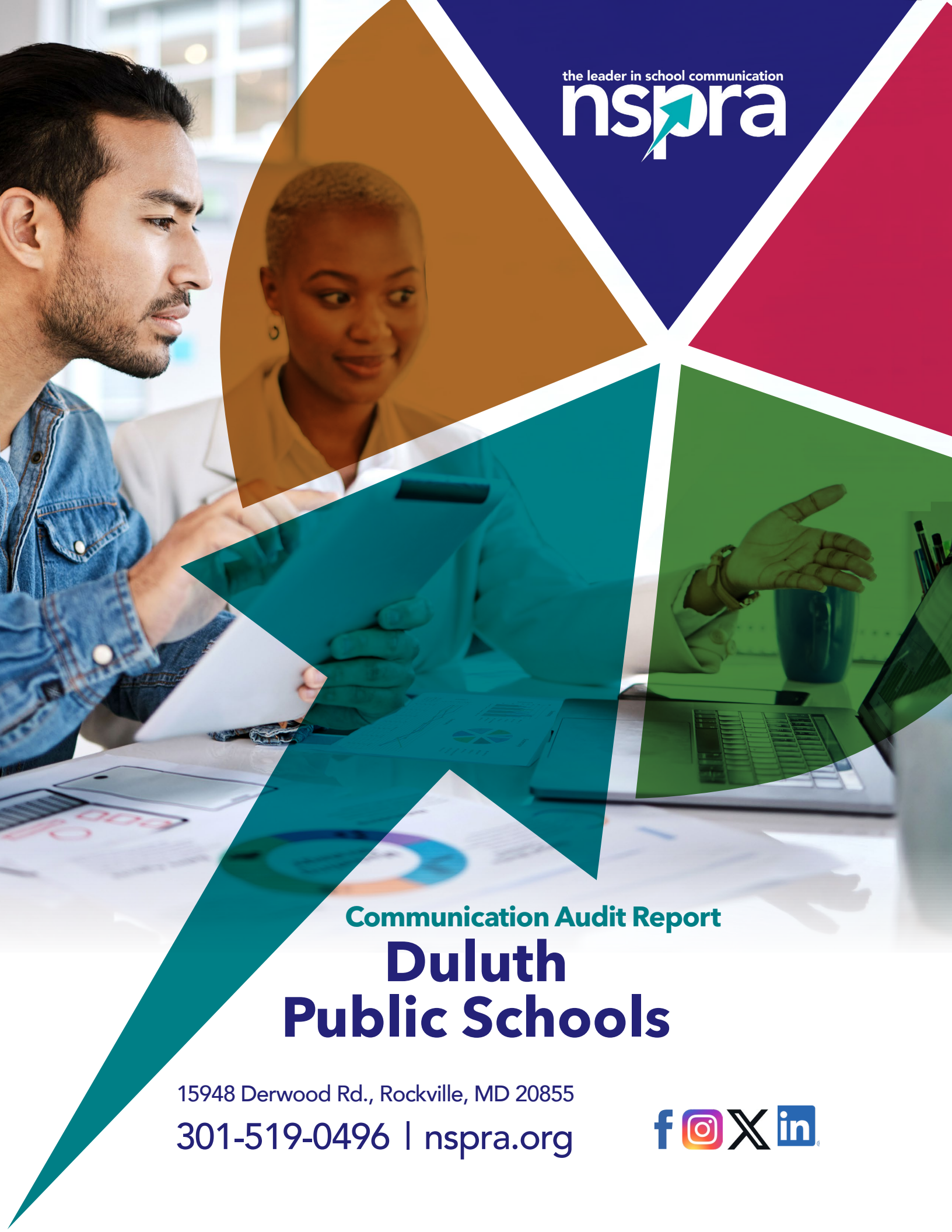


the leader in school communication



Communication Audit Report
**Duluth
Public Schools**

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surveys



materials



focus groups



interviews



results

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Key Findings	14
SWOT Analysis	52
Benchmarking of Results	54
Recommendations.....	58
1. Align communication staffing and capacity with district expectations and stakeholder needs.....	60
2. Develop and implement a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.....	65
3. Strengthen internal communication systems to improve information flow and staff readiness.....	75
4. Increase transparency around decision-making processes and the role of stakeholder input to build trust in district leadership.	83
5. Shift district communication toward more targeted, substantive and audience-centered content.....	89
6. Streamline and clarify the district’s communication ecosystem to reduce overload and improve access.....	94
Appendix.....	99

Executive Summary

About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Duluth Public Schools (ISD 709) has contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for an in-depth, independent review of the system's overall communication program. The NSPRA Communication Audit process helps to identify the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in a school communication program through a process that includes:

- A review of print and digital communication materials, tools and tactics;
- Quantitative research through the surveying of district staff (instructional, support, administrative, etc.), parents/caregivers and community members; and
- Qualitative research through focus groups with these same audiences and through interviews with staff who perform formal communication functions for the district.

