos and videos most appropriate to share, privacy considerations, consent requirements, and content standards. Association members shared some of their ideas for this in a fall 2023 post in the NSPRA Connect online community at <https://connect.nspra.org/discussion/social-media-playbook-for-schools>.
- **Recognize and incentivize teachers** who regularly contribute high-quality content. This could be through shout-outs in staff meetings, newsletters, or small rewards.
- **Establish a feedback mechanism** where the Communications & External Affairs team can provide constructive feedback to staff on the content they submit, fostering continuous improvement and encouraging more contributions.
- **Maintain a district-wide inventory of all school and department social media accounts** to ensure alignment with brand standards and messaging. Association members shared some of their ideas for this in a summer 2018 [post on "social media accounts"](#) in the NSPRA Connect online community.
- **Consider using social media as a tactic for combating false information.** Speed is essential when the rumor mill or disgruntled stakeholders start to spread

inaccuracies about the district and its schools. While social media is sometimes not the best tactic for addressing issues, it can be useful for directing the community to accurate information directly from the district. NSPRA's spring 2024 report "[From Distortion to Clarity: Empowering School Districts to Overcome False Information](#)" explores this topic in more detail.

- **Ensure content planning** aligns social media post content with districtwide storytelling strategies (see [Action Step 5.5](#)). Find sample posting calendars and social media plans in the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on Social Media at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Social-Media-Tips-Guidelines-and-Policy-Examples>. In particular, check out the extensive social media plan of the Butte County Office of Education in California, found inside the "Plans and Strategies" folder.

Action Step 7.2

Expand targeted social media reach through paid promotions.

Paid promotion of social media content can help amplify priority messages to more of a school district's desired audiences and allow it to overcome some of the limitations on organic reach created by ever-changing social media platform algorithms. While GRPS has strong organic reach on some platforms, it can expand the impact and reach of its social media through paid promotions and ad targeting. This is especially helpful to connect with audiences who may not already follow district channels, such as not-yet-enrolled families and job seekers, and to boost followers for schools. (Note that this may already be a feature of the marketing consultant's services, at least as it relates to enrollment campaigns.)

Make a plan for where to begin testing the value of paid promotions, and start with a small funding allotment to test its impact on audience reach and engagement.

- Use paid Facebook and Instagram ads to promote enrollment windows, hiring fairs, and major announcements to segmented audiences by geography, language, or user behavior. This includes targeting specific zip codes, interest areas (e.g., bilingual programs), or lookalike audiences based on current followers.
- Allocate a small, recurring budget for boosting high-performing posts that align with the district's core values or strategic goals, such as equity, innovation, or college and career readiness. These posts should be identified using platform analytics and engagement indicators.
- Prioritize campaigns that celebrate neighborhood schools, dual language programs, or lesser-known achievements that might not otherwise receive broad attention. Paid promotion can help balance perceptions of equity and give every school a platform.
- Develop branded ad campaign templates (e.g., "Now Enrolling," "Come Work With Us," "Inside Our Classrooms") that can be reused seasonally. Templates should be aligned with the district's visual identity and adaptable by school sites.
- Coordinate campaign timing with enrollment deadlines or job fairs, and work with schools to tailor images or testimonials that reflect their unique offerings, ensuring authenticity while benefiting from central coordination.
- Monitor ad performance metrics (impressions, click-through rates, engagement) and adjust content and targeting quarterly to improve

return on investment and better reach underrepresented groups.

As the department's use of paid promotions becomes more sophisticated, explore digital marketing services and website features that will allow the tracking of ad funnels, demonstrating whether paid social media ads or boosted posts (e.g., enrollment deadline reminder) drive traffic to specific webpages (e.g., enrollment page) and lead to an action being taken on that page (e.g., enrollment packet downloaded).

Action Step 7.3

Integrate more video into GRPS' social storytelling.

According to the [Pew Research Center's Social Media Fact Sheet](#), short-form video is now the most popular content format across all generations of school families, particularly Gen Z and Millennials. GRPS should expand its video strategy to make storytelling more personal, accessible, and dynamic. Videos offer a unique opportunity to humanize district messages, bring classroom moments to life, and connect emotionally with current and prospective families.

