



NSPRA

Communication Audit Report:

Long Beach Unified School District

National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | www.nspr.org | [f](#) NSPRAAssociation | [t](#) nspra

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Introduction

The Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) is the third largest district in California and is in one of the most diverse large cities in the United States. Its 12,000 full-time and part-time employees provide educational and support services for more than 70,000 students, from preschool to high school, in 85 educational facilities located in Long Beach, Lakewood, Signal Hill and Avalon on Catalina Island.

LBUSD families are diverse, with approximately 58 percent of the student population identifying as Hispanic, 12 percent as Black, 12 percent as white and another 17.2 percent as multiple races and ethnicities. Of note, the number of Cambodian residents within the district is the largest single population outside of Cambodia. Dozens of languages are spoken by students, to primarily include Spanish and Khmer. More than 13 percent of students are English language learners and 62.3 percent have been identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.

The district continually is evolving to meet the needs of the broad diversity of students and families it serves. Its efforts were recognized in 2019 by the Learning Policy Institute, which found that Hispanic, white and African American students in LBUSD achieve at higher than predicted levels. LBUSD also was recognized as a high-performing school system in a 2012 Global Education Study by Battelle for Kids. Yet the district is facing significant declines in enrollment, with a loss of nearly 6,000 students between 2015 and 2020.

Jill Baker, Ed.D., began her tenure as LBUSD superintendent in July 2020 amid a global pandemic that already had shut down in-person learning for months. Dr. Baker, who spent her 28-year education career in LBUSD, followed two superintendents with nearly 30 years of longevity in the post. In a profession where the national turnover of large district superintendents is about five years, this consistency in leadership is seen

by stakeholders as a district strength. Another strength is the willingness of district leaders, including the LBUSD Board of Education and Dr. Baker, to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services 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 a strategic communication plan.
- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

In serving LBUSD, the goals of the NSPRA Communication Audit process were to:

- Seek data, opinion and perceptions, and from these to assess the effectiveness and management of public relations, marketing and engagement efforts in the school district; and
- Provide customized recommendations on strategies and best practices to enhance the overall communication program.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Public Information office, Marketing and Media Services or any other department or individual school, they are intended to help LBUSD improve the effectiveness of current communications, engagement and marketing efforts and to support its commitment to continuous improvement.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall, but individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met for example. The real measure of success,

though, is whether the communication program is helping the division move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing recommendations, the NSPRA auditing team reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of the district's vision, mission, beliefs and goals.

Guiding Definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication engagement and marketing practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

An NSPRA Communication Audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions and the effectiveness of current public relations, engagement and marketing efforts, and offers recommendations to enhance or expand the overall program. The audit also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication program begins with opinion research.

Scope and Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of LBUSD enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultants for this communication audit were Tim Carroll, APR, and Elise Shelton. Their vitae are included in the [appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the communication audit involved the Public Information office, Marketing and Media Services, and district leaders in Equity and Engagement and Equity Access submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *LB School Bulletin*, *Building Success Annual Report*, strategic plan brochure, *Right To Know* parent newsletter, Parent University fliers). The auditors conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media.

These digital and print materials were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditors reviewed the district's demographic data, strategic plan, news coverage and digital communication analytics.

Virtual Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the virtual focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditors met with 22 focus groups on January 11-19, 2021, and conducted interviews with the superintendent and communications-related staff on December 7-8, 2020.

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 (with the exception of one group, which met for 90 minutes, where translators of Spanish and Khmer assisted) 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 audit report.

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

- Parents
- Business leaders, community leaders and school partners
- Students
- Teachers
- Central office and school administrative assistants
- Principals
- Department directors, managers and supervisors
- School counselors and nurses
- Executive staff
- Board of Education members

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments and interview feedback, the auditors identified [key findings](#) and prepared [recommendations](#) for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district’s internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected within NSPRA’s [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking publication.

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by NSPRA Executive Director Barbara M. Hunter, APR, and Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR.

Assumptions

It is assumed that school systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations

and communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view the school district and its work through the perceptions of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable in doing so.

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. It is also a “snapshot” or view of the district at the time of the audit, and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. Recommendations are designed to address gaps and assist LBUSD leaders’ efforts to communicate consistently and effectively.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

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. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication tasks, and others may apply to additional departments or all staff. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake while maintaining existing programs.

This is a long-term effort in which the report should serve as a road map for the future.

Communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, evaluated and regularly updated. With this NSPRA Communication Audit Report, LBUSD now has the research and guidance necessary to more effectively manage its communication with key stakeholders.

Copies to participants

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 involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that the findings of this report be shared with focus group participants.

Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews and review of district materials.

District Image Strengths

- When focus groups were asked about the strengths of Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), the most common answers were diversity and equity, a focus on helping all students succeed, excellent resources and professional training for teaching staff, leadership opportunities, a high graduation rate, meeting the needs of student subgroups, supportive community, continuity in leadership and the positive feeling of Long Beach as a “little big town.”
- Specifically, other strengths named by the participants were the wide choice of high school pathways, dual immersion programs, providing technology to students, comprehensive offerings in Parent University and the use of data in decision making.
- More general comments focused on the family atmosphere; the longevity (low turnover) of employees, who also live in the community; and doing things “The Long Beach Way.”
- Community trust was touted by staff focus groups, and auditors found further evidence in the successful LBUSD bond measures, with 75 percent public support for a \$1.5 billion school bond measure in 2016 and 71 percent support for a \$1.2 billion ballot initiative in 2008.
- Auditors saw that LBUSD offers a comprehensive number of parent workshops with livestream options in English, Spanish and Khmer.

District Image Challenges

- Many of the district’s challenges from March 2020 through the time of this audit relate to the pandemic. Concerns repeatedly were voiced about the disparity of students who don’t have internet connectivity for online learning, and parents who may not have the necessary devices with which to monitor their child’s progress.
- The strength of diversity in the district has brought with it the need to communicate in the various languages spoken by parents, most frequently Spanish and Khmer, but also Vietnamese, Bengali, Mandarin, Samoan, Tagalog, Thai and Russian. A need for access to translation services for parent materials was often mentioned by staff, who noted that timeliness is a barrier to circulating important information. In focus groups, both parents and staff agreed that students are too often depended upon to interpret information for their parents.
- The pandemic has restricted the superintendent from holding face-to-face meetings with stakeholders. Focus group participants noted that the current superintendent’s predecessor held frequent in-person meetings with stakeholders. Focus group participants were understanding of why this was not possible during the pandemic, but some felt that a more frequent live online interaction could have been a substitute in the interim.

Communication Strengths

- Focus groups indicated that the work produced by the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services was appreciated and valued.
- Administrators in the focus groups believed the two departments providing communication support, the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services, would be available in times of crisis.

- Focus group participants generally noted a highly effective roll out regarding COVID-19 communications, with information posted on the website, issued via communication tools such as SchoolMessenger and shared via video updates from the superintendent.
- Many focus group participants were able to recall multiple platforms with which the district communicates.
- Several staff members said they viewed and appreciated the streamed Board of Education meetings.
- Focus group participants and interviewees expressed concerns about communication timing and identification of the appropriate vehicles for relaying important information. They also sought a better balance between “too much communication” and “not enough communication.”
- Several participants in the staff focus groups felt that information from Board of Education meetings was not readily available. They said that they look to local media online resources (*Long Beach Post*) for that information.

Communication Challenges

- The structure and workflow of communications in LBUSD is complex.
- Focus group participants voiced concerns about the timeliness of district website information and updates to school building webpages. Under the current structure of the Public Information office, only one staff member has access to update all district website content. School pages are managed at the school level.
- Not all staff with communication responsibilities have a written job description that outlines those responsibilities, as is the case for the Marketing and Media Services assistant director. In addition, some descriptions have not been updated in some time and so do not reflect current responsibilities or best practices in communication. For example, the actual duties for the webmaster have far outpaced those outlined in the current job description, which was created in 2005.
- The two offices directly responsible for district communications—Public Information and Marketing and Media Services—also collaborate on communications for Equity, Access, College/Career Readiness and for Organizational Equity and Engagement, which includes the district’s Education Foundation.

Internal Communications—Employees

- Internal focus group participants expressed support for the superintendent and the district administration, and they noted the communication challenges inherent in a pandemic.
- Both elementary and secondary principals commented that the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services are very supportive and helpful when asked. They appreciated the departments “getting the word out” and felt the staff would readily assist in a crisis situation.
- Auditors observed a general perception among staff focus group participants that communication with internal publics could be improved. “Much of the public relations efforts are directed to the parents and social media,” noted a staff member in one illustrative comment.
- There was a feeling among staff members that central office decisions were not communicated down to school administrators and teachers in a timely manner.
- Comments from teachers and principals indicated that there is a greater need to involve staff in decision-making, particularly when decisions impact staff. When input is requested, staff members felt that the recommendations were not included in the decision-making process.

- The focus group of teachers felt that there was a need for more information about what’s going on in the school district and what impacts their jobs. The Canvas management system and the asynchronous learning attendance changes were given as examples of not providing timely information or not giving the rationale for decisions affecting staff.
- The *School Bulletin* employee newsletter was not widely read. Reasons cited were lack of relevance “to my job” and the links that take readers to different levels of staff intranet webpages. Employees in the focus groups said they typically get school district news from sources other than the employee newsletter. The need for a more visible and relevant employee newsletter was expressed.
- Paraprofessional group members were frustrated by inconsistent communications from different departments. Principals also indicated that communications from different departments was not consistent.
- Email communication internally was identified as a problem by staff. The number of emails from different departments was cited as a problem by campus level administrators. Teachers indicated that they were often confused by conflicting emails. They also said that emails of varying importance come through different channels: Outlook, MyPD and Canvas.
- When asked how they receive school district information, the internal focus groups said they receive most school district information by email and then word of mouth from supervisors. Several cited the *Long Beach Post* and various community social media as their source of school district information. Weekly updates and communications from the mayor of Long Beach were also identified as a source for school district information along with regular communications from the union.

- Use of the website and social media was sporadic among employees in focus groups.

External Communications— Parents and Community

- Inconsistency in teacher-to-parent communications was identified as a problem by principals, teachers and parents. The comments centered on different tools teachers are using such as Remind, Bloom and Canvas. Apparently, most campuses allow teachers to choose their own system, which leads to multiple portals for parents with several children. It was especially a concern/frustration of parents in the focus groups.
- Parents, parent liaison representatives and students identified frustrations in school-to-home communications, whether from lack of understanding of how to use a program (e.g., Canvas, Zoom) or lack of internet access. With the majority of messages only on an online platform due to COVID-19 safety restrictions, information equity gaps appear to have been created.
- While the district’s communication plan supports Goal 5 of the LBUSD strategic plan in supporting effective communication throughout the district, and identifies parents/guardians as a key audience, auditors identified a need for a more strategic plan to reach them through communications.
- Participants in the parent and community partner focus groups said they would welcome learning more about LBUSD, but they observed that locating the information was sometimes a barrier. Sometimes that difficulty was identified as being due to language and sometimes it was due to unfamiliarity with which platform was being used, according to comments.

Website

- Multiple focus group participants felt the COVID-19 information provided on the district website was helpful and up to date.
 - The responsive design of the site works well on handheld devices and meets the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.
 - With the exception of news releases, the website is mostly static. Information is not updated in several areas.
 - Only one person is able to update most sections of the district website site, which focus group participants noted as causing time delays in getting information deployed.
- Campus leadership felt they did not have the staff time to properly manage their school webpages. The quality of the webpages varies from campus to campus, apparently based on who is editing the site.
- Individuals in many focus groups felt that the district website was difficult to navigate. Some noted that LBUSD staff who know which words to search for in the index don't have a problem, but those who don't know the key word have difficulty locating helpful information. Office staff members found it hard to grab facts and figures quickly when getting requests.
- Some focus group participants commented that the search function draws too many results for simple requests.
- Focus group participants generally liked the A-Z Directory, but some stated that they would have preferred it be broken into categories first and acknowledged that it worked best for "insiders" who already understand how the district works.
- There is enrollment information on the district website, but access to data such as such as test scores, demographics,

boundaries and registration procedures require multiple clicks to find.

- Bond updates are communicated on a dedicated sub-site <https://lbschoolbonds.net/> and through a *Building on Success* e-newsletter, both of which are developed through the support of a communications coordinator position created in 2019. The bond website includes work photos, project details and schedules, fact sheets, details on information sessions and more. Auditors found it to be very thorough, clear and concise, with information to keep voters apprised of the school district's ongoing efforts to build and upgrade school facilities using bond funds.

Social Media and Video

- LBUSD has a social media presence on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), but focus group participants rarely mentioned district social media as a go-to source of information. The three platforms each have about 4,500 followers. The district also maintains a [YouTube channel](#), with about 6,800 subscribers, where it posts all videos, including school board meetings and messages from the superintendent.
- Parents in the focus groups said they don't see district social media as effective communication for themselves, and students thought it would be more effective if students pushed the content.
- In general, the level of engagement with district social media depends on the nature of the content. As the district communicated COVID-19 information and plans for opening schools, the engagement numbers on district social media significantly increased. Content including messages from the superintendent and COVID-19 updates were the most followed.
- Many focus group participants mentioned that Superintendent Baker's videos were helpful.

- The [Parent University video catalogue](#) was also commended for its insight and ability to be communicated in three languages.
- Student focus group participants indicated that they don't follow LBUSD social media, but they suggested having students create content and tag LBUSD for cross promotion. Students noted that one high school junior had set up an Instagram page to post key deadlines of which students should be aware.

Future Communication Challenges

- A final question in each focus group asked about the major communication challenge facing the district in the immediate future. While there were many and varied responses, the most frequent centered on:
 - How best to communicate in a paperless system since not all stakeholders have internet access;
 - Multiple online communication tools have created confusion and frustration;
 - A need for more intentionality in who receives messages first and what the message is;
 - Being able to make communication preferences known before receiving information;
 - Managing email overload; and
 - Crafting quality messages that are written with the audience in mind.

Observations and Comments

Following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditors offer these general observations and comments:

- Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) is an excellent school district academically as demonstrated through its numerous awards. This is a boon for communication efforts because it is easier to manage a communications program and to maintain supportive relationships with school stakeholders when the perceptions of the staff and community are positive.
- Stability in school board leadership and superintendent tenure is a strength, as is a high teacher retention rate. Frequent changes in leadership often lead to public relations problems, but the news that LBUSD generates is overall positive or neutral.
- Work of the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services is acknowledged and respected. The staff members' willingness to help, especially at the campus level, was noted by campus administrators and other staff members.