Details of this process can be found in the [Introduction](#) of this report.

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

- The [Key Findings](#) section provides details about what was learned through the review of materials and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.
- A [SWOT Analysis](#) distills these findings into the district's primary internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats related to its communication goals.

- The [Benchmarking of Results](#) section reflects how the district's communication program compares to other districts on nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey questions and national standards of excellence in school public relations, as outlined in NSPRA's [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#).
- The [Recommendations](#) section details suggested strategies and tactics for addressing identified communication gaps and for enhancing effective strategies already in place.

Report Synopsis

Following is an overview of this report. As with all school systems, ISD 709 has areas where it excels and areas where improvements can be made. For a full understanding of what was learned, the rationale behind the resulting recommendations and what will be required to implement those steps, it is recommended that the report be read in its entirety.

Key Strengths of the Current Communication Program

- District communications are generally recognizable, understandable and trusted by parents and employees, providing a solid foundation for more strategic and transparent engagement.
- Crisis communications have improved in recent years, supported by clearer protocols, templates and timely outreach that most staff view as helpful during serious incidents.
- ParentSquare is widely adopted and valued by families and staff, providing a consistent, push-based channel that aligns with stakeholder preferences for email-based communication.

- The Communications Office has taken steps to strengthen consistency and structure through common platforms, branding and templates, establishing a baseline that can support greater districtwide coordination.

Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- The Communications Office is staffed by a single person, significantly limiting capacity for strategic, proactive communications.
- High-stakes topics such as funding, staffing, curriculum and long-term plans are communicated infrequently, inconsistently or without sufficient context to internal and external stakeholders, leaving audiences feeling underinformed and eroding trust.
- Stakeholders experience communication overload and fragmentation, driven by overlapping channels, inconsistent practices across schools and departments, and unclear expectations about which platforms should be used for which purposes.
- Roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority are widely perceived as unclear across staff, resulting in inconsistent messaging, delayed information and frontline staff feeling that they are asked to communicate decisions without full context.
- District and school websites are not functioning as reliable, up-to-date information hubs, due to uneven maintenance, unclear governance and limited use for timely communication.
- The district lacks a consistent, effective way to communicate with non-parent community members, leaving many

residents reliant on external sources rather than district-owned channels for information.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the research, the auditor recommends the following strategies and their related action steps for enhancing ISD 709's communication program.

1. Align communication staffing and capacity with district expectations and stakeholder needs.
2. Develop and implement a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.
3. Strengthen internal communication systems to improve information flow and staff readiness.
4. Increase transparency around decision-making processes and the role of stakeholder input to build trust in district leadership.
5. Shift district communication toward more targeted, substantive and audience-centered content.
6. Streamline and clarify the district's communication ecosystem to reduce overload and improve access.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in ISD 709, not just the Communications Office.

It is generally not feasible to address more than two to three recommendations each year.

But while some report recommendations may require major investments of time, this report also offers opportunities to rethink existing practices or to make quick improvements without a significant investment of resources.

Introduction

The Environmental Setting for Communications

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

About the District

Duluth Public Schools (ISD 709) is a PK-12 public school district serving approximately 8,700 students in the Duluth, Minnesota, metropolitan area. Classified as a small city district, it operates 13 schools, including nine neighborhood elementary schools serving grades K-5 or PK-5, two middle schools serving grades 6-8 and two comprehensive high schools serving grades 9-12.

ISD 709 employs nearly 1,800 staff members and is governed by a seven-member school board. Board members serve staggered four-year terms, with four elected from geographic precincts and three elected at large. The district's estimated budget for the 2025-26 school year is approximately \$185 million.