The district can benefit from its communications team producing a steady cadence of video content that celebrates students and staff, explains complex initiatives, and elevates school pride, all in alignment with the district's goals. For inspiration, check out the NSPRA award-winning videos at <https://www.nspira.org/Awards/Award-Winners/Publications-and-Digital-Media-Excellence-Winners-2025#videoih>. Other video topic ideas include:

- Behind-the-scenes tours of school events, classroom projects, or field trips
- Student and staff spotlights that highlight leadership, creativity, or resilience
- Day-in-the-life features from different schools, programs, or job roles

- Quick video recaps of board decisions, budget updates, or new initiatives
- Equity-focused narratives told through student or family perspectives
- Athletic highlights, arts performances, or fine arts showcases

Following are some implementation considerations for this action step:

- As part of digital communications training opportunities ([Action Step 6.1](#)), provide simple tips and tools to staff for capturing and submitting short videos using smartphones. Focus on lighting, framing, and privacy/consent. (See additional details in the next Action Step.)
- Shift the creative content coordinator role to include more time dedicated to video planning, editing, and coaching school teams in best practices.
- Collaborate with high school media programs or local colleges to expand capacity and involve students in producing authentic, engaging content.
- Build a content library of b-roll footage, interview clips, and past video assets that can be reused and repurposed across campaigns.
- Use closed captions and translation tools, available in most video hosting platforms, to ensure videos are accessible for all audiences, including those who might watch videos in a setting where the volume is muted as well as multilingual and hearing-impaired audiences.
- Create short-form videos optimized for each platform, such as 15–60 second Reels for Instagram, horizontal explainers for Facebook, and vertical “shorts” for YouTube.

Action Step 7.4

Provide employees who maintain school social media pages with training and templates.

To make GRPS social media more representative, engaging, and reflective of all schools and communities, storytelling must be a shared effort, elevated beyond the central office and into every school building, department, and classroom. This requires both structure and encouragement, equipping staff with the tools, training, and confidence to contribute content while ensuring brand consistency and storytelling alignment across all district and school platforms.

Following are some steps to support employee contributions for school and district social media that aligns with district priorities:

- Provide school-specific templates for use in social media posts, videos, and stories, including Canva or Google Slides designs, that align with best practices and GRPS' visual identity and tone.
- Offer employees who run social media pages for schools, sports, or clubs access to a tip sheet or quick video tutorial on:
 - Taking high-quality photos and videos on a phone.
 - Writing captions that reflect the district's voice and values.
 - Obtaining and managing consent for student images and quotes.
 - Understanding platform-specific best practices (e.g., Reels vs. Stories).
- Recognize and celebrate contributors:
 - Spotlight staff and schools who regularly submit strong content in special "GRPS Storyteller" features, in newsletters, online, and at board or staff meetings.
- Provide small incentives, certificates, or digital badges to school storytellers to encourage ongoing participation.
- Encourage student storytelling:
 - Invite interested high school teachers to collaborate with the communications team, and to build content creation for district and school social media into their existing clubs, electives, or media classes.
 - Pilot student contributor roles (e.g., "Social Media Correspondent") at select schools to showcase youth voices and increase authenticity.
- Rotate spotlight opportunities among schools to ensure every building, large or small, neighborhood or theme-based, is featured throughout the year. Align this with the storytelling strategy (see [Action Step 5.5](#)) and editorial calendar.

Recommendation 8:

Grow capacity for strategic communications with key communicators and communications staff professional development.

During the communication audit process, the director of communications expressed eagerness for data to support Communications & External Affairs in focusing its efforts strategically. Nearly half of parents (46 percent) rated their satisfaction with communication from the district as above average or excellent on the SCOPE Survey, but fewer than a third of employees (28 percent) give similarly high ratings, demonstrating the urgency of being able to deliver strategic communications. Shifting to more proactive, planned messaging will help build trust with these important stakeholder groups, as noted throughout this report.

Few GRPS stakeholders indicated on the SCOPE Survey that they *prefer* to use word of mouth to get information about the district, but nationally, the majority of U.S. adults (73 percent) “often/sometimes” get local news and information from friends, family, and neighbors according to a 2024 Pew Research Center [report](#). Some school districts tap into this tendency through formal or informal key communicator networks that strategically empower thought leaders in a community to have proactive, informed conversations within their personal networks on district and school topics. Key communicator networks, including Parent Action Leaders, civic partners, and neighborhood influencers, exist in Grand Rapids but are often under-leveraged.

At the same time, the Communications & External Affairs team must be well-equipped to lead and sustain the district’s strategic communications work. This can be achieved through ongoing professional development on the latest and best practices, professional

accreditation that is grounded in strategic communications, and structured collaboration with school communication peers in other districts.