Marketing and Branding

- The school district does not have a unifying message or brand. Marketing is largely directed at recruiting new families, but a marketing program can also build support and pride among staff and existing families. These stakeholders can serve as brand ambassadors in the community to help attract (and maintain) potential new employees and students.
- In reviewing materials from across the district, there appears to be no consistent, recognizable brand for the district as a whole. Printed collateral materials should have a cohesive design, and a LBUSD Brand Standards Guide should be developed.

- If improving academic performance is a priority key message for the district, awareness of that message and communicating it should be a priority for all staff. Academic performance was not identified as a strength or a challenge by any of the focus groups. More strategic communication efforts can help build awareness of this board goal internally and externally.

Public Relations

- Two different departments handle district communications. The Public Information office handles corporate communications, media relations and website content, while Marketing and Media Services coordinates video, social media and special marketing projects. Having separate departments sometimes duplicates efforts, serves as a barrier to projecting a unified message and may be the reason for the lack of an overall communication vision. The offices work closely together but some responsibilities seem parallel to each other rather than combined for a common goal.

The large and diverse nature of the Long Beach community makes it important to consider how best to target messages and communication delivery vehicles to these varied audiences. Today a "one size fits all" approach engages none. In addition, LBUSD can better market its value proposition with families, who are seeking a quality education program, by maintaining high visibility for positive success stories and innovative programs that elevate its brand.

Auditors believe these challenges and opportunities warrant ongoing, high level, strategic collaboration across public information and marketing efforts in order to manage the complex communication

challenges and opportunities facing large urban systems today.

- Because of his longevity in the district, the public information director and his staff have absorbed many responsibilities over the years that now should be evaluated, prioritized, and if appropriate, considered for reassignment to other departments or for elimination. Reprioritizing work from the office should be done so that more strategic activities can be pursued, as recommended in this report. Auditors' observations and conversations with communications staff suggest that they are operating beyond capacity to try to stay on top of the myriad communication demands that must be addressed daily. The same can be said of Marketing and Media Services, where the assistant director is the sole manager of all LBUSD social media platforms and podcasting in addition to other critical duties, though the position does not have a job description.
- There is an overemphasis on one-way communication (i.e., pushing out information) rather than on two-way communication (i.e., exchange of information between the district and its stakeholders). One-way communication tools such as e-newsletters and static website postings are important sources of information for stakeholders, but engaging stakeholders in two-way conversations can strengthen relationships, build mutual understanding and create trust. Community engagement is a priority of the district, but it is being managed independently by several departments. From a communications perspective, there needs to be more coordination and strategy.
- There needs to be a more detailed crisis communication plan. LBUSD has a comprehensive crisis management plan in place (EOC – MMA) that includes the Public Information office in a key communications role. What is needed is

an internal Public Information document that breaks down the role of each staff member in various crises.

- Internal communication efforts should receive more attention and strategic focus. During focus group conversations, staff indicated there is a lack of information they need in the formats they prefer. This has contributed to some staff feeling not in the loop on district or school information and not included in important decisions that affect their work. Some staff are overwhelmed by the volume of email communication, and some are confused by conflicting information or competing sources for that information. This creates a void of staff knowledge that makes them less effective as district ambassadors.
- The district's online presence can and should be strengthened. Working in the district's favor is the fact that the current website design is mobile responsive and set up to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Yet focus group feedback and the auditors' analysis suggest multiple areas for improvement. For example, basic facts are not easy to locate, much of the content and imagery is dated or largely static, and video as a communication tool is underutilized.

Analysis

The auditors have identified the following items as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) affecting the ability of

LBUSD to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed in the recommendations of this report.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff and parents expressed pride in LBUSD academic options; the district’s diversity; and the promotion of equity. LBUSD implements a wide array of communication tools. Superintendent Baker received appreciation for her intentional communications with staff and parents in her biweekly video messages. (These became weekly video messages in late February.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders shared that confusion sometimes occurs on who “owns” a message, resulting in timing challenges. Clear structure and organization of communication flow was expressed as a concern. The LBUSD website was often mentioned as non-intuitive in searching for key information. There may be an overreliance on electronic communication tools, leaving out families and community stakeholders who lack the necessary resources to connect to those tools.
	Opportunities	Threats
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many stakeholder groups said they often learn of district news through outside social media news outlets. Community and partner organizations said they want to know more about LBUSD, sharing concerns about having to search and seek out news and information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without question, the global pandemic has hindered direct and face-to-face communication, causing a multitude of communication frustrations. Offering opportunities for stakeholder engagement is especially critical as student enrollment has trended downward in LBUSD.

Recommendations

This NSPRA Communication Audit Report offers recommendations—informed by auditors’ research and communication best practices—to address immediate communication needs in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) as well as those that are ongoing or should receive future consideration. They are presented with the intention of helping LBUSD to not only improve current communication efforts but also to look ahead to the future. This is a long-term effort, and the report is intended to serve as a road map the district can use as a resource to maintain and increase the effectiveness of its communication program.

Effective communication is listed as a priority in the LBUSD Strategic Plan main goals. Responsibility for achieving that goal falls to multiple departments and schools, but at the district level, it primarily rests with the [Public Information](#) office. The LBUSD Communication plan, developed by Public Information, addresses communication collaboration across the following departments: [Research and School Improvement](#); [Technology and Information Services](#); [Facilities Development and Planning](#); the deputy superintendent (includes [Equity, Access and College/Career Readiness](#); Organizational Equity and Engagement; and [Business Engagement and Strategic Partnerships](#)); and the [Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development](#). The district also has a [Marketing and Media Services](#) department, and separately, a draft plan for marketing was provided for the auditors’ review.

Currently, Public Information handles corporate communications, media relations and website content, while Marketing and Media Services coordinates video, social media and special marketing projects. These two departments meet weekly, but this audit report includes a suggested organizational structure that would facilitate more effective communication and collaboration across all of the district’s official communication functions.

Public Information and Marketing and Media Services staff have accomplished a great deal in LBUSD. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the district’s overall communication program, but that should not detract from the many positives coming from those two offices.

In fact, many of the recommendations will require commitment and participation from the entire LBUSD administrative team—at the district and school levels—if the district is to realize meaningful improvements in its communication program. Administrators should be accountable together for improving communication districtwide and may need to take the lead in some of the areas addressed in this report. District leaders should review the recommendations in this light and consider how some communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among administrative teams.

There are many recommendations that apply to all departments and schools that LBUSD can begin implementing right away. However, it would be unreasonable to expect Public Information and Marketing and Media Services to undertake more than two or three of the major recommendations in a year while continuing to maintain existing programs. New communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow. In addition, some of the recommendations would not be practical during the ongoing pandemic under current social distancing restrictions. Therefore, some recommendations may be planned now and set aside for a more “normal” school year.

This report can serve as a planning guide for the next several years to help keep communications work on track and positioned for success.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Strengthen the value and usefulness of LBUSD's communication plan by including measurable objectives and research-based strategies.
2. Increase alignment of the varied communication service areas and staff to maximize the effectiveness of the district communication program.
3. Expand LBUSD's inclusive culture for diverse families to its expectations for all communication practices.
4. Make internal communications a priority.
5. Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district's decision-making process.
6. Enhance LBUSD's use of digital communication tools to strengthen their effectiveness.
7. Incorporate marketing strategies into a strategic communication and marketing plan.
8. Create a network of key communicators.
9. Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.
10. Include students in delivering the LBUSD message.

Recommendation 1:

Strengthen the value and usefulness of LBUSD's communication plan by including measurable objectives and research-based strategies.

In Long Beach Unified School District, the Public Information office has a communication plan in place that is guided by the district's strategic plan and fosters collaboration with certain departments. While the current plan lacks research-grounded strategies and sufficient measures for evaluating successful outcomes, there is an opportunity to build on this foundation to develop a more strategic and measurable plan. Such a plan would help staff keep their daily work aligned with departmental goals while improving the effectiveness of the district's overall communication program.

A strategic communication plan, informed by research and guided by communication-specific goals and measurable objectives, should serve as the framework for determining priorities that drive the work of the communications team. The findings and recommendations in this report should serve as a foundation for the plan's development, particularly in the identification of plan objectives and the selection of strategies. A comprehensive plan – blending public relations, marketing, digital media and engagement efforts – should demonstrate how projects, tasks and responsibilities align with the district's strategic goals and provide clear direction for prioritizing the work of the team.

In listening to communication staff talk about their work, valuable time often is dedicated to tasks that have always fallen under their purview though such tasks don't necessarily contribute to achievement of overarching goals. When identifying priority areas for communication, staff may discover a need to abandon projects or activities that are good practice but not high priority ([Action Step 2.2](#)).

For example, focus group feedback on the *LB School Bulletin* suggests it may be less effective than desired at keeping internal stakeholders informed. A strategic communication plan can establish expectations by which projects, programs and activities will be measured to determine their relative value.

Charting a clear course for current and future communication needs, as well as being responsive to the direction of the district, will ensure that LBUSD leadership is communicating the right message to the right constituency using the right communication tactics. A strategic plan also will help ensure the development and dissemination of key messages critical to the district's mission and goals. One significant finding of this communication audit was that although information is shared regularly from Executive Cabinet, there is often a breakdown in communication as the information works its way through all levels of the school system. A strategic communication plan can make it clear which roles communication staff and administrators share in helping to ensure that key information is shared throughout LBUSD.

A strategic communication plan provides transparency with district leaders and accountability for communication staff. It is both a guide for staff members' work and a vehicle for reporting on progress. However, it is important to remember that school systems exist in an ever-changing environment, impacted by community, state and federal influences. Creating a flexible and dynamic plan that allows for the impact of these influences will benefit LBUSD and the families that it serves.

Action Step 1.1

Follow the four-step strategic PR planning process.

A strategic communication plan adheres to the four-step strategic communication planning model. The four steps outlined here constitute a planning process based in sound public relations theory. Begin transforming the

current communication plan into a strategic communication and marketing plan by following these four steps:

- **Research** all public relations, marketing and engagement activities currently happening in LBUSD; stakeholders' communication needs and wants; and the problems and opportunities now facing the district that could be addressed through communication. This research will create a more accurate picture of how communication is integrated into district and school operations. It also will show the scope of responsibilities for communications staff and help identify areas where they can provide assistance, support and/or training to schools and other departments. This NSPRA Communication Audit is an excellent starting point on that research, with its findings on district perceptions and the communication preferences of parent and staff stakeholders.
- **Plan** for how to address the problems and/or opportunities identified through research by first setting longer-term communication and marketing goals. With goal setting, think of a future state for the district and its communication program that you hope to achieve. Keep in mind that planning does not mean that communications staff are solely responsible for implementing all elements within the plan. All district and school employees contribute to and have a responsibility for the communications and marketing of Long Beach schools, so some elements of the plan may require collaboration with other operational areas beyond communications.

In the plan, be sure to identify affected stakeholder groups/target audiences and the best ways to reach, build relationships with and attract them. Define the demographic and psychographic characteristics of each main audience, including their attitudes, concerns

#1

Strengthen the value and usefulness of LBUSD's communication plan.

and communication preferences, drawing many such details from this communication audit report. Similar to the focus groups convened for this communication audit, stakeholder groups/target audiences should include:

- Parents (may be broken down by grade levels, "involved" and "non-involved," non-English-speaking, etc.);
- Newcomers such as families and other residents new to the community;
- Students such as high school student government leaders or active club members;
- Employees (teachers, principals, administrators, central office staff, other support staff);
- Business and community partners such as civic leaders, faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, Realtors, volunteers and others active in the schools and community;
- Elected officials in state and local government (Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia was identified in focus groups as being an effective communicator.);
- "Empty nesters," seniors and other community members without children in LBUSD; and
- Media representatives such as local print, broadcast and digital news reporters, including for stations and platforms that have formats for speakers of Spanish and Khmer.

Focus around key messages to disseminate to each target audience. Key messages should be “sticky”—memorable and relevant to the audience. Aim for a maximum of three key messages per individual program, campaign or initiative. For example, initial messaging could address how LBUSD is taking proactive steps to improve communication, provide transparency to build trust, and demonstrate progress toward achieving the strategic plan goals.

The plan also should articulate objectives for communication and marketing based on desired changes in awareness levels, knowledge levels, perceptions and/or behaviors of key audiences (Action Step 1.2). The objectives should be measurable in order to evaluate the plan’s effectiveness. For example, measurable objectives might call for:

- A desired percentage increase in positive statements from employees about “being well-informed,” which could be measured via a survey; or
- A desired number of people who agree to serve on a Key Communicator Network (also discussed in this report).

Identify the strategies to use to achieve objectives and the tactics/tools for accomplishing each strategy. (Focus communication strategies and tactics on increasing outreach, engagement and two-way dialogue rather than simply on broadcasting information.) Delineate specific tools and tactics for each stakeholder group/target audience. Identify needed resources to deploy tools/tactics and how they will be acquired.

A timeline to achieve the desired outcomes should be set to ensure effective and efficient delivery of information. It should include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out.

A budget that notes the resources needed is the final step of plan development.

Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:

- Equipment/software licensing;
- Materials and supplies;
- Printing and duplicating;
- Advertising;
- Professional development;
- Staff travel (post COVID);
- Subscriptions;
- Professional dues/fees; and
- Additional staff members or contracted services.

- **Implement** the plan and begin communicating with specific tools on an established schedule. The recommendations included in this report provide some direction for identifying communication activities to accomplish the desired outcomes. Other ideas may come from discussions about key messages related to the strategic plan or from a group such as a communication advisory council. Responsibility must be assigned to someone for each action step to ensure accountability and completion.
- **Evaluate** the outcomes, whether measurable objectives were achieved and the success of the strategies and tactics used. (This step is often overlooked by school districts, yet it will be critical in demonstrating the impact of strategic communication in helping LBUSD achieve its strategic plan goals.) When initially writing up the plan, be sure to identify evaluative measures to use at a later date to determine whether the articulated goals and measurable objectives were achieved. Those evaluative measures might include survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc.

Regular evaluation of all communication activities should take place throughout the year to refine the plan and consider the addition or elimination of tactics and strategies as

necessary. The communication plan must be a dynamic document that can be updated as needed.

Action Step 1.2

Include “SMART” objectives in communication planning.

The strategic communication plan must include SMART (specific, measurable, ambitious but attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) objectives for each goal. This will allow LBUSD to determine whether a communication activity is successful, needs additional resources or should be eliminated.