The district operates through a layered leadership structure that includes a Cabinet—composed of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, directors and the communications officer—as well as other cross-functional leadership teams, principal groups, department meetings and standing operational committees. Issues are discussed and decisions are shaped across multiple venues, reflecting a district of growing complexity and scope. In the past year, the district has also experienced notable leadership turnover at the Cabinet and director level, resulting in several key administrators who are new to their roles or new to the district.

According to the most recent data from the [Minnesota Report Card](#), student enrollment is approximately 77% white, 9% American Indian, 4% Black or African American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian and 6% two or more races. Fewer than 1% of students are identified as English language learners. Nearly one quarter receive special education services, and about 39% qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The district's four-year graduation rate is 79%.

The district offers a range of specialty programs designed to meet diverse student needs. These include an alternative secondary program through its Area Learning Center, a state-accredited virtual program (Academic Excellence Online High School), Spanish and Misaabekong Ojibwe language immersion, high school Career Pathways programs, extensive early childhood programming including Duluth Preschool and Head Start and a variety of special education programs offered at co-located and standalone sites. ISD 709 also partners with numerous community organizations, such as the Duluth Public Library, to expand opportunities for students and families.

In contrast to many Minnesota districts, ISD 709 has experienced modest but meaningful enrollment growth in recent years. Based on figures cited by the superintendent during a September 2025 School Board meeting, year-to-year enrollment increased by approximately 2% from the prior school year, exceeding projections. This growth has begun to shape planning discussions related to facilities, classroom capacity and program placement, occurring in the context of a divisive and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to revisit school boundaries in 2020.

Like many U.S. cities, the city of Duluth experienced early-20th-century racial segregation and redlining practices that restricted investment in west-side neighborhoods. Those historic practices in the

city have been widely cited as contributing to present-day disparities in housing stability, income, health indicators and student academic performance between the western and eastern parts of the city. A 2022 Minnesota Public Radio report described a “geographical and generational divide” separating Duluth’s more working-class, racially diverse west side from its whiter, more affluent east end.

These geographic disparities appear to be reflected in some school demographics and outcomes. According to state data, East Duluth High School’s student body is 88% white and its graduation rate is 95%. At Denfeld High School on the city’s west side, students are 63% white and the graduation rate is nearly 20 percentage points lower. Under Minnesota’s federal accountability system, the district and certain schools have been identified as in need of improvement due to persistent achievement gaps and performance indicators related to graduation rates and student subgroup outcomes, but district initiatives aimed at closing these gaps have produced measurable gains among historically underserved student groups in recent years.

In the mid-2000s, the district launched the “Red Plan,” a long-range facilities initiative intended to modernize aging buildings and consolidate schools in response to declining enrollment. While supporters framed the plan as an effort to right-size and update facilities, it generated sustained controversy regarding cost, neighborhood impact and the absence of direct voter approval. The fiscal implications of the Red Plan remain defining features of the district’s financial landscape and continue to influence community perceptions, especially regarding the east-west divide and ISD 709’s long-term financial stewardship.

In 2023, voters considered two referendum questions: one to refinance existing debt to support academic and mental health staffing, which passed, and one to increase property taxes to fund technology infrastructure and

equipment, which failed—reflecting both community support for direct student services and ongoing caution regarding new financial commitments.

Following the expiration of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, the district has faced structural budget deficits and approved approximately \$5 million in reductions for the 2025-26 school year, including staffing reductions of about 48 full-time equivalent positions, although numerous special education positions were subsequently restored due to increases in students needing services. At the time of this audit report, district leaders anticipated the need for an additional \$4 million in reductions for the upcoming school year.

The district’s logo (pictured below) includes the phrase “Every Student. Every Day.” Its mission states that “Every student, every day will be empowered with learning opportunities for growth, creativity and curiosity, in preparation for their future in a global community.” The district’s vision describes “an academically engaging, safe and inclusive environment with high expectations and responsible use of resources.” Core values emphasize learning, excellence, equity, collaboration and belonging.