The following action steps offer tactics for growing the capacity of GRPS to strategically communicate in ways that will increase stakeholder satisfaction, two-way communication channels, and credibility in the community.

Action Step 8.1

Maintain a robust key communicators network.

Building strong, trusting relationships between the district and the community is essential to fostering a positive image and ensuring transparency. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by encouraging board members, cabinet members, school principals, and district leadership to actively participate in local civic and philanthropic organizations. Another effective method, though, is establishing a formal key communicator program.

A key communicator program engages those who are influential and represent diverse perspectives to serve as trusted carriers of the district’s messages within their personal circles of influence. Once participants are identified, the program might involve:

- Equipping them with welcome toolkits, including district/school FAQs, contact lists, and current strategic priorities.
- Sending them regular email briefings on district initiatives with customizable talking points for different community contexts.
- Hosting periodic listening sessions to collect their insights on rumors, community concerns, and knowledge gaps.
- Holding an annual appreciation breakfast or lunch to recognize the role these ambassadors play in informing the community about the district.

Internally, GRPS could also launch an employee Ambassador Network, a peer-to-peer program composed of volunteer staff members who serve as communication champions within their buildings or departments. The program might involve:

- Identifying and inviting school-based and department staff to join the ambassador network as liaisons.
- Providing monthly briefings with key messages, FAQs, and shareable visuals aligned with district priorities.
- Creating a dedicated space on the staff intranet for ambassadors to access toolkits and upload feedback.
- Recognizing participants through spotlights, certificates, or leadership opportunities.
- Using the network to pilot communication tools, test messages, and collect insight from frontline staff.

Action Step 8.2

Strengthen the role of Parent Action Leaders as a key communicators group.

The Parent Action Leader (PAL) program, led through the FACE department, is a promising model for parent leadership and advocacy. However, during focus groups, parents shared their perception that the group is not always treated as a meaningful advisory body, and its contributions are not consistently recognized or acted upon at the district level.

To elevate PALs as part of GRPS' wider key communicator program:

- Position PALs as official key communicators with structured briefings and two-way updates.

#8

Grow capacity for strategic communications with key communicators and communications staff professional development.

- Develop guidance for how PAL feedback will be captured, themed, and acted upon. Share back what has changed as a result of parent input.
- Invite PALs to regular roundtables with the superintendent and leadership team to create a more visible and accessible feedback channel.
- Provide training and information to PALs so they can be confident advocates in their communities and trusted bridges between home and school.
- Use PAL feedback to inform public engagement strategies, particularly around equity and access.

Action Step 8.3

Engage local real estate agents as community ambassadors.

Real estate professionals are often the first point of contact for families new to the area. Strengthening these relationships ensures that GRPS schools are positively represented, top of mind, and seen as a first-choice option for families exploring the district.

Following are relationship-building tactics for the district to consider using with local agents:

- Host an annual breakfast and tour of select schools and programs.
- Provide information packets and a special webpage for prospective families.
- Speak at local agent association meetings.
- Co-host a virtual housing trends and school tour session.

Barnegat Township School District in New Jersey earned a 2023 NSPRA Golden Achievement Award for its “Reaching Realtors for Positive Perceptions” campaign at <https://bit.ly/3P7DkOE>, and association members shared some of their ideas for this in a summer 2018 [post on “real estate meetings/breakfasts”](#) in the NSPRA Connect online community.

Action Step 8.4

Support communications staff in pursuing ongoing professional development.



To ensure a strategic communication program, GRPS must prioritize strategic skill-building within the Communications & External Affairs team. In national and local studies, employees cite professional development as a key retention factor—and school districts are no exception. To support this:

- Allocate resources for the team to participate in professional learning associations like the Michigan School Public Relations Association (<https://www.mspra.org/>), a chapter of NSPRA, as well as the national association.
- Allocate time for team members to attend webinars and skill-building workshops, but also offer training opportunities during

team meetings where members can share what they have learned and strengthen their knowledge by teaching others.

- Foster networking with counterparts in neighboring districts such as Kent ISD, ensuring peer learning and local alignment.
- Explore the use of artificial intelligence tools, which present new opportunities for more efficient content drafting, idea vetting, and audience-specific message refinement. Tools like ChatGPT, Bard, and Claude 2 can support routine tasks such as helping to tailor social post content to different platforms, applying brand style elements to messages, translating content, or generating summaries. This technology has introduced ethical considerations and should be approached with transparency and clear guidelines. Explore how others in the school communication profession are using it at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Hot-Topics-in-School-PR/Generative-AI-in-School-PR>.
- Hold quarterly “learning and reflection” sessions for the team to discuss trends, case studies, or communication challenges.