An example of a SMART objective is, “By [date], 80 percent of staff will indicate they are familiar with the five goals of the Board of Education’s strategic plan.” In contrast, an objective that only aims to “create awareness” cannot be effectively measured. Measurable objectives will increase the accountability of communication efforts. Results-oriented, outcome-based objectives will enable LBUSD to better demonstrate its return on investment of resources (funds and staff time) spent on communications.

Action Step 1.3

Create mini communication plans for new programs and initiatives.

Where an annual or multi-year strategic communication and marketing plan serves as an overall guide for district communication efforts, a major initiative may require its own mini communication plan. Such a plan is more narrowly focused, but it still follows the best practices as outlined in the preceding four-step strategic planning process. Consider developing a mini plan template that communications staff can use whenever they are asked to consult with another department or a school building to help them communicate about a new program or service.

Action Step 1.4

Plan a communications team retreat to evaluate current efforts.

A planning retreat, whether virtual or in person, can be an effective way to give communications staff time to delve into the intensive discussion, analysis and “give and take” necessary to evaluate the success of current communication activities. This will provide a solid starting point for developing the strategic communication and marketing plan and for ensuring all staff understand and own their roles in the implementation of that plan. When held annually, a departmental retreat allows communication staff to review, plan and brainstorm activities, events and storytelling opportunities.

Action Step 1.5

Create a crisis communication plan.

Auditors’ analysis did not yield any formal plan for how crisis communications is handled by communication staff. Crisis communication plans may be separate from or embedded within existing crisis management plans, but they should be very specific about which staff member(s) is responsible for disseminating communications during a crisis when, how and to whom. In addition to the LBUSD crisis management plan (EOC – MMA), consider developing an internal document that details what each communication staff member will do in the event of a district or school crisis. For example, if a serious bus accident occurs and media coverage at the site is expected, which staff member drives to the site? Who will answer news media calls, who will answer calls and social posts from the public, and how will they all stay consistent in their messaging? If an earthquake shut down a school, what would the role be of each communication staff person in that scenario? Some school districts create a flip book that be scanned by any communications staff member. Auditors recommend reviewing this plan annually as staff roles and organization change.

Recommendation 2:

Increase alignment of the varied communication service areas and staff to maximize the effectiveness of the district communication program.

Long Beach Unified School District currently manages its communication functions through a [Public Information](#) office and the separate [Marketing and Media Services](#). Public Information, led by a director, largely coordinates media relations, major internal and external communications, website content and communications support for executive leadership and the Board of Education. Marketing and Media Services, led by an assistant director, has primary responsibility for cable streaming content, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and project management for specialized marketing events. The Public Information director and the Marketing and Media Services assistant director, who each report directly to the superintendent, meet regularly and work closely together. The work of two other departments—Organizational Equity and Engagement, and [Equity, Access and College/Career Readiness](#)—necessitate additional, regular communication efforts, and those efforts fall inside and outside the purview of official communications staff.

As LBUSD communication needs have evolved with advanced communication technology and increased engagement activities, the separate offices responsible for communications have attempted to keep pace by adding an increased use of social media, video communication and “Leading Students in Time of Crisis” podcasts. Yet the communication needs of the district and its stakeholders continue to grow and change. One example is the increasing diversity of the school community, which brings with it more opportunities to tailor messages, tactics and tools to meet the communication needs of these varied audiences. In addition, today’s competitive learning environment—with

charter schools, private schools and virtual learning alternatives—makes it essential that LBUSD elevate the marketing of its brand ([Recommendation 7](#)) to families seeking a quality education for their children.

Consideration must be given to how LBUSD can create the capacity needed to maximize the effectiveness of its marketing efforts and to strategically focus its communication efforts, in alignment with the LBUSD Strategic Plan. While having adequate capacity is often a function of staffing levels, it can also be improved through rethinking how work is prioritized. This concept is addressed throughout the recommendations in this report. The ability to improve the strategic focus, though, relies both on improved strategic communication planning ([Recommendation 1](#)) as well as on ensuring alignment across the many and varied functional areas that now shape district communications.

After reviewing the tasks, responsibilities and organization of the varied offices involved in district communications, auditors offer the following suggestions for improving the effectiveness of LBUSD’s official communication functions.

Action Step 2.1

Reconfigure the structure of the communications function.

To manage the complex communication challenges and opportunities facing large urban systems today, consider creating a chief communications and community engagement officer position that serves on the executive staff and provides ongoing, high-level strategic communication counsel to the superintendent and executive leadership team. This position would oversee all staff and functions pertaining to public information, public relations, marketing, media services, communications equity and community engagement. Where now the Public Information director and Marketing and Media Services assistant director report directly and separately to the superintendent, such positions and

functions would be unified within one, cohesive communications and community engagement department. This unity would help ensure that all district communication efforts are planned strategically, collaboratively and for maximum effectiveness in terms of use of staff and impact among stakeholders.

Many large county school systems today have recognized the close relationship between stakeholder engagement and communication with stakeholders. That recognition, in some cases, has included folding engagement responsibilities under an expanded communication umbrella. In LBUSD, the engagement functions and the Education Foundation could benefit similarly by a closer connection to the communications department.

The chart below reflects a suggested reconfiguration of positions affiliated with communications, public information, marketing and engagement in LBUSD as well as opportunities for new, strategic

#2

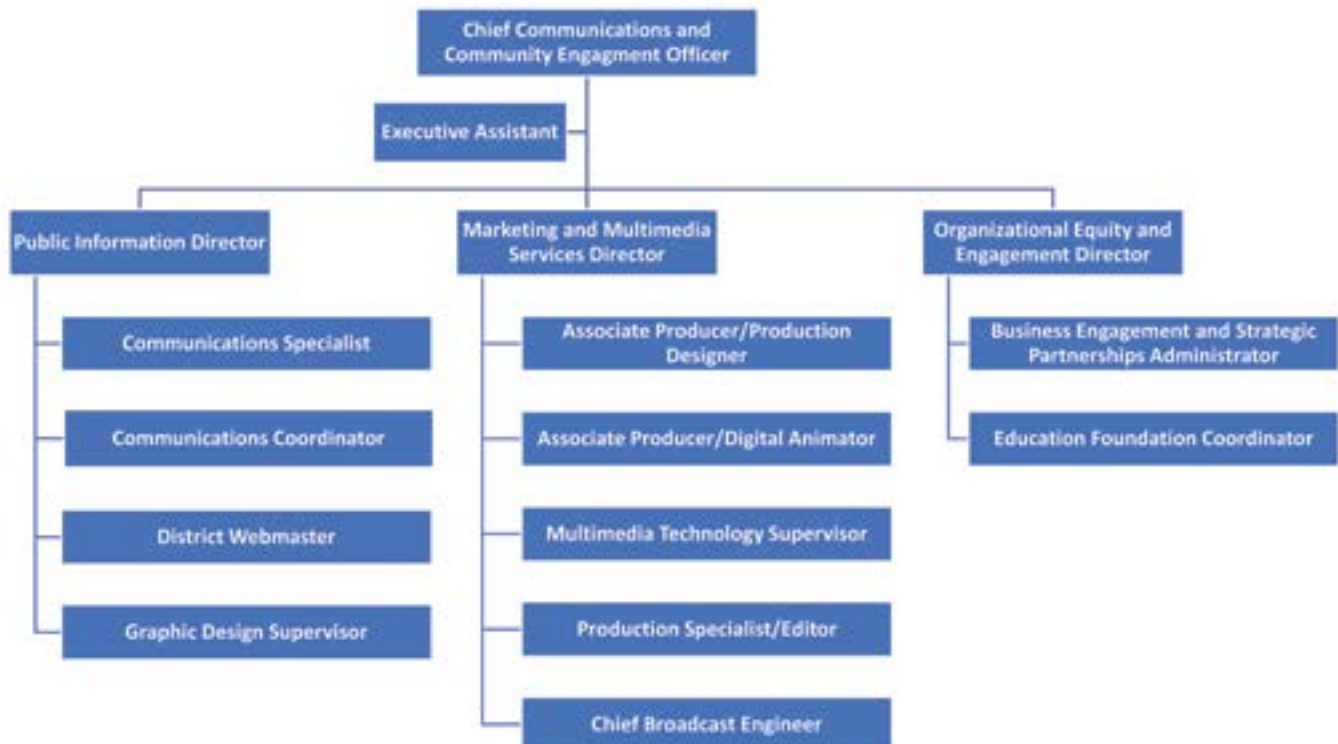
Increase alignment of the varied communication service areas and staff.

positions as resources allow. It is offered as a comprehensive method for increasing the alignment of the currently varied service areas and staff that fill communication functions on behalf of LBUSD.

Following are a few items to note regarding the positions in the chart:

- **Chief Communications and Community Engagement Officer**—This position does not exist currently, but it might be created by elevating an existing

Recommended Organizational Chart: Communications and Community Engagement Department



position or staff member, or when budgets allow, by adding to the communications team. Along with the suggestions at the beginning of this action step, consider the following example job descriptions for the responsibilities of this type of position:

- Chief Communications and Community Engagement Officer—https://www.nspr.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/job-chief-communications-community-engagement-officer.pdf
 - Director of Communications and Community Engagement—<https://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription2.pdf>
 - Assistant Superintendent for School and Community Relations—<https://www.nspr.org/files/audio/007AssistantSuptForSchool%20CommRelations.pdf>
- **Public Information Director**—This position, as it currently exists, could be modified while continuing to focus responsibilities on internal and external public relations efforts, and newly, helping to support the development of a strategic communication and marketing plan ([Recommendation 1](#)). The aim of such a position would be to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between LBUSD and its publics. The position would oversee any internal and external communication staff in the department as well as report to the chief communications and community engagement officer.
 - **Marketing and Multimedia Services Director**—This position is a modification of the current assistant director role. It would focus responsibilities on enhanced marketing efforts ([Recommendation 7](#)); helping to support the development of a strategic communication and marketing plan ([Recommendation 1](#)); and the niche area of digital communication via multimedia platforms such as video, social media and podcasting. It would oversee marketing and digital media staff in the department as well as report to the chief communications and community engagement officer.
 - **Communications Specialist**—This position does not exist currently, but when budgets allow, its creation would facilitate school-level communication. It would focus on identifying and coordinating relevant local news, working with principals to enhance their school-level communication efforts, and building local community and business connections. It also would serve as a liaison with the cross-collaborative departments of Research and School Improvement, Facilities Development and Planning, the Deputy Superintendent, and the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development.
 - **Communications Coordinator**—The district created a communications coordinator position in 2019 to focus solely on bond communications. The position supports that effort through development of the dedicated sub-site <https://lbschoolbonds.net/> and the *Building on Success* e-newsletter, but it functions independently of the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services. To ensure alignment between all of LBUSD’s financial communications and its strategic communication efforts, the position should be folded into a comprehensive Communications and Community Engagement Department.
 - **Organizational Equity and Engagement Director, Business Engagement and Strategic Partnerships Administrator, Education Foundation Coordinator**—These positions, as they currently exist, report to the deputy superintendent, but there are many overlapping purposes and functions between the effort to engage stakeholders—students, parents, business leaders, voters, etc.—in their schools and ensure equity for members of the school

community ([Recommendation 3](#)) and the work of formal communications staff. While many of the responsibilities for the district's current equity and engagement positions pertain to educational operations, consideration should be given to formally connecting these separate functions (see chart on page 23) or to providing more opportunities for collaborative planning.

Action Step 2.2

Critically evaluate current communication tasks.

One inexpensive and relatively immediate way to increase communication effectiveness and efficiency is to take a hard look at all current functions and consider how well each program, task and service aligns with the goals and objectives of the strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)) and the district's strategic plan. This conversation might begin with questions such as:

- What would happen if a specific program, task or service were eliminated?
- What goal does the program, task or service fall under?
- How critical are the ramifications of the program, task or service to strategic communication plan goals? If eliminated, how will they be impacted?
- How will the eliminated program, task or service provide more staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives?

Based on the results of that conversation, each program, task and service should be labeled as "high priority" (do first), "low priority" (do next), "eliminate" or "save for later" when staff time allows. This brainstorming conversation might happen in person, with diagrams on a white board, or virtually through digital workspaces.

Every great communication team has too much to do, so eliminating a task should be

seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. The cuts may be upsetting to those who feel some personal ownership, but they will make room for new, critical, strategic measures that better support LBUSD's goals.

To ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful to record the actual time spent on each task. This would allow the chief communications officer and directors to evaluate operational efficiency and determine which tasks take valuable time away from communication priorities. Today many NSPRA members on multi-person communication teams report using online project management tools such as Basecamp, Trello, Asana and Monday.com to increase collaboration and work efficiency while improving their ability to meet deadlines. These tools also can be useful in tracking who and how much time is devoted to each ongoing task or special project. Some even include timer integrations for generating personalized time sheets. This data will allow for a quick assessment of the status of the workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary.

At the culmination of any major communication initiative, campaign or project, be sure to evaluate communication success in terms of outcomes as well as outputs. For example, preparing marketing materials, website content and news releases for registration is an output. An increase in the number of inquiries and registrations is an outcome. Evaluation should also determine which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which can be improved in the future. This evaluation step is critical in determining priorities for communication tasks, based on what has been shown to work best with district stakeholders.

Recommendation 3:

Expand LBUSD's inclusive culture for diverse families to its expectations for all communication practices.

Research is clear about the importance of family involvement in a child's education. However, families cannot be fully engaged and supportive of their child's academic progress if they do not understand, or if they feel excluded by, the language a school system uses to communicate with them.

Long Beach Unified School District takes a variety of steps now to create an inclusive school culture for its non-English and non-native English speakers. The Organizational Equity and Engagement Office facilitated virtual forums on a variety of topics and has looked to create opportunities for those who can't engage to be a part of the conversation. The office of Equity, Access and College and Career Readiness delivers Parent University workshops online with translation in Spanish. Mindful Mondays, bi-weekly sessions for caregivers, are also translated in Spanish. These are just a few examples of those steps to promote inclusion.

During the NSPRA Communication Audit, non-English-speaking parent focus group participants shared, through the assistance of translators, that they want to be a part of the LBUSD team in helping their children achieve academically. At the same time, parents expressed frustration that to get to a translation, one must first be able to read English. "If you call our district line, it isn't translated for Spanish or Khmer, it's only in English," noted a participant. Speakers of Khmer also expressed frustration that translations and lack of accessibility hinders parent involvement.