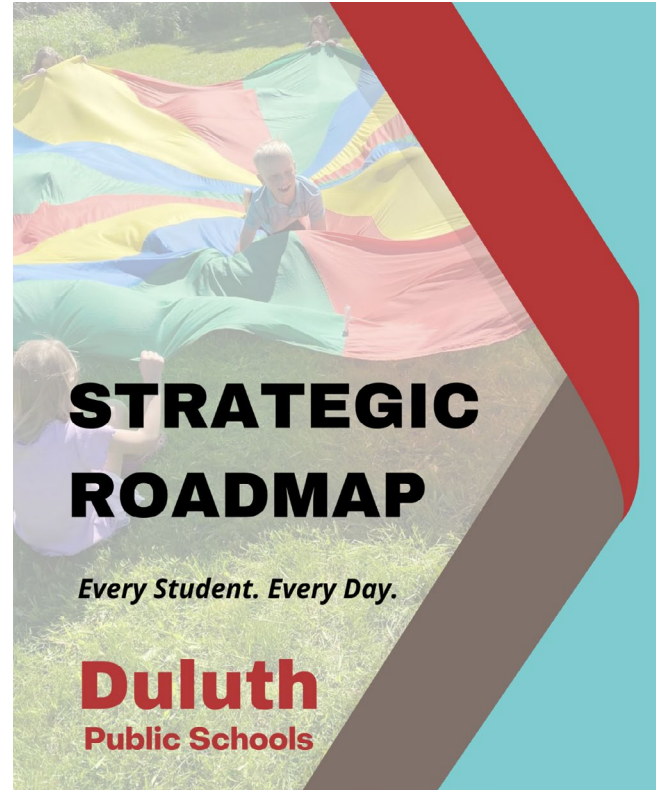


In 2023, ISD 709 adopted a three-year [strategic operational plan](#) outlining its strategic directions and desired daily experiences for students, families and staff. Together, these guiding documents establish expectations for district operations and provide important context for how communication is intended to support transparency, engagement and trust across the school community.

About the Communications Office

Duluth Public Schools' communications function is led by Communications Officer Adelle Wellens, who has served in the role since January 2022 and reports directly to the superintendent. Prior to joining the district, she spent more than a decade working in journalism, including as a reporter covering local government and school districts and later as an award-winning education reporter focused on ISD 709. This background informs her role as the district's primary communications strategist, media liaison and crisis communications lead. Adelle is also an active member of NSPRA and will soon be president-elect of MinnSPRA, the Minnesota state chapter of NSPRA.

According to the official job description, the Communications Officer is responsible for leading all districtwide communications and marketing efforts and serving as a strategic advisor to district leadership. Core responsibilities include planning and directing public information programs; coordinating internal and external



STRATEGIC PLANNING

Duluth Public Schools worked on a comprehensive strategic planning process from April 2022 through May 2023. The overall process and strategic plan were created with input from Duluth Public Schools students, staff, families and community members focused on future system-wide enhancements to improve outcomes for students. The planning has resulted in a 3-year operational plan, a progress monitoring schedule and a 3-year school board plan. In this document you will find our mission, vision, core values, desired daily experiences and strategic directions.

OUR MISSION

Every student, every day will be empowered with learning opportunities for growth, creativity and curiosity, in preparation for their future in a global community.

OUR VISION

Duluth Public Schools provides an academically engaging, safe and inclusive environment with high expectations and responsible use of resources.

OUR CORE VALUES

Learning  Developing a love of learning through life-long inquiry.	Excellence  Having high standards for all through accountability, integrity and authenticity.	Equity  Creating conditions of justice, fairness and inclusion so all students have access to the opportunities to learn and develop to their fullest potential.	Collaboration  Working in partnership with staff, families, students and community.	Belonging  Providing a welcoming and accessible environment where everyone feels safe, seen and heard.
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DESIRED DAILY EXPERIENCES

STUDENTS

I am accepted, cared for, and respected regardless of the color of my skin, how I identify or my beliefs.

- I have multiple options for courses including "real life" classes and extracurricular activities.
- Staff and teachers keep me safe, believe I can succeed, hear my voice, and support me.

I enjoy school, have fun, and feel like I belong.

- I feel connected to my classmates and the staff.
- My school meals have a variety of options and I am given enough time to eat and socialize.
- I have access to physical and mental health support at school.
- I know what is expected from me and know that I am treated fairly if I make a mistake.
- Important information is shared and is accessible to me.



communications; serving as the district's primary media contact; overseeing district websites, social media platforms and digital communication tools; managing crisis and emergency communications; supporting principals and department leaders with communications guidance; and overseeing

public information campaigns and special events intended to strengthen community trust and support enrollment. The role also includes responsibility for public information requests and assisting with data requests.