Action Step 8.5

Support the director in pursuing accreditation.

Universal [accreditation in public relations](#) (APR) is a voluntary certification program for communication professionals. It demonstrates mastery of strategic communication practices and a commitment to ethical standards. To ground the operations of Communications & External Affairs in strategic practices, support the director of communications in pursuing the APR with the necessary resources. NSPRA offers a step-by-step guide to the APR process and webinars about it at <https://www.nspra.org/Professional-Development/Accreditation-in-Public-Relations/Step-by-Step-Guide>.

Appendix

<u>Focus Group Discussion Questions</u>	86
<u>What Is NSPRA?</u>	87
<u>Audit Team Vitae</u>	88

Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Participants

1. **What do you see as the district's greatest strengths?**
Follow up: What makes you say that? Can you share an example?
2. **In what areas could the district improve?**
Follow up: How has this impacted you or others in your community?
3. **How would you describe the district's current image or reputation in the community?**
Follow up: Has this perception changed over time?
4. **How well does the district communicate about important issues (e.g., funding, curriculum changes, legislation)?**
Follow up: What's working well?
Follow up: Where could communication be improved?
5. **How effectively does the district communicate during a serious incident or crisis?**
Follow up: How do you typically receive updates during these situations?
Follow up: What would make these communications clearer or more helpful?
6. **Do you feel the district seeks and considers input from stakeholders before making major decisions?**
Follow up: How would you prefer to provide feedback?
7. **What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district?**
Follow up: How do you think this challenge could be addressed?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. **How do district communications impact your ability to do your job well?**
Follow up: Are there specific areas where you need more support or clarity?
2. **How clearly is your role defined in communicating with families and the broader community?**
Follow up: Do you feel prepared and supported in fulfilling that role?
3. **How does communication flow from district leadership to schools and staff?**
Follow up: Are there any gaps or delays?
Follow up: What would improve this process?
4. **How effectively is information shared between departments (e.g., HR, transportation, food services)?**
Follow up: Are there systems in place to ensure consistent updates?

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

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

With more than 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Audit Team Vitae

This NSPRA Communication Audit Report was developed by a team with extensive background in developing and managing communication and public relations programs for school districts and education agencies. Following are brief descriptions of their backgrounds and experience.

Shawn McKillop, APR

Consultant Auditor

Shawn McKillop, APR, is a longtime member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and a two-time NSPRA Gold Medallion award winner, recognized for excellence in education communication. He brings extensive experience in strategic communications, public engagement, and education sector leadership, and continues to support organizations across North America as a consultant on public relations and community engagement issues.

He previously served as senior manager of communications and community engagement at the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), where he led strategic marketing and complex issue management with a strong focus on youth and education policy. Prior to that, he was the manager of communications at the Grand Erie District School Board and began his career in the public sector as a communications advisor to various Ontario cabinet ministers, including in education, labour, and social services.

Today, Shawn is the senior vice president of communications and digital transformation at the YMCA of Hamilton|Burlington|Brantford in Ontario, where he leads efforts to strengthen community engagement, government relations, and strategic storytelling for one of Canada's largest YMCA associations.



Jessica Scheckton, APR

NSPRA Communication Research Specialist

Jessica Scheckton, APR, serves as NSPRA's communication research specialist, and she plays a key role in developing communication audits, data reports and whitepapers. Prior to joining the association staff, Jessica served as an audit consultant with NSPRA after a 25-year career in school communications with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service in New York. She holds accreditation in public relations (APR) and is a two-time NSPRA Gold Medallion Award winner, a past NSPRA Front-Runner and a past president of the New York SPRA chapter.

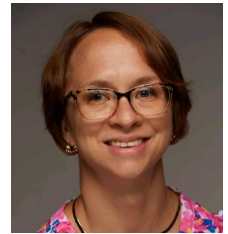


Learn more about Jessica at <https://www.nspira.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Research-Specialist>.

Alyssa Teribury

NSPRA Communication Research Manager

As communications research manager, 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.nspira.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Research-Manager>.

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. An award-winning communicator, she is also an accredited public relations professional (APR).

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



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