Both external and internal focus group participants noted that access to interpreters is a challenge and requests for translation are often "log jammed." As a result, information to

speakers of other languages is delivered too late or not at all.

Action Step 3.1

Ensure that every communication plan has a diversity/inclusion component.

Whether developing a comprehensive, strategic communication and marketing plan (Recommendation 1) or a campaign- or event-specific mini communication plan, be sure to include strategies and tactics that reflect the district's focus on making all families feel included. There may also be a need for establishing desired outcomes relative to communications with diverse families so that clear, measurable objectives can be set for increasing diversity communication (e.g., 75 percent of student households with Khmer as the primary language will register a parent for at least one Khmer-language Parent University program during the 2021-22 school year).

Following are some additional measures the district may want to consider taking in support of more inclusive communication practices:

- **Expand translation/interpretation services.** Providing translation and on-site interpretation is a challenge all districts face in serving families who don't speak English. While interpreters may be present for one-on-one family meetings that involve discussions about a child's academic progress, larger school meetings at which non-English-speaking families will be present should also have provisions for language interpretation. This may involve on-site interpreters, audio equipment or closed captions with real-time translation for meeting attendees.
- **Incorporate communication expectations into cultural competency training for staff,** so that they have a better understanding of how their communication practices affect the diverse students and families with whom they interact in the schools.

#3

Expand LBUSD's inclusive culture for diverse families to its expectations for all communication practices.

- **Include strategies for direct community outreach** to neighborhoods, churches and community organizations when planning to distribute information or gather feedback about issues affecting diverse families. Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they feel more safe and comfortable such as church or home. Using community liaisons, who work directly with families, is one strategy for communicating face to face with parents that has been effective in other districts.

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

Action Step 3.2

Support and set expectations for school building principals in delivering inclusive parent communications.

As the leaders in their schools, principals play a critical role in parent communications. An LBUSD survey done in fall 2020 revealed that more than 80 percent of parents felt communication from their child's school was helpful. Each school has its own culture and personality, though, so understanding the best methods to communicate given the specific conditions of the individual school is all important.

Communications staff can support principals in their vital communication role and promote inclusive communications at the school-building level by:

- **Establishing a common understanding across the district regarding when, how and how often communications should be translated.** This might be achieved through a one-page guidance document (reviewed annually) that sets

standards for when communications must be translated. It should list common types of school communications and group them broadly by levels of urgency/priority. It also should share how much time to allow for translations before they are needed, how to go about getting those translations and who at a school should make those requests. Given the translation timeliness issues noted by focus group participants, it may be necessary to expand the district's current capacity for translations by investing in additional staffing or outside translation services (see Action Step 3.3).

- **Providing translated message templates and promotional materials that principals can easily customize for their schools.** In communicating, there is a distinction between the message or content (the what) and the strategies used to deliver the message (the how). There needs to be consistency in the content of LBUSD's key messages so there is common understanding across the district, but the means of delivering the message should be tailored, with the principal's guidance, to the unique culture of a school and its families' needs.
- **Making communication staff available as on-call consultants for principals.** When principals can develop their own inclusive parent communications in close cooperation with a communications

specialist, they can draw upon their knowledge of a school community to create localized and effective communications.

should strive to develop a workable protocol for times when a bilingual staff member is not readily available to take phone calls or talk with parents who have come to the school office.

Action Step 3.3

Strive to expand translation services for non-English-speaking families.

Focus group participants identified LBUSD's diversity as both a strength and a challenge, primarily because of language issues. Many staff believe there is a need for more translation of messages and forms, and a need for more interpreters in the schools.

Auditors recommend that LBUSD review all district forms, digital notification systems, publications and letters to ensure that important information is translated into both Spanish and Khmer. While it may be unrealistic to translate all materials into all languages spoken in the district, as an alternative consider placing translated versions of the phrase, "This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you," with a video translation line link in the footer of non-translated school documents. A video "language line" interpretation service provides on-demand translations via interactive video, so a parent can hold up a document for a translator to view.

Secretaries in the focus groups also noted the problem of parents calling or visiting schools when an interpreter is not available. Some school systems now quickly connect an interpreter with parents needing translation assistance, at any school or office, through smartphones and a third-party vendor (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, FaceTime). Training school and central office secretaries to use these digital alternatives makes every school a welcome center and starts new families who don't speak English off on the right foot by connecting them with a friendly staffer who speaks their language.

This strategy could be used any time an interpreter is needed, especially in an emergency situation. At a minimum, LBUSD

Recommendation 4:

Make internal communications a priority.

Internal audiences play an important role in helping the school district get its message out. Employees must feel they are part of a bigger organization and understand the school district's mission and vision. A well-informed and supportive staff can have a positive influence on the overall communication efforts and morale of the school district. To communicate effectively in "one clear voice," all employees must understand that good communication and public relations are not solely the responsibility of administrators, Marketing and Media Services and the Public Information office.

Among the internal focus groups, communications from the central office to administrators or to school staff was identified as having some problems by participants in each group. Their concerns, as outlined in the key findings, primarily related to relevancy of the employee newsletter, mixed messages coming from different departments and an overwhelming volume of emails. Their feedback also indicated that employees turn to a variety of external, non-district sources for information about Long Beach Unified School District.

A lack of communications from central office to employees is almost always identified by employees as a problem in communication audits, but in LBUSD, there was a high level of confidence in Superintendent Baker among employees in the focus groups. Their concerns centered more on how decisions are communicated rather than the actual decisions themselves. Confidence in leadership will make building a good internal communication system much easier.

The following action steps outline suggestions for building that system.

Action Step 4.1

Update and/or redesign the internal employee newsletter.

The size of LBUSD's staff presents a problem for internal newsletters. While a "small district" feel is desired, it is hard to create relevant information for more than 12,000 employees. In fact, few employees in focus groups pointed to the *LB School Bulletin* as a go-to publication for school district news. To better meet staff information needs, auditors recommend a more focused internal e-newsletter with an updated design and a more strategic approach to content that will attract more readers.

The goal should be to provide timely information in a brief (possibly one page), bulleted, single paragraph format. Keeping in mind that employees said they prefer to get non-emergency information by email, consider embedding the newsletter in the email rather than through an email hyperlink. Employees can use hyperlinks to the website or intranet for more extensive or detailed information, but the most important information is already "in their hands."

Customization is an expectation of most consumers today. The same is true of email readers, whether they are employees or students' families. There are a variety of tools and tactics available to help districts better customize their e-newsletters to the preferences and interests of recipients. One low-tech way is to gather reader feedback on topics of interest, distribution frequency and layout through evaluation tools such as readership surveys, existing advisory groups or focus groups. (Make use of the findings in this report, too.) Letting questions, ideas and concerns bubble up from staff to be addressed in the e-news update can help create transparency and demonstrate a willingness to be responsive to school and staff communication needs.

More sophisticated email/e-newsletter platforms can mine data based on how a recipient interacts with district email and its content as well as with the district's

website, staff intranet and particular online communities. Future emails/e-newsletters can then be automated to deliver certain types of content to different groups based on their history of engagement with the district’s digital content. While this may not be feasible for LBUSD given its current communication toolbox, any future investment in a district website redesign ([Recommendation 5](#)), email service and/or employee database should be evaluated from the perspective of options for communication customization.

Action Step 4.2

Improve internal email management to reduce communication overload.

One area in which school districts unintentionally burden employees is the daily volume of email. Department staff and administrators have important information to share with teachers, but many teachers report struggling to find the time to manage work and parent communications during the workday. It can become overwhelming in terms of the number of emails and the depth of information provided.

In LBUSD, campus leadership and some teachers identified this as a challenge. They also pointed to a need for clear identification of which communications are critical. As one focus group member put it, “If everything is important, nothing is important.”

Several steps LBUSD can take to reduce unessential emails include:

- Allow “all employee” emails to go out only through executive staff. When department staff need to send blast emails to executive-level staff first, they are inclined to send less of them and be more accurate when they do. This would add a step, but only for emails going to every employee – not the day-to-day business emails.
- Encourage departments to create short, weekly or monthly e-newsletters for employees that contain content that might otherwise go out in multiple emails.

#4

Make internal communications a priority.

- Develop a priority system for communication that provides building administrators and staff with the ability to handle critical information in a more immediate manner. Without this system, critical communications simply get lost or left to sit until the school day is done or require follow-up calls to the schools. Programs such as Outlook can automatically color code incoming emails alerting the recipient if it is a high priority.
- Rather than using “Update” with the current date in the subject line, feedback was given that using a short summary of the topic would be helpful when recipients need to retrieve the information.

Action Step 4.3

Keep school and central office administrative assistants/secretaries in the communication loop.

As the first point of contact for many parents, staff and students, school secretaries and office administrative assistants can influence the climate of a building almost as much as the school principal or department administrator.

Because secretaries interact with most employees on a campus and communicate with central office departments, they become a trusted source of information about the school district. This can be the case, whether those individuals are privy to any information at all. School office personnel frequently have long tenures on campuses and are usually strong supporters of the school and school district.

This was illustrated by the LBUSD school office supervisors and central office secretaries

who took part in the focus groups. Generally, they knew where to access school information and regularly used the LBUSD website. Most commented that they felt comfortable speaking with their supervisor about communication issues. However, there were multiple comments from school office supervisors that they did not always get information in a timely manner.

The following steps can be taken by principals and central office administrators to ensure that their key office personnel have the information they need to field calls, dispel rumors and do their jobs well:

- Provide scripts and Q&A documents for frontline staff (receptionists and office secretaries) on key LBUSD initiatives such as COVID-19 prevention strategies, calendar changes or breaking news (school lockdowns, policy changes, etc.).
- Review daily and weekly schedules so that office staff are aware of activities going on in their school or department as well as major events across the district.
- Review deadlines for reports and other information required by the central office or the state.
- Review the major public issues being discussed in LBUSD so that they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
- Ensure they have copies of any LBUSD publications, information brochures and other key materials coming from the Public Information office so that they can answer questions and share information.

Action Step 4.4

Create opportunities for employees in the Administration Building to interact with the superintendent and cabinet.

To strengthen internal communications, consider holding regular meetings of all staff in the Administration Building. As the center of a very large school district, these central office

staff tend to operate in silos, with employees who work in different departments having limited interaction with each other or not knowing each other at all. Holding an “all-hands on deck” meeting quarterly or once a semester would provide valuable face time with the superintendent and executive staff while also providing staff in the Administration Building with opportunities to ask questions and clarify information about new initiatives and updates.

Action Step 4.5

Use a communication responsibility grid.

One way to address inconsistencies and improve communication follow-through after meetings is through use of a responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of “who does what” for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. This type of grid can also be used with any councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated.

The grid can be an e-template that can be sent to all administrators and their assistants, so everyone is consistently applying the practice.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add check boxes for “FYI,” “to be shared” and “confidential” to each agenda item. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are to do with the information. If an item is marked “to be shared,” then a discussion will be needed to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed. The above communication grid could then be employed.

Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes

FYI	
To be shared	
Confidential	

Noting what is to be done with specific agenda items will help ensure that the right people are informed in a timely manner.

Action Step 4.6

Form an employee communications council.

An employee communications council can serve as an excellent way to improve understanding between executive leadership and frontline staff while empowering staff to speak knowledgeably in the community about district initiatives. Seek one volunteer per campus so members are representative of all schools. Establish protocols to ensure the meetings focus on communications opportunities, problem solving and information sharing. Following the meeting, share a summary of the discussion and any recommendations or conclusions created by the group on the staff intranet. Embedded in the success of this communication concept is the assumption that the thoughts and suggestions of the employee council will be taken seriously and given appropriate follow-up. The Public Information director could attend the employee communications council meetings, prepare an action summary for distribution and assist the superintendent in any follow-up necessary.

Action Step 4.7

Keep employees informed to build trust and buy-in.

LBUSD has expectations for how its teachers and staff should communicate with parents. Expectations should also be established for how the district will communicate with employees. As frontline communicators, employees should receive important information before the media and public or if needed – at the

same time. The focus should be on delivering the information staff need and want to know, which includes: the rationale behind decisions; articulation of the vision and direction of the district; summaries of important meetings; and the “nuts and bolts” of district operations and policies that impact them.

Principals and supervisors should clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner and be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. However, for administrators to communicate effectively, they must be included in the communication loop and receive all critical information of importance to district operations.

Action Step 4.8

Use employee orientation sessions to help new staff understand their communication roles.

Communication is not just the responsibility of official communications staff and administrators; all employees represent the district in the community and can serve as ambassadors for the schools. When informed of and effectively prepared for this role, staff members can help build allies for the district, its schools and their programs and services. Informing (and annually reminding) staff of their communication roles on behalf of LBUSD can be an extraordinarily powerful in creating a culture of communication across the district.

While orientation or onboarding programs usually fall under the Human Resources or Personnel Commission departments, new staff orientation sessions should contain a component on communications. A revised employee orientation program was rolled out in 2017 themed to “The Long Beach Way.” The program does an excellent job focusing on customer service and the importance of a positive communications between the public and LBUSD employees. Like many others, the program was sidelined during the current pandemic, but it can serve as a good base for expanding employee orientation.

In addition to customer service, presentations on topics such as school district history, culture and district facts and figures would be useful, if done effectively. This is an area where the Public Information office could assist Human Resources. Ideas to expand the existing program in the future might include:

- Use the orientation program to acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with LBUSD operations, culture, history and procedures. Provide new hires with an orientation package that includes publications and summaries of important district initiatives.
- Have the superintendent or a designated cabinet member welcome the staff and talk briefly about the strategic priorities and accomplishments to date. Making an immediate connection with top leadership demonstrates they are valued in their role and helps build trust and confidence. With current contract restrictions, this may or may not be practical.
- Share a status update about the LBUSD Strategic Plan and any major initiatives. The focus should be on generating excitement about the innovative programs going on across the system and providing talking points and support that taps into the enthusiasm of new employees.
- Offer onboarding orientation sessions throughout the year depending on the need and number of new hires and/or capture the meeting in a video format and post it in the Employee Portal to be reviewed by new employees and others as needed.
- Include a communications component to emphasize the important role of staff as communicators and ambassadors. New hires should learn which channels the district uses to communicate information to staff and to families as well as what it means to be a staff ambassador for LBUSD. Emphasize that employees have a responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their schools.

Review guidelines and expectations related to news media relations and social media so that staff clearly understand protocols.