The Communications Office functions as a one-person department. While the Communications Officer's job description mentions supervision of additional communications staff, no dedicated communications specialist position currently exists. As a result, the Communications Officer independently manages day-to-day operational communications alongside strategic planning, media relations, digital platform management and crisis response.

The Communications Officer serves as a member of the Superintendent's Cabinet and is considered part of the district's leadership team. She participates in regular Cabinet meetings and certain other high-level leadership discussions, advising on communication strategy, messaging and public relations implications of district decisions. Her inclusion at this level reflects the district's recognition of communication as a strategic function.

Some cabinet members routinely involve her at the outset of planning conversations to incorporate communication considerations early. In other cases, she is brought in later or after decisions have taken shape, particularly when communication or community-relations implications are not initially identified. As a result, some opportunities to proactively frame information, anticipate stakeholder questions or align messaging across departments are limited.

ISD 709 also employs a Family and Community Engagement Specialist, who reports to the Department of Advancing Equity. The position is designed to strengthen connections between schools and families who have been historically disconnected or underserved. While not formally part of the communications function, the role leads

several family-focused engagement initiatives, including Parent/Guardian Academy 101, which helps families better understand their children's education, and the annual districtwide back-to-school event, executed in collaboration with the communications officer.

ISD 709 has made recent investments in tools designed to strengthen marketing, enrollment and community engagement efforts. During the 2024-25 school year, the communications officer used SchoolMint, a student enrollment and marketing platform, to implement a targeted enrollment campaign. District leaders report that the campaign contributed to significant growth at one elementary school that had previously been among the district's smallest. A similar targeted effort is planned for the upcoming year.

In January 2026, the district also contracted with ThoughtExchange, an online engagement platform that enables stakeholders to share open-ended feedback and rate the ideas of others in a structured, transparent format. The district has already completed its first exchange, signaling an interest in expanding two-way engagement and broadening opportunities for community voice.

Although the district does not currently have a formal strategic communication plan or crisis communication plan, the Communications Officer grounds her work in the broader direction set by the district's strategic plan. She intentionally integrates the priority of advancing equity into communication practices and decision making, with support from the Superintendent and School Board.

This audit was commissioned in part to provide a research foundation for developing comprehensive strategic and crisis communication plans, reflecting leadership's recognition of the need for a more systematic and coordinated approach to communication.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Process

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

- An important foundation for developing and implementing an effective strategic communication plan.
- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

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

Based on the research findings, the auditor identifies common themes and makes general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the communication program. The auditor then uses this information to develop [Recommendations](#) designed to help the district address communication challenges and enhance areas of strength. Each of these customized recommendations is accompanied by practical, realistic action steps grounded in today's public relations and communications best practices, as reflected within NSPRA's 2023 edition of the [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking publication.

It is important to note that the primary goal of any communication program is to help the

district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, the auditor developed each recommendation in light of ISD 709's [mission, vision and core values](#). The result is a report that will provide ISD 709 with a launching point for improving and enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

Research Components

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

Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the Communications Officer submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., newsletters, strategic roadmap, crisis communication templates, referendum materials, press releases, branding elements). The auditor conducted a rigorous review of these materials as well as of the district and school websites and social media pages.

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

SCOPE Survey

NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communications Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey™ to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey was conducted for ISD 709 from November 17 - December 12, 2025. It included questions regarding the following:

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

- How informed they are in key areas such as leader decisions, district plans and district finances.
- Perceptions about what opportunities exist to seek information, provide input and become involved.
- To what degree stakeholders perceive communications to be understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

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

A separate, similar survey was conducted with high school students during the same time period, focusing on their perceptions of their school and district as well as their communication preferences and level of knowledge about topics related to their school experience.

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

Parent Survey:

- 315 surveys completed
- ± 5.4 percent margin of error

Faculty/Staff Survey:

- 182 surveys completed
- ± 6.9 percent margin of error

Community survey:

- 27 surveys completed
- ± 18.9 percent margin of error

High school student survey:

- 108 surveys completed
- ± 9.2 percent margin of error

Due to lower than desired survey participation among community members, no significant

recommendations are included in this report based solely on community survey responses.