They should also be given guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests. Consider preparing a summary sheet of “communication responsibilities” to distribute to all employees. Consider developing a Communications Handbook to be used as an in-service framework for new staff orientation or communication workshops. The handbook could be shared and reviewed annually with principals and administrators, and sections could be highlighted as communication tips in staff publications.

Following are some examples of communication handbooks for staff:

- **Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations** (Brenham Independent School District, Texas)—https://www.nsprapro.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/administrators-guide-communications-pr_brenham-isd.pdf
- **Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators** (Collier County Public Schools, Florida)—https://www.nsprapro.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/ccps-communications-guide-2019_redacted.pdf
- **Connect. Be Heard. School Communication Guidelines** (School District of Osceola County, Florida)—https://www.nsprapro.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/communication-guidelines-for-staff.pdf

Action Step 4.9

Create an expanded employee recognition and awards program.

Being recognized for a job well done is almost as important as being compensated for school employees. LBUSD currently sponsors a teacher of the year program and recognizes top staff members in various employee groups.

In addition to those programs, consider awards that highlight staff efforts but maybe don't rise to the level of "...of the year."

Some examples of other types of employee awards come from the Allen (Texas) Independent School District:

- **Best Supporting Role Award** presented to support staff members nominated by supervisors in areas such as transportation, food service and maintenance.
- **Bright Idea Award** presented for employee-generated programs and initiatives that improve student learning or save the school district resources.
- **Rookie of the Year Award** presented to one first-year classroom teacher who is nominated by peers.
- **Bell Ringer Award** presented to any employee who has gone above and beyond their regular job responsibilities.

Consider involving representatives of the employee associations in setting criteria and the award selection process. Some school districts include at least one teacher or support staff member on the committee (former winners) to lend more transparency to the process.

Present the awards at an end of the year breakfast or luncheon if budget permits. The event might also be sponsored by the school foundation or a local business(es). Awards recognizing them for good work and being presented by the superintendent and board president are very meaningful to the employees.

Recommendation 5:

Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district's decision-making process.

An effective school district communications program needs support and trust from employees. Gaining that support from all employees in a large, diverse district can be challenging, but encouraging staff engagement in decision making shows transparency and good faith. Long Beach Unified School District currently gathers staff input, typically through surveys and focus groups, but the key findings of this report show that staff members have concerns with the quantity and quality of engagement opportunities provided. While some staff members believe there are not adequate opportunities for staff to provide input as part of the decision-making process, others were concerned that the input collected is not listened to or incorporated into decisions.

Effective engagement of staff members in decision-making processes will ultimately serve to strengthen trust, connection and transparency throughout the district. Focus group participants stated that as staff members, they felt they could provide key information to help administrators understand important implications in rolling out a new program or approach. When considering how best to engage staff, keep these tips in mind:

- **Do not ask for input if a decision has already been made.** When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, stakeholders can easily feel that their input does not matter. It is important to seek input on major, key issues and to listen to that input as part of the decision-making process.
- **Give stakeholder input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or directions for the district.** In some cases, district leaders may already

have a strong sense of what decision is necessary but choose to seek public input before finalizing it. When this is done and stakeholder input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders can choose to continue with the original plan or listen to the input and consider alternative options. Asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause stakeholders to disengage from the district. Give all input due consideration, and if it is not actionable, explain the reasons why and the rationale for the final decision.

- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** In most cases, the Board of Education or administrators seek input to gather information in order to make a better decision. Confusion and frustration may enter the process if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive that they are “making” the decision. To avoid such a situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used and who will make the actual decision. If these positions are clearly defined on the front end of the process, it will be less likely that those providing input will misunderstand their role.

Many staff members in the focus groups commented they do not always know how or if their input is used in the decision-making process. While it may seem obvious to some, we recommend that LBUSD clearly communicate how input will be considered as it is gathered, and, after it is summarized, how it will be incorporated into a decision. These steps are necessary to make sure staff members are aware their input is being used and is a valuable part of the process. In addition, it is critical for staff members to see how their input influenced the final decision. Without this, it is often challenging to encourage employees to participate in future engagement opportunities.

Effective engagement requires school districts to conduct two-way communications with stakeholders in meaningful ways that build

trust. This recommendation offers a variety of ways for LBUSD to strengthen its commitment to transparency, authentically seek input from stakeholders and engage them in the work of the district.

Action Step 5.1

Develop clear purpose statements to outline the work of committees, task forces and other work groups.

When forming a committee, task force, work group or study team to assist in the decision-making process, it is important to clearly outline the group’s purpose. A purpose statement should define the role of the group and who has the authority to make the final decision. It should also include what the group does not have authority to do. Without these purpose statements, those involved can often perceive their authority to be different than originally intended. It is the responsibility of the leaders of each of these groups to continually reinforce the purpose and authority of the group. These purpose statements will help LBUSD district administrators to collect the input and information that is most helpful and will set clear guidelines for the work of the committee or work group.

Action Step 5.2

Schedule regular visits to schools and departments for the superintendent and senior administrators to connect with staff.

Most successful superintendents use attendance at in-person school and department staff meetings to connect with employees. Dr. Baker planned for this as part of her transition to the superintendency, but pandemic shutdowns have delayed the roll out. As in-person learning returns so should this plan for outreach.

With many executive staff being new to their positions, it will be beneficial for some of them to also accompany the superintendent

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Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district’s decision-making process.

on school visits. To make such visits an engagement tool, take 5-10 minutes to provide a brief update on district issues and then use the remaining time to solicit staff comments and concerns. There might be a specific topic to focus on, but it is also useful to ask for comments on issues or topics that are top-of-mind for staff.

Gathering input from staff members in this manner can inform decisions as well as clarify rumors. Over time, these meetings also can help staff members feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts without fear of retaliation for their comments.

Action Step 5.3

Have administrators use “rounding” conversations to solicit input from staff.

Rounding conversations happen when administrators are consistent about going around within their departments or schools to ask specific questions of their staff in order to obtain information for the purposes of decision making. The practice of “rounding” is a quick way to gather input from staff while building familiarity and demonstrating that administrators care about staff members and their input. A rounding conversation is a check-in conversation that can be focused on a particular topic.

Here’s how it might work to gather input from staff members:

- The district’s executive team may be discussing an idea, and staff input is needed to inform the decision.
- The executive team develops two or three questions to gather quick input.
- The executive team asks principals and department supervisors to each find 10 staff members in their buildings or departments to answer the questions.
- Principals and department supervisors share the responses with the executive team for consideration in the decision-making process.

Again, as stated earlier, it is important that staff members see how this input affected the decision, so they are more likely to participate in the future.

Action Step 5.4

Create an “I Have an Idea” e-form on the staff Intranet to solicit comments and ideas from employees.

Inviting comments and ideas via an optional, digital tool can make providing feedback more convenient and comfortable for busy or self-conscious employees. When soliciting ideas from employees, consider developing an e-form that encourages respondents to select a particular topic or issue so responses are more easily categorized and shared with appropriate administrators. Regularly review submitted ideas and either consider them, or if not submitted anonymously, ask the individual who submitted the idea to further develop it.

Staff members should receive a response to confirm that their suggestion has been received. Ideally, the response message should refer back to the suggestion, instead of just an automated “thanks for your response,” to create the sense that someone is actively listening to the suggestions. This is a critical piece of this process. Without some follow through, the person who submitted the idea can feel like it was not truly considered and will be unlikely to share in the future.

Action Step 5.5

Work to seek input from a variety of staff voices and perspectives.

One of the challenges of effective engagement is to broaden the voices that are included in any engagement process. It can be easier for districts to go back to the same staff members who always respond when a request for input is made rather than to seek new and different voices that are less likely to get involved. While the tactics described above will help tap new voices for input gathering, it is important for LBUSD to be intentional about who is invited to participate in its decision-making processes.

It is also important to engage all types of employees. In education, it is not uncommon for administrators to go to teachers and other professional staff while overlooking valuable input from classified support staff. 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.

Recommendation 6:

Enhance LBUSD's use of digital communication tools to strengthen their effectiveness.

The Long Beach Unified School District makes use of a variety of digital communication tools as part of implementing its overall communication plan. Currently, the Public Information office handles corporate communications, media relations and website content, while Marketing and Media Services coordinates video, social media and special marketing projects. Despite that division of labor, there are areas of overlap in terms of communicating various districtwide initiatives with stakeholders.

One of the primary digital communication tools is the LBUSD website, which is comprehensive and provides a good volume of information for a large school district. The website's responsive design works well on phones and tablets, and it also meets all of the Section 504 accessibility standards—a major accomplishment and ongoing challenge for the web design team. Other notable and positive features of the district website, in the auditors' opinions, were the Building On Success facility project pages, the Public Information office news release archive, the fiscal transparency Local Control Funding sections and the video archive.

Focus group participants offered more than 100 comments on the district website. It appears to be regularly used by parents, employees, prospective school families and outside organizations such as the media and business groups seeking facts about the Long Beach schools. Many participants' comments were positive, but some recommended changes to make the site more user friendly or navigable. Themes that emerged from the comments are reflected in the recommendations below. The recommendations also include auditor observations based on best practices for website design and public relations functionality.

Another set of digital communication tools is LBUSD's four social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. While student enrollment is about 70,000, followers on each of the platforms hovers around 5,000 or fewer. This is a significant increase from a year ago, as the platforms were becoming more content driven from communication staff. Yet focus group participants rarely mentioned district social media as a go-to source of information. Multiple parents said they don't see it as effective communication for themselves, and multiple students said they don't follow LBUSD on social media. In contrast, the Long Beach Post on Facebook has almost 50,000 followers and was noted in multiple focus groups as a popular source for school district news. That suggests there is much capacity for growth in the district's social media engagement, once practices are put in place for more effective digital communication.

LBUSD also creates and features videos on its YouTube channel, Instagram and Facebook. During focus group discussions, Marketing and Media Services received high marks on its video capabilities and output. This method of online communication has increased in popularity during the pandemic and its shutdowns of schools and workplaces; experts predict that trend is unlikely to change even after communities return to a relative normal operation. LBUSD should capitalize on its video capabilities in telling the district's story to strengthen stakeholder relationships and market its programs and services.

While there are other digital communication tools in use in LBUSD, the following action steps focus on areas for growth or improvement relevant to the district's website, social media and video functions.

Action Step 6.1**Enhance the district website.**

Based on focus group feedback and an analysis of the district website and school webpages, auditors recommend the following:

- **Train all staff who edit school webpages.** In website discussions with employees, campus administrators and secretaries felt they did not have the expertise or time to keep a campus page current. The campus websites (in SchoolLoop) are often “good or bad” based on the skill level of the person assigned to manage it, according to the principals. Some principals have taken the website as their own project, which takes away from other principal duties. Compensating a staff member to manage the website through a stipend may be unrealistic under the current budget, but at a minimum, training is needed for whomever manages the site.
- **Clarify the process for managing and updating district webpages.** Department staff expressed frustration with the inability to change or update their own web page information. At least annually, review with department staff the process for managing sites within the district website (not SchoolLoop).
- **Consider a redesign of the district website to enhance its value as a competitive marketing tool.** Because the website is the first point of contact for many visitors and parents, its image does reflect on the image of the total school district. Use the website to market the schools and more effectively communicate the LBUSD brand. To make a strong first impression, the website needs to immediately communicate the district’s “brand” and pull visitors in to learn more about the schools ([Recommendation 7](#)) as well as share news and information. It needs to be the place where visitors go for information, but it also needs to help

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**Enhance LBUSD’s
use of digital
communication tools
to strengthen their
effectiveness.**

people get excited about LBUSD schools and programs. Consider for comparison the websites of neighboring school districts with more contemporary website design such as Santa Ana Unified School District (<https://www.sausd.us/> - see its “Why Choose SAUSD Schools?” homepage feature) and Los Angeles Unified School District (<https://achieve.lausd.net/>). This is a major undertaking and may require several years of planning and implementation.

- **Consider bringing all school and district websites under “one roof.”** The district currently manages its own site for district and department pages, while the SchoolLoop product is used for campuses. There could be a variety of reasons for this separation, but using a single platform could improve consistency between the campus and district pages in terms of design, content expectations and availability of training for page editors.
- **Improve navigation by making it more intuitive for the casual user.** School districts often struggle with striking a balance between organizational information (for example, the functions within LBUSD) and user-focused information (for example, school menus and upcoming events). As the LBUSD website evolves toward becoming more of a user-focused website, it’s helpful to pose the question, “What do parents need to know to support their child’s education?” when organizing and presenting district

information. In addition to reviewing website analytics (for example, the pages receiving most visits), LBUSD can consider creating user groups to provide granular information about what they want from their district’s website and to test the usability of the new site once redesigned.

- **Expand the district facts and figures that are easily accessible online.** Under the About pull-down menu, “About LBUSD” includes a LBUSD Facts At a Glance box with high-level data about enrollment, student diversity, facilities and the operation budget. More details about district and school enrollments, test scores, graduation rates, employee numbers, etc. also should be readily accessible. Consider including or cross-linking to a separate page with such data.
- **Provide an easy-to-find link back to the district home page from all school home pages.** It is difficult to return to the LBUSD home page from campus pages.
- **Increase the visibility of the Board of Education online.** Citizens looking for board meeting streaming, policies or agendas who are not familiar with the district site and may have trouble finding these important links under the Offices tab. On the Board of Education page, also include a short bio or vita for each member, either as a hyperlink under their photo or in a new section.
- **Make an easy-to-find link on the district home page leading interested parties to the Strategic Planning webpage,** which is thorough and well organized with the district goals. This could be easily done by linking the Mission Statement in the footer to the planning page.
- **The quality of the news story/ photographs on the home page is excellent, but they are not changed frequently enough.** This gives the site a stale appearance even if the text content

is changing. If there are not enough news stories, especially under pandemic closures, consider using district stock photos that show students learning and teachers teaching.

- **The Accolades section offers a good summary of district awards and accomplishments, but the page needs a better design** that breaks up the text with photos, headlines and other devices. There is too much text or explanation for many of the awards.
- **The A-Z Directory is a good tool for visitors who know what they are looking for.** Consider adding a different section such as “How Do I...?” or “I Would Like To...” that has 10-15 of the most common questions people are searching for on the website. For example, how do I enroll my child? How do I apply for a job with LBUSD? How do I apply for a school transfer? And so on.
- **Expand the available history of LBUSD under the About section.** About LBUSD includes several sentences pertaining to the district’s history, but a special feature highlighting the district’s long history would make a good connection to alumni and the senior population. A collection of old photos with a short narrative would be attention getters and opportunities to reconnect.
- **While awaiting a district website redesign, consider including a “How to Use this Website” section on the home page.** Many focus group participants said that they had to “dig” to find information on the website, which is time consuming and frustrating. To help address this problem, provide a link with tips and guidelines for navigating the site and finding specific content areas. Embed video demos of a user navigating to the most commonly used features for parent or staff visitors to the website. In addition to being a helpful tool for site visitors, it will save time for office personnel who

often guide parents and others through the site by phone.

- **Add a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section to the homepage.** An FAQ section is a useful resource for the public and staff. Keep it current by asking district office and school secretaries and other staff to track the questions they are most often asked by callers. These can then be compiled and added as updates. FAQs can also be used for “myth busting” and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or district leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in the FAQ or another prominent spot on the homepage for easy access. To be effective, the FAQ feature should be clearly visible near the homepage and not buried deep in the website.

Action Step 6.2

Inform parents and staff about how social media is being used by LBUSD.

Encourage parents and staff to engage with LBUSD on social media by building their understanding of how and why the platforms are used by the district, how staff can use it professionally and how to ensure they see the district’s social posts.

For parents new to the district, building their understanding can increase their awareness of and comfort with the district’s and schools’ use of these platforms, compared to partner districts. Discuss social media use by the system and educators during open house events, parent-teacher meetings or scheduled presentations. Include information in regular communication to parents such as school newsletters. Topics to cover could include:

- Which platforms the district uses;
- How the district uses those platforms to tell its story and support families;

- The benefits of social media use for the district and its schools;
- The policies, protocols and safeguards in place to protect students and staff;
- The site rules or rules of engagement for each platform and how offenders are handled; and
- How to follow LBUSD on social media.

Long Beach has social media guidelines for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as related Board of Education policies. Secondary administrators received training on social media development prior to the schools being closed. Due to the pandemic, however, elementary administrator training was delayed. It is encouraged that all applicable staff be provided with professional development opportunities and/or guidance, at least annually, on how they can maintain professional social media pages. This should include references to any applicable school board policy and information on permissible (or not) means of engaging with families on social media, particularly as it relates to the potential creation of student record information that must be archived.

Following are some example staff guidelines for social media use:

- **Social Media Tips Series: Getting Started** (Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia)—<http://www.acpsk12.org/staff/social-media-tips-series-getting-started/>
- **Staff Social Media Guidelines** (Mill Valley School District, California)—https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/staff-social-media-guidelines_mill-valley-school-district.pdf
- **Guiding Social Media Principles for Employees** (Virginia Beach City Public Schools)—https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/staff-social-media-guidelines_virginia-beach-cps.pdf
- **Social Media Guidelines** (Wayzata Public Schools, Minnesota)—https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/gold_mine/

[staff-social-media-guidelines_wayzata-public-schools.pdf](#)

With Facebook prioritizing “groups” in its ever-changing platform redesign, supporting educators who lead classrooms, clubs and teams in managing their own group sites within a structured environment is now essential.

Social media platforms frequently change how their systems choose information to display for users. The district should consider annual campaigns to remind all stakeholders of its social media platforms and the steps they can take to ensure they see LBUSD posts in their feed.

Action Step 6.3

Look for creative ways to present the district and schools online.

Social media users engage more often with content that makes them feel like they know or are a part of something special. So much of the interaction in this space is about demonstrating a connection to someone or something. To increase user engagement on LBUSD social media, consider using several “connection” campaigns each year such as the Illinois Consolidated High School District 230 Legacy Story series and #StaffWhoAreAlumni campaign.

Social media users also enjoy surprises, challenges, responding to questions and polls, and reacting to memories. Following are some ideas for additional social campaigns and creative posts to increase user engagement with social media:

- Post fun, school-related fill-in-the-blank statements.
- Highlight a parent or community volunteer of the month.
- Highlight a “big wheel” (aka, big deal) bus driver each month.
- Share surprising and quirky statistics about the district (e.g., pounds of French fries served in school cafeterias or total miles driven by buses each school year).

- Post old yearbook photos and ask users to tag themselves and classmates.
- Post a weekly “Did You Know” feature with a little-known fact about classroom activities.

Action Step 6.4

Optimize the use of video.

The LBUSD Marketing and Media Services department received high marks on video capabilities and output. There are numerous studies showing that video is the number one draw on many social media outlets. Social media posts that include a video have 48 percent more views and generate 12 times more shares than posts with text and image content. With video consumption on mobile devices rising by 100 percent every year, experts predict that by 2022, online videos will comprise more than 82 percent of all consumer internet traffic. So, the power of video for a communications program cannot be underestimated.

School districts that use quality video as part of their communication program can reach a wider audience. Conversely, video-savvy parents are more critical of content that is irrelevant or poor quality. As the district looks to expand the reach of its communication program, high quality video is a logical direction.

LBUSD is currently featuring videos on its YouTube channel, Instagram and Facebook. District-produced videos also can be pushed out to stakeholders on their mobile devices through links, embedded code or native video files in e-newsletters, or on websites and social media. The Superintendent’s Message, Connecting with Students, T-Shirt Tuesdays, special videos (e.g., “Welcome to the 2021 Education Celebration”) and others are well produced, with valuable information. To justify the staff time spent on these projects, maximum promotion of these videos is critical.

Video subject matter should emotionally connect viewers to the story of education in LBUSD and may expand to a wider range of subjects, hot topics and board member views

on the district's mission and values, as well as educator how-to's ("Yes, eighth-grade math still has its uses in real life, and here's how.") and additional student features.

Currently, LBUSD videos tend to be on the longer side of production. Some videos could be shorter in length as those under two minutes long get the most engagement. The YouTube algorithm today does favor longer videos in its recommendation engine, but one study found about a third of all viewers will stop watching a video after 30 seconds, 45 percent by one minute and 60 percent by two minutes. Obviously, this rule cannot be applied to Board of Education meetings.

For some purposes such as Facebook or Twitter live broadcasts, engaging videos can be produced quickly and of relatively good quality on a smartphone. More professional filming, editing and production is generally recommended for the district's strategic communication and marketing videos, though.

Here are some considerations and ideas for using video to tell the district's story and communicate key messages:

- Expand video production capacity. The findings of this report suggest that Marketing and Media Services is currently at capacity or close to it when it comes to producing. Maintaining and possibly expanding this capacity in the strategic communication and marketing plan ([Recommendation 1](#)) will help the district increase stakeholder engagement. As budget and staffing levels allow, give consideration to opportunities to expand capacity in this area.
- Continue to add to the inventory of video on the website and YouTube. Short videos with testimonials and content showing students engaged in learning activities almost always tell a more engaging district story than paper brochures.
- Promote videos in parent e-newsletters. Give parents another reason to read the school or district newsletter by adding

links to videos or embedded video content. Videos keep parents abreast of district-wide events in a creative way and help to promote understanding and pride.

- Highlight employees in short customer service or community service spots. Through 30- to 60-second videos, identify and celebrate examples of employees providing great customer service or volunteering in the community.
- Consider these additional examples from other districts for video projects:
 - Superintendent's video annual report
 - District marketing videos for teacher recruitment
 - Marketing videos for specific school programs or graduation pathways
 - Highlighting special student projects and staff achievements during board meetings
 - Video tours of new construction or renovation projects
 - High school graduate success stories
 - Welcome video for transient families such as those in the military
 - Orientation videos for new students/families transitioning from charter schools or neighboring districts
 - Strategic plan updates for presentations at business/civic groups
 - In-service training videos for staff with customer service spotlights

Recommendation 7:

Incorporate marketing strategies into a strategic communication and marketing plan.

The branding and marketing efforts of Long Beach Unified School District include many tasks that enhance district communications such as the use of video and podcasts. Those tasks largely appear aimed at promoting programs such as high school choice, Linked Learning, career/technical education and their related events. Such tasks are reflected in existing plans for communications staff, but a more strategic marketing plan would build the perceived value of LBUSD programs and increase awareness of that value among potential new families and job applicants.

Participants from a variety of focus groups spoke highly of the district, but few could articulate what the school district's message was or what specifically made it a good school district. Helping families confidently answer that question and spread the word (aka, word-of-mouth advertising) can and should be a shared aim of the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services. The LBUSD Strategic Plan includes effective communications as one of its five major goals, and the beginnings of a thorough plan are in place to accomplish this goal. Take that effort to the next step by incorporating marketing strategies within the strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)).

Marketing strategies should be aligned with the district's overall vision and strategic plan. Specific goals and measurable objectives should be outlined along with staff responsibilities, timelines and budgets—similar to the strategic communication planning process. Conduct market research on competitive school systems to inform the selection of strategies and tactics, which should be targeted to specific audiences. Key marketing messages should be developed that support the LBUSD brand.

Action Step 7.1

Define LBUSD's desired brand.

The first step in this process is to clearly define the district's "brand identity" – the reputation that it wants to be known for in the community. A brand identity is how the district wishes to be perceived by others. The district's brand is not a logo or tagline, although both elements are part of communicating a brand. A brand is the combination of design, words and symbols that are used to create an image or reputation that describes LBUSD and differentiates it from other districts.

If budget permits, consider using the services of a marketing consultant to assist in defining the brand and developing the logos and materials needed to communicate it. The district may also be able to find a board member, parent or other community member with expertise in marketing to assist. During the branding process, clearly articulate a desired brand and develop messages which tell the district's story that can be easily communicated by all employees and parents.

- **Identify the district's value proposition.** A school district's value proposition is the promise to its audience. What are the benefits to students attending the schools, or even the benefits for parents who are a part of the school community? What is it about the schools that sets them apart from the competition? Think about the district's unique identity. Does it offer something that no other schools in the area are able to provide? The district should be able to give its value proposition in one concise sentence. As a "tagline," make sure this message is used consistently across all media. Most importantly, don't change it, or confuse it by using multiple taglines. Here are links to two websites that offer examples of corporate value propositions.
 - [25 Companies Who Absolutely Nailed Their Unique Value Proposition](#)
 - [31 Value Propositions You Wish You Had](#)

#7

Incorporate marketing strategies into the strategic communication plan.

the information is easy to find for any visitor to the district and school websites and on the staff intranet.

- **Identify the district's brand identity.** A brand identity is crafted based on an organization's value proposition, how it *wishes* to be perceived by others and how it actually is perceived; essentially, it is the district's personality. Start the process by reviewing district and school goals, defining the strengths and weaknesses of the district and its schools, and determining whether LBUSD is meeting the expectations of students, families and employees. Consider also how the district brand is conveyed such as through a logo, fonts, colors, etc. and how those elements are used around the district. A brand identity helps create a memorable and positive experience for anyone researching the district.
- **Create a brand guide to share with others.** A brand guide sets the standard for presenting the district's brand to the public. In a school setting where hundreds or even thousands of employees represent the district, a brand guide will give some logic and teeth when enforcing the brand. The brand or style guide could range from choosing district colors, deciding on one logo or variations on the logo, having consistent brand elements (for the layout and design of all outreach materials), to the writing style of all communication. It is simply a document ensuring message and design consistency throughout all print and digital channels to unify the content under the district's brand.
 - Consider modeling the simple, visual format of Highline Public Schools' identity and style guide posted at <https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/communications/brand-guidelines>.
 - Consider providing a website such as Harvard Community Unit School District 50's online identity guide at <https://www.cusd50.org/page/harvard-cusd-50-identity-guide> for internal use by staff and external use by partners and vendors. Make sure
- **Manage the brand.** Once brand guidelines have been established, clearly communicate the district's brand identity, standards and expectations to stakeholders, particularly staff, volunteers, families and outside vendors. This can help to ensure that nothing is produced without consistent brand messages and graphic elements in place. School districts are different from companies in that schools often see themselves as independent organizations. Business cards, letterhead and website design are areas that campuses often do their own thing. Publicizing the brand guidelines and explaining their purpose to principals can help manage the district brand.
- **Consider designing a new LBUSD logo.** The current district logo depicts gender-typical iconography of a boy and a girl beside the district name. With the diverse community LBUSD serves and the trends in graphic design, it is a good time to update the district logo to reflect an innovative, inclusive learning environment and the strategic marketing direction. Emotions are often attached to a school or district logo, particularly among those involved in its creation, so consider holding logo-specific focus groups and rounding conversations with parents, students and staff before any changes are made. The cost and time commitment to introducing a new logo can be significant,

so consider phasing in a new logo over a year or several years, focusing on web and print materials that can be updated easily.

Action Step 7.2

Highlight the successes of Long Beach students with “Points of Pride” campaigns.

Focus group participants were generally positive about LBUSD and the quality education program it offers, but some felt that the district is not “telling its story” as well as it could be. The district’s major global and national awards are well-publicized, but the achievements of individual students and staff is less evident.

One way to shine a spotlight on those smaller accomplishments is to clearly, consistently and frequently share “Points of Pride” that communicate successes. Student performance on standardized tests are one measurement of success, but there are many others that the district and schools can focus on as well. These include awards that students and staff have received; graduates who have gone on to receive advanced degrees or achieve significant professional accomplishments; service projects students have completed; and business investment in the schools.

Key to this effort is sharing points of pride with internal audiences. Teachers and support staff should know positive information about the district and its schools, so they are prepared to answer questions with pride, whether they are on the job or in the supermarket checkout line. Points of pride can be used by employees ([Recommendation 4](#)), key communicators ([Recommendation 8](#)), Board of Education members ([Recommendation 9](#)) and real estate agents (Action Step 7.4) as they answer questions about the schools. The points can serve as a guidepost for parents who are deciding whether their children will attend Long Beach schools.

LBUSD’s long history can also be tapped. Are there famous graduates of the schools that can be identified? Are there successful graduates from more recent years that could be highlighted? Highlight these standouts through video, graphic posts and special publications.

Some ideas for communicating successes and sources of district pride include:

- Develop a speech or presentation around points of pride that can be delivered to civic organizations, parent groups, and other appropriate audiences.
- Develop a points of pride section on the homepage of the website. Update the list monthly. Encourage schools to do the same on their individual websites.
- Develop a flier or brochure on points of pride and distribute it to real estate offices, elected officials, businesses and other key audiences. Use it as a handout for speeches and in information provided to new families and employees.
- Solicit alumni to submit testimonials on what an education in LBUSD has meant to them. Include these testimonials on websites and in publications and share them with key audiences. Create short video testimonials for use on social media.
- Encourage schools to create a “Wall of Fame” in a visible campus location or on their websites. Include photos and short summaries of accomplishments of students, staff and alumni.
- Post points of pride history items and photos on social media for Throwback Thursday, Wayback Wednesday, etc.
- Highlight one or two points of pride at each Board of Education meeting.