This same survey has been administered to more than 150 school districts across the United States, and the [Benchmarking of Results](#) section includes the [SCOPE Scorecard](#), which compares ISD 709's SCOPE Survey results with the results of other districts who have conducted the survey.

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

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit process is the focus groups component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the Superintendent of Schools, the Communications Officer and the Family and Community Engagement Specialist on December 8-10, 2025.

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

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

- Assistant principals
- Business and community partners (two groups)
- Clerical staff
- Directors
- Families

- Managers and program leaders
- Paraprofessionals
- Principals
- Teachers

The development and maintenance of an effective communication program should include opinion research through methods such as surveys, focus groups and interviews. Although comments are anecdotal, this type of research can be valuable for measuring progress and assessing the effectiveness of communications. NSPRA's research process aims to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives, providing a comprehensive view. While these public sentiments are often based on a smaller sample of the school community, the opinions shared remain valuable.

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

Your NSPRA Research Team

The research team who delivered these communication audit services included the following:

- Auditor and NSPRA Communications Research Specialist
Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP
- NSPRA Communication Research Manager
Alyssa Teribury
- NSPRA Associate Director
Mellissa Braham, APR, CAE

The team's vitae are included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Duluth School Board, Superintendent John Magas and Communications Officer Adelle Wellens, to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders through effective communications. It is intended to build on the positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Communications Office by suggesting options for strengthening the overall communication program.

Adhering to public relations standards is crucial for effective school communication strategies. Thus, an effective strategy in one school system may be applicable in another. **As a trusted leader in school communication, NSPRA advocates for established industry best practices in school public relations.** While our communication audit findings are unique to each school system and our recommendations are tailored to those findings, industry best practices are applicable to and may be recommended across multiple school systems. With that in mind, the recommendations included in this report are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking ISD 709's communication program to the next level.

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

- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.
- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement

is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that ISD 709 would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the district and its communication practices through the perceptions of others.

- **Perceptions are just that.** Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by stakeholders and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.
- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditor's analysis,** and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

Next Steps

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Implementation of the recommendations should be approached strategically, using this report as a road map and taking the following into consideration:

Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.
- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority,** but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- **Recommendations may go beyond the purview of the Communications Office.** NSPRA views communication as a function

that occurs across every level of a school district. While some recommendations may apply only to the Communications Office, others may apply to additional departments or all staff.

- **Look for opportunities for immediate improvement and to rethink existing practices.** Action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the school or the Communications Office and still pay quick dividends are noted as "quick wins" with the symbol shown to the right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to "rethink" a task or process



that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders' feedback and the auditor's analysis. These are noted with the symbol shown to the left.

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

Sharing the Report

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. NSPRA recommends that ISD 709 share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward because closing the communication loop builds trust and credibility.

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

Key Findings

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

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

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

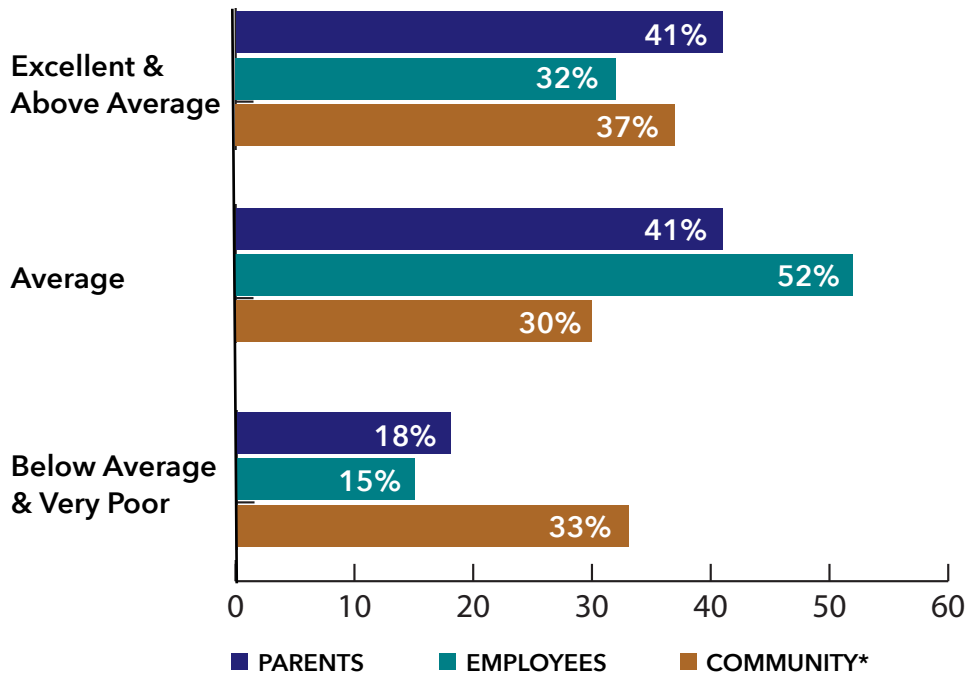
Also, at first glance, some findings may appear to conflict, when they actually reflect different dimensions of the same topic. For example, understanding information (e.g., “I know what you mean”) is not the same as satisfaction with the information (e.g., “I’m happy about what you said”) or knowing where to find the information (e.g., “I don’t know whom to ask”). When reviewing the data, consider what aspect of the communications experience is being measured.