Action Step 7.3

Enhance branding with micro-campaigns.

One way to enhance branding efforts is to deploy micro-campaigns that demonstrate the brand as it is lived among staff and district families. These are smaller, more focused initiatives centered on specific events (like the first day of school or Parent University) or a targeted audience and that are designed to boost the district's brand profile. Review the school calendar for special events that lend themselves to a campaign or craft a campaign designed to attract the attention of a specific target audience. Following are some ideas for micro-campaigns that could be developed to demonstrate the district's value proposition and promote its brand:

- Collect and post short profiles of current staff on the district website and social media. Highlight employee volunteer activities to show they are active community members.
- Film and share short videos of LBUSD employees talking about what it is like to teach and work in Long Beach.
- Capitalize on parents' positive perceptions of the district through themed, branded yard signs featuring brand hashtags for online engagement. Many LBUSD parents are very pleased with the education their children are receiving. Look for support from those parents outside of a bond election time frame. One Texas school district sells yard signs to raise money for their educational foundation. "Proud for Plaid" (school colors are plaid) goes beyond the typical sports team signs and says, "I support public education and am proud of my local schools."

Action Step 7.4

Build a solid outreach program to real estate agents.

School districts generally nurture strong relationships with real estate agents because that relationship is beneficial to both parties. Real estate agents are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community, and they play an important role in creating a positive "first impression" of the schools. Timely and useful marketing materials can be very helpful to real estate agents who frequently answer questions and provide LBUSD facts to potential new families. Because of LBUSD's size, it is particularly important that correct zoning and school choice information be shared with prospective homebuyers.

When it comes to selling a school district to prospective homebuyers, Realtors are subject to a major legal block known as the Fair Housing Act. This federal law protects people from discrimination because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability or familial status during housing-related activities such as buying or renting a home. It means Realtors can't tell parents one neighborhood has better schools than another or that one home is in a more desirable district. Some Realtors won't even tell homebuyers whether the home they're touring is in a neighborhood with lots of kids.

Realtors can, however, provide families with third-party tools that empower them to decide on their own whether a home and its schools are a good fit. This is where LBUSD can work to promote its value proposition for potential families. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year at a school. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Provide them with information packets, a checklist of information that is available on the district website and a link to a special district webpage set up just for prospective families – that third-party resource Realtors need!

Keep in mind, too, that many Realtors

today send families to online school rating websites to get information on local schools. One of the major sites Realtors sent parents to is GreatSchools.org, which is also found on many property search engines such as Realtor.com, Zillow.com and Trulia.com. GreatSchools.org profiles about 200,000 public and private schools serving preschool through grade 12 based on state test data and factors related to student progress and college readiness. Self-submitted, anonymous reviews of a school from parents, teachers, students and community members appear below rating details.

Communications staff should review LBUSD's rating on GreatSchools.org and also coach principals in how and why they should check to see what the site is telling potential families and employees about local schools. Building principals should be informed how to "claim" their school to add general information that will help demonstrate what makes their schools special. They might also consider encouraging parent-teacher association leaders to add school reviews.

Action Step 7.5

Add a marketing emphasis to the onboarding process for families new to LBUSD.

Through conversations with building principals and families, communication staff can review the experience new families go through to research, visit and enroll in LBUSD. This area is frequently overlooked as a marketing opportunity because school districts tend to repeat the same process year after year. With a year of unprecedented changes due to the pandemic, the 2021-22 school year might be a good time to enhance the process with a greater emphasis on brand marketing.

Many families first do their research online when moving to a new district, and the district website has a great deal of useful information on the schools, registration requirements, schedules, etc. These online resources can be augmented with offering virtual and in-person orientation meetings in appropriate languages

and providing opportunities for building relationships with LBUSD. A "Learn About Your Schools" program could also be packaged for new families at locations more comfortable for them such as community centers or churches. At these meetings, branded information packets can be offered (print or digital) and surveys can be conducted to evaluate brand perceptions while also determining the best ways to communicate with new families.

Action Step 7.6

Evaluate first impressions of LBUSD campuses and programs.

The old saying "You never get a second chance to create a first impression," applies to schools as well as individuals. Even residents who never step foot in a school form an opinion as they drive by just observing the basic upkeep of the property. Is the lawn mowed? Is the signage in good condition? Is the building in need of new trim or a little paint?

As part of a strategic marketing effort at the building level, encourage principals to assess the first impression that visitors get when calling or visiting a school. Consider the appearance of school offices and lobby areas that visitors see upon entering buildings as well as the welcome they receive from front-line staff. While employees are well-intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception based on how a phone is answered or whether they are welcomed when entering a school office.

Communications staff could offer to consult with principals on their assessments and help brainstorm possible solutions to first-impression issues that may be addressed through communications (e.g., better signage, staff training in customer service).

Action Step 7.7

| Create a LBUSD Alumni Program.

To strengthen the bridge between the community and the schools, LBUSD should consider capitalizing on its formal and informal alumni programs to sustain long-term connections with graduates and involve them in activities that build pride and support for the schools and district. Most of LBUSD's comprehensive high schools sponsor alumni activities, but a district-wide coordination could help identify successful graduates who may assist with marketing efforts. Unified, district-level access to members of high school alumni programs could allow the district to seek their assistance as volunteers and business partners in developing special programs for their schools and the Long Beach Education Foundation.

In some school systems, alumni programs are administered by district education foundations and members are involved in student leadership programs and fundraising to provide scholarships or extracurricular programs. Others are managed by community relations or community services departments. Making use of a graduate location and alumni database program could help both the school district as a whole and individual high schools.

Recommendation 8:

Create a network of key communicators.

A key communicator network is a formal program designed to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community—a useful communication tool. Although social media and communications technology such as email and text alert systems have made it convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of patrons and staff, it does not replace the value of face-to-face communication with a small group of influential community opinion leaders.

Auditors recommend that Long Beach Unified School District extend its outreach by developing a formal key communicator program that expands existing relationships and builds new ones with key stakeholders in the community and district. Key communicators are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents. They are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and they are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. These individuals can help extend the reach of the district’s key messages, add authenticity to those messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” for the district. They can also serve as a sounding board to test new ideas and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

A key communicator network could be managed by communications staff, if staff capacity allows, with logistical support from an administrative assistant.

Action Step 8.1

Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.

The individuals invited to participate in a key communicators network should be credible members of target audiences identified by

the district; people whom others go to for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building. Several community members who participated in the communications audit focus groups would be good key communicators, but the list should be expanded beyond that group.

To organize a key communicator program, ask each principal, central office administrator and school board member to recommend two or three people – parents or community members – who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community, and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, also ask those named individuals whom they consider to be opinion leaders in the community. Former board members, parent-teacher group leaders, small business owners and influential corporate partners can all contribute and should be included in a key communicator network. LBUSD’s list could also include pastors from local churches, civic organization leaders and City of Long Beach and Los Angeles County elected officials.

The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.

Action Step 8.2

Hold an orientation meeting(s) for key communicators.

During this meeting, the superintendent should discuss the vision for the district and the participants’ role as important conduits for information. Share an overview of the district’s goals and strategic plan as well as highlights from any pertinent studies and reports such as this Communication Audit Report. Consider scheduling two meetings a year with the key communicator group – one at the start of the school year to discuss upcoming plans and another at the end to review accomplishments. Depending on the number of leaders identified, it may be more effective to break them into smaller groups that meet at different times. This

can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.

At the orientation meeting:

- **Share a planned schedule for email updates to key communicators.** Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated consistently with current information. Updates can alert the group to breaking news, help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about major school district initiatives. Keep messages effective but brief. Key communicators should also receive any regular district publications.
- **Encourage key communicators to report to a particular person (e.g., designated communications staff member) any concerns they hear in the community,** especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about the school district or individual schools. Key communicators should be given a “hot line” number or email to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate and inform the key communicator network of the district’s response.
- **Conduct an annual evaluation of the program.** Survey participants at least annually to determine their satisfaction with the program, and through an internal evaluation process, ascertain whether the key communicator network is functioning effectively and meeting the district’s needs.

#8

Create a network of key communicators.

Action Step 8.3

Hold an appreciation event at the end of each school year.

Invite key communicators to a virtual celebration or an in-person breakfast or luncheon (post-pandemic), possibly at a new school or regional facility you want to showcase, to thank them for their support and involvement. Communication staff may coordinate the event, but it should be hosted by the superintendent and attended by Board of Education members to show support by top leadership.

Recommendation 9:

Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.

Engaging the public in conversations about their schools can help build a foundation of trust and strengthen stakeholders' connections to local education. In Long Beach Unified School District, participants in several focus groups as well as Board of Education members expressed a desire to find opportunities for informal discussion or interaction in addition to the public comment section of a school board meeting. An intentional effort to expand the outreach of district leaders should begin with expanding and enhancing Board of Education communications with the community.

Action Step 9.1

Create a Board of Education policy on communications.

In LBUSD, policies are already in place for community relations topics such as district and campus websites, advertising and business partnerships but there does not appear to be a policy specifically related to communications. An official policy for communications can help focus district leaders and staff members on the importance of effective, strategic communication. It can also demonstrate the Board of Education's commitment to transparency, responsiveness and engagement with stakeholders.

Board communication policies take many forms and can be tailored to the specific needs of the school community. A good policy should include a statement of purpose for communications followed by board expectations. It also should establish guidelines, set expectations for actions of the school board and staff, and outline what information stakeholders can expect from the district. In conjunction with a strategic communication and marketing plan ([Recommendation 1](#)), the policy helps ensure and protect the

district's commitment to ongoing, proactive communication.

The following is a sample of the beginning of a school board policy establishing communication as a priority, in alignment with the LBUSD mission:

The Long Beach Unified School District and the Board of Education believe that planned, two-way communication is the foundation of a strong relationship between the school district and the community. It is the responsibility of each board member and each district employee to actively build positive long-term relationships with community members to support the personal and intellectual success of every student every day.

Such a general statement could be followed by a list of specific expectations:

We will engage the community in the mission of our schools by:

1. *Providing accurate, timely information.*
2. *Requesting feedback on important issues.*
3. *Involving affected stakeholder groups in the problem-solving/decision-making process whenever possible.*
4. *Listening to the ideas and viewpoints of citizens.*
5. *Adhering to a practice of open, honest communication with our citizens and news media.*

Action Step 9.2

Provide prompt summaries of school board meetings.

Public meetings are the most recognizable role of the Board of Education, and decisions there impact many if not all staff and families in the school district. Therefore, it is important that access to information about school board meetings and subsequent actions be readily available to the community.

Focus group participants knew that board meetings were live streamed, and some

indicated they regularly watch them live. Beyond that, many commented they received information about board meetings from the *Long Beach Post* or waited for official minutes of the meeting to be posted.

Preparing a brief summary immediately after each regular meeting is an opportunity for the school district to be the first and best source of information about itself, to demonstrate transparency and to shape how what occurred is framed in conversations. The summary could be emailed to all staff the morning after the board meeting, posted on the Board of Education webpage for community stakeholders and emailed to local reporters to support accuracy in media coverage.

The document should be less formal and more “digestible” than official board minutes. Single paragraphs for each major agenda item can include hyperlinks to reports and other documents. A good tip is to have the school board meeting summary in draft form before the meeting. By preparing it in advance, the document can be updated with board actions and quickly posted online after the meeting. Also consider emailing the quick summary to key communicators, especially when action on “big items” such as the calendar, budget and school openings/closings are taken.

Visit <https://www.allenisd.org/Page/47> for an example of board meeting summaries from the Allen Independent School District in Texas.

Action Step 9.3

Make the Board of Education more accessible on the website.

LBUSD provides the standard information necessary for citizens to follow the Board of Education such as meeting schedules, agendas and minutes. It also provides online access to video broadcasts and recordings of meetings via YouTube and the district website. In addition to the website recommendations outlined in Action Step 6.1, consider taking these additional steps relevant to the Board of Education’s online presence:

#9

Expand and enhance Board of Education communications.

- Make the Board of Education page more prominent on the LBUSD website home page. It is tucked under a general “offices” tab currently.
- Share a brief biography of each board member on the Board of Education page.
- Post a summary of the most recent meeting (Action Step 9.2).
- Regularly update the Board of Education webpage with photos of board members performing their duties (e.g., at a meeting or event, visiting schools) or add a feature that displays images and headlines with links to recent district and school website stories featuring board members.

Action Step 9.4

Offer more opportunities for dialogue between the Board of Education and the public.

When the public and the school board gather together for conversations, it can build trust in elected officials and lead to long-term support for education initiatives. In-person community outreach may be limited during the ongoing pandemic, but following are several public engagement ideas that communication staff could help coordinate for the board:

- **Quarterly Community Meetings**—Offer a quarterly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversations about the school system with school board members and administrators. Have designated topics and

position them as opportunities to gather opinions and listen to public concerns about specific issues. Topics could include raising academic performance, student health and wellness issues, state legislation affecting schools, operational budgets, upcoming bond proposals, etc. If necessary, board members could pair up and rotate attendance so that a quorum is not called.

- **Adopt a school**—Have each school board member “adopt” one or more school campuses. This means they would pay closer attention to activities at that school and be seen there on a regular basis. The district size makes it impractical to adopt all school campuses each year, but rotating campuses annually can give board members a broader, firsthand experience with their district.
- **Write the Board**—Citizens wanting to contact the Board of Education may currently send emails to individual members. Some school boards have “Ask the Board” links on their websites to allow community members to write the board as a whole, which can be more inviting for citizens who do not know which board member to contact. The option does not eliminate the ability to write an individual; it just gives another communications avenue for the public.

- Provide factual school information as candidates begin campaigning.
- Build a positive relationship with candidates or citizens thinking about a future school board run.

A Board Academy is fairly easy to create and manage. Set aside a Saturday morning or weeknight for any citizens eligible and interested in running for the Board of Education. The academy can include brief presentations by the current school board president, superintendent, key cabinet members and the district elections officer. Binders with the presentations and all election information can be prepared in advance. Time should be allotted for questions and answers.

Action Step 9.5

Develop a School Board Academy for potential board candidates.

Regardless of who runs for the Board of Education each year, it is in the best interest of the school district to build relationships with potential candidates. A half-day Board Academy scheduled for the start of the election filing period can accomplish several goals for the district. A Board Academy can:

- Educate candidates about election laws and filing timelines as well as the time and work expectations.

Recommendation 10:

Include students in delivering the LBUSD message.

During the course of the focus groups, there were several positive mentions about the work of Long Beach students in promoting their schools and activities through video and social media. In one of the examples, it was shared that a student was creating her own Instagram news feed to update seniors on important dates and information. Several participants suggested that students be encouraged and supported in generating more content that could be part of district communication strategies. In the student focus group, it was mentioned that if encouraged, students could tag Long Beach Unified School District in their posts to help connect and extend the reach of district messages.

Student-generated content offers districts the opportunity to tell their stories through first-hand, personal accounts. In the corporate world, this type of “user-generated content” (UGC) has provided valuable marketing opportunities during the ongoing pandemic. In the world of K-12 education, student UGC offers a unique authenticity that, if reflective of district goals and messaging, serves as a valuable testimonial of the local education program.

Alternatively, some districts have found social media success through organized “student takeovers” of official social media accounts for a special (and widely promoted) day or week.

Ensuring that students’ work meets district standards for publishing, school board policies and all applicable laws may require an additional investment of staff time and resources, but it also presents an opportunity to expand the district’s storytelling capacity while building students’ professional storytelling skills and experiences. Such opportunities should fall under the supervision of the applicable teacher/advisor and communications staff, with appropriate guidelines to ensure that policies on privacy and permissions are met.

Action Step 10.1

Offer a student internship in the Public Information office.

Under the supervision of the public information director, enlist student interns to assist in developing stories about the district and schools. These would be unpaid positions that provide supervised, practical work experience under the guidance of a communications professional. Having direct, regular contact with a student to offer suggestions may also increase the pool of ideas for potential LBUSD stories.

The director could meet with appropriate classes at the high schools to create interest and explain expectations and benefits of an internship. Following are two example job descriptions for communication interns:

- **Internship General Information** (Hempfield School District, Landisville, Pennsylvania)—https://www.hempfieldsd.org/cms/lib/PA01000122/Centricity/Domain/300/HHS_Internship_Contract.pdf
- **Communication Intern Position** (Elkhart Community Schools, Indiana) - https://www.nspira.org/sites/default/files/files/job_communication-intern.pdf

Action Step 10.2

Create a student school news liaison at each high school.

Encourage more content creation by establishing a network of students at each school site who are personally invited to submit school news ideas and items to the Public Information office for consideration. They also could be provided with a list of upcoming events/projects in the district that the department can’t cover but students could if their schedules permit.

Students should be given general guidance to follow and something to acknowledge that they understand their stories will need to be reviewed, edited and approved by the

department before publication. Accepted and approved content could be shared online or in print, with the students credited for their work.

The students selected as liaisons should have a strong interest in writing, social media, photography and/or video production. Work closely with principals and English Department chairs to identify potential liaisons.

#10

Include students in delivering the LBUSD message.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures

In 2011, the National School Public Relations Association embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that our members can use to assess their programs. The work was organized into critical function areas, and to date, rubrics have been completed for the following:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Branding/Marketing Communications
- Crisis Communications
- Bond/Finance Communications

While it is difficult to quantify the value of public relations and there is no agreement on the best tools and methods, in the spirit of traditional benchmarking practice, NSPRA sought to identify top performers in each critical function area based on results and gathered research in each area to develop the rubrics and suggested measures.

The following reflect the auditors' assessment of where the Long Beach Unified School District falls within the rubrics. The purpose of the communication audit was to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level. The recommendations throughout this report are designed to support the district in moving from "emerging" or "established" to "exemplary," as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the complete *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* for improving school communication is available as an electronic download on the NSPRA website (www.nspira.org/store/school-communication-benchmarking).

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Emerging

At this point in time, Long Beach Unified School District's overall communication effort falls in the Emerging category. As this audit report identifies, LBUSD needs both a strategic communication plan and a marketing plan that aligns with the district's strategic goals and objectives ([Recommendations 1, 7](#)). This is a critical priority for LBUSD to undertake in the next 12 months because these plans should drive the work of the Public Information office and Marketing and Media Services. One of the key findings of this report is that LBUSD recognizes the importance of the communications function. It is recommended that the district identify a leader of communications and community relations, who is included as part of the executive level team, and that individual's advice and insight is sought on major issues.

A few of the additional areas that could move LBUSD's communication program from Emerging into the Established rubric include:

- Incorporating a series of approaches to embed communications across district and building operations, for example using prepared memo templates, talking points for department heads and principals to use in sharing information on important issues.
- Designating and training district and school leaders as media spokespersons on specific issues.
- Using social media channels and video more strategically and regularly to engage audiences.

- Using a series of approaches to regularly evaluate communication program effectiveness, such as attendance and participation rates at programs and events, surveys and other polls to determine satisfaction and effectiveness of district communication efforts.

Internal Communications – Emerging

Based on observations and interviews, the LBUSD internal communications program falls into the Emerging category. Several strategies for improvement have been identified in this audit report ([Recommendations 4, 5](#)) to help it move toward being Established and eventually Exemplary. In addition to these recommendations and action steps, LBUSD should:

- Communicate key messages internally first. Internal buy-in on the district’s key messages is critical for success with the public. Examples given by employees where this was not accomplished included the roll out of Canvas in August 2020 and the asynchronous attendance communications in January 2021. Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Communicate with staff before important messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media.
- Use multiple vehicles to communicate and make it clear to employees how information will be disseminated. For example, text message in emergencies, email from department for important items and e-newsletters for basic and ongoing information.
- Increase opportunities for face-to-face meetings (in person or virtual) that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. These could be led by the superintendent or executive staff in their respective areas.

- Share key messages with advisory committees, employee groups, and teacher/support staff association leaders.

Parent/Family Communications – Emerging/Established

At this time, LBUSD’s parent and family communications program falls between Emerging and Established on the rubrics. One of the strengths of LBUSD’s program is that the district reaches out to its parents and families in multiple ways, including Canvas, numerous teach to home apps, Parent University and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This audit report contains several recommendations and action steps for further strengthening parent and family communications ([Recommendation 3, 6, 10](#)). In addition, LBUSD might also consider taking the following steps to move it squarely into the Established category:

- Offer at least annual professional development opportunities for principals and teachers on effective parent/family communication strategies.
- Cultivate an inviting environment at every school that fosters parent/family engagement in their student’s education, including programs to increase parent/family understanding and skills in how to support their children, resources on curriculum, instructional strategies and student expectations, and consistent use by teachers on Canvas to help parents/families understand their student’s homework and classroom assignments.
- Monitor and track parent/family complaints and concerns about communication effectiveness, then offer solutions to address those complaints and concerns.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging

The ongoing efforts of LBUSD to enhance its marketing services are helping to move the Emerging program toward becoming Established. This audit contains recommendations and action steps related to creating a comprehensive, strategic communications and marketing plan to raise LBUSD's profile and reinforce its brand ([Recommendations 1, 6](#)). Following are other opportunities to move it into the Established rubric:

- Determining the purpose and targeted audience of any marketing plan for LBUSD.
- Providing guidance documents and training for key school and central office personnel, especially administrative assistants, to ensure consistency in meeting brand standards.
- Plan to update district visual image through logo, communications and website.
- Determining what the LBUSD value proposition is and then package and brand it.
- Use storytelling (via video, social media, print and interpersonal) to help target audiences emotionally connect with LBUSD brand.

Crisis Communications – Emerging/Established

LBUSD has a comprehensive crisis management plan in place (EOC – MMA) that includes the Public Information office in a key communications role. Auditors' analysis of current communication functions suggests that a more detailed breakdown of the roles of each communication staff member in various crises also is needed ([Recommendation 1](#)). This would be an internal document that details what each staff member would do in the event of a campus or district crisis. Review the plan annually, particularly if staff roles and departmental organization changes.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Exemplary

LBUSD's most recent experience with bond/finance elections suggest it is Exemplary in this critical function area. The district benefits from the addition of a communications coordinator position in 2019 to provide support for bond/finance communications. Effective communication practices such as a dedicated sub-site <https://lbschoolbonds.net/>, and e-newsletter (*Building on Success*) should be modeled with future bond proposals but also with how the district shares its operational budget. Keeping voters apprised of the school district's financial plans and taxpayers' return on their investment in local schools demonstrates transparency to the public and builds trust in leadership decisions.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you consider to be Long Beach USD's greatest strengths compared to other school systems in the area?
2. When it comes to communication, what does the district do well? In what ways can communication be improved?
3. What is your best source of news and information about Long Beach USD and the schools? Is the information you need easy to find or access?
4. What is the best way for the school district to deliver important information to you?
 - (PARENTS ONLY) Is the parent portal (if available) helpful and user friendly?
 - Do you read the [district publications]?
 - Is the information provided helpful and informative?
 - Is there additional information you would like to receive?
 - What is your overall impression of the school district website?
 - Are you able to find information you need for work (as a parent)?
 - How often do you access the district or campus website?
 - Are you able to conduct school research/gather data from the website?
 - Are the district's social media accounts helpful sources of information for you? (Facebook – Twitter – Instagram)
 - Which do you use most often?
 - Do you use the district's mobile app?
 - Are you familiar with district video and broadcasting projects?
5. Do you have access to programming through cable or YouTube?
 - Have you watched a school board meeting streamed on district website?
5. Do you feel that district leaders provide opportunities and truly listen to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
 - What kinds of engagement opportunities would interest you?
6. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system in the future?
7. Do you have any final comments or suggestions that could be used in this communications audit?

Questions: Staff

1. As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
2. What additional information would you like to receive that you don't get now?
3. Are current communication vehicles [name employee pubs] effective in delivering information?
4. How can district leaders be more proactive in communicating with you?
5. What is the message that LBUSD wants people to come away with – is there one "thing" that LBUSD is known for?
6. What is your overall impression of the school district website?

- How accessible is employee information online?
- Are you able to conduct school research/gather data from the website?
- Does the website improve / build upon the image of LBUSD?

Additional Questions: Staff—Administrators

1. As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job?
2. What are your greatest communication challenges in your role?
3. How can the communications staff better assist you with your school/department communications?

Questions: School Board

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
2. How would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
3. Regarding communications, what does LBUSD do well? / How can communications be improved?
4. What do you see as the role of the Board in communications?
5. What communication tools that LBUSD uses are most effective in your opinion?
6. Do you feel that the opportunities now provided for people to have input and express their views on important decisions are being accessed?
7. What is the greatest communication challenge facing LBUSD in the future?

Questions: Students

1. What do you like most about your school?
2. What has been the best part of your high school experience so far/ What could be improved?
3. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?
4. How do you learn about what's going on at school and around the district?

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 advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts. The vast majority of NSPRA members are school communication professionals working in public school districts. Members also work in educational service agencies, education associations or state departments of education.

With over 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual NSPRA National Seminar, maintain best practice resource files and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

The [NSPRA National Seminar](#), the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each

July. This four-day conference offers expert speakers on dozens of topics in the areas of school communication, PR, marketing and engagement.

NSPRA members can continue their professional development year round through a variety of electronic and print publications:

- The *NSPRA Network* e-newsletter tackles major education communication issues and offers proven strategies to address them.
- Our e-updates, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor* and *NSPRA Alert*, offer summaries of breaking national education news, in-depth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products and services available.
- *PRincipal Communicator* is a monthly building-level print newsletter that provides practical communication tips for school principals to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.
- *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

At www.nspira.org, NSPRA offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public website and more in-depth information, resources and archives in a Members Only section.

The members-only benefit [NSPRA Connect](#) is an online community forum that allows members to connect with and learn from one another while sharing ideas, uploading resources and providing counsel through a robust discussion forum.

[NSPRA has 33 chapters](#) across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for

members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

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 launch the rededication of America's commitment to education and a democratic, free society.

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

Join NSPRA

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

Auditors' Vitae

Timothy Carroll, APR Consultant auditor

Timothy Carroll, APR, is currently a public relations instructor at Texas A&M University in Commerce, Texas. He recently retired after 26 years as the chief information officer and director of public information for the Allen Independent School District in Allen, Texas. He previously served for 14 years in a similar position with the Penn-Harris-Madison Schools near South Bend, Indiana and one year with the School Town of Munster in Indiana, for a total of 41 years in school communications. In addition to his school PR responsibilities, he also served as the Allen ISD stadium marketing director and community services director overseeing community education, afterschool and preschool programs.

Carroll has been an active member of the National School Public Relations Association since 1981, receiving NSPRA's prestigious Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award in 2011 for service to the profession. He has written numerous articles for NSPRA and contributed chapters to *The School and Community Relations* textbook. He is also past-president of the 500-member Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) and received that association's Professional Achievement Award in 2006 and the President's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020. He is the former executive director and past-president of the Indiana School Public Relations Association (InSPRA) and received a Ball State University Department of Journalism Special Citation for service to Indiana public schools in 1993.

He received his Accreditation in School Public Relations (APR) in 1985, a master's degree in educational public relations from Glassboro State College in New Jersey in 1979 and a journalism education degree from Murray State University in Kentucky in 1978.

Elise F. Shelton Lead consultant auditor

Elise F. Shelton recently retired as the chief communications officer for the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System in Tennessee, a public school district of 36,000 students, after working in school public relations for 25 years.

Shelton was the Southeast Region Vice President on the NSPRA Executive Board from 2012-2015. She was an active member, officer and past president of the Tennessee Association of School Communicators. She also has served on the Executive Board and as president of the International Association of Business Communicators – Nashville, Tennessee chapter.

She has been a frequent presenter at NSPRA National Seminars, the National School Boards Association, state school boards association conferences, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and at various state and regional school public relations conferences. As a member of the National Information Officers Association, she received ongoing professional development focused on best practices in crisis communications.

Shelton has written articles for NSPRA's nationally circulated member e-newsletter *The NSPRA Network*, including articles on how schools can navigate around political landmines in highly charged environments (December 2018) and on student suicides and the need for social and emotional learning (March 2020). She has served as a communications auditor for NSPRA since 2017.

Prior to her career in school public relations, she worked in healthcare communications; magazine publishing; and print journalism, at the *Nashville Banner* and newspapers in Tennessee and Kentucky. She holds degrees in history and journalism from Western Kentucky University, and is a certified consultant in crisis prevention and management by the Institute for Crisis Management.



Communication Audit Report

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National School Public Relations Association

15948 Derwood Road | Rockville, MD 20855 | P: 301-519-0496 | F: 301-519-0494 | www.nspra.org |  NSPRAssociation |  nspra