District Image/Brand

- In the SCOPE Survey, when participants were asked to rate their overall perception of ISD 709, 41% of parents, 32% of employees and 37% of community members rated the district as excellent or above average, as shown in the chart at right.

When the survey results are translated to a five-point scale to compare them with the results of districts nationwide that have participated in the survey, local perceptions are a bit below national averages.

Overall Rating on Perception of the District



Stakeholder Group	ISD 709	National Average	National High	National Low
Parents	3.3	3.8	4.7	2.6
Employees	3.2	3.7	4.5	2.3
Community*	3.0	3.4	4.5	2.1

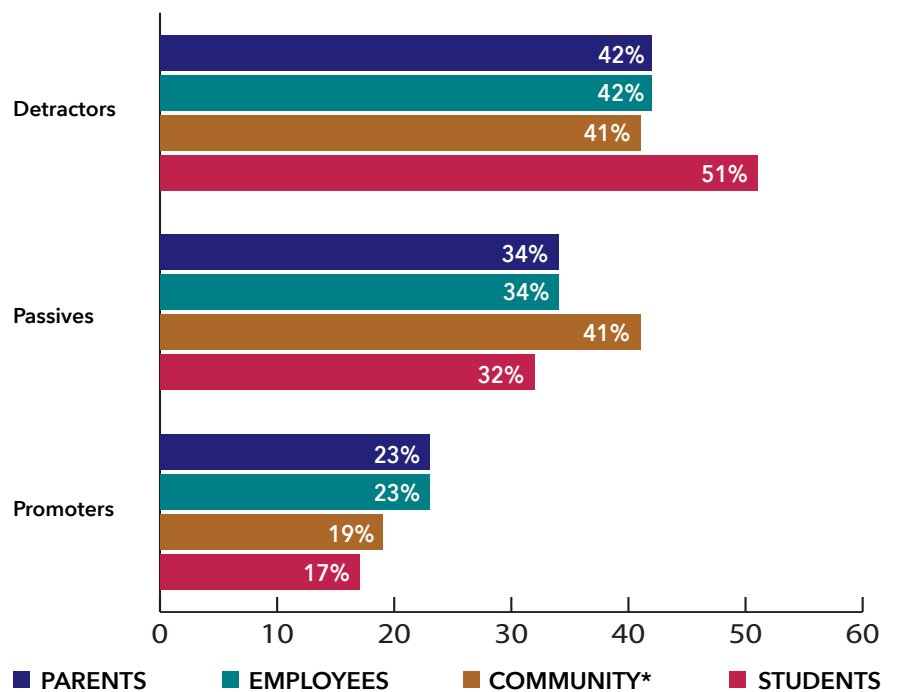
* Due to lower than desired [survey participation](#) among community members, no significant recommendations are included in this report based solely on community survey responses.

- Asked to rate their overall perception of their schools, 37% of high school students rated their schools as excellent or above average, while about a third (30%) rated them below average or very poor.
- The SCOPE Survey asked respondents how likely they are to recommend the district to a friend, a question used to calculate the Net Promoter Score (NPS). NPS is a widely used measure of overall satisfaction and loyalty, and it categorizes respondents as promoters (those likely to recommend the district), passives (those who are generally satisfied but not likely to recommend) and detractors (those who are unlikely to recommend and may share negative feedback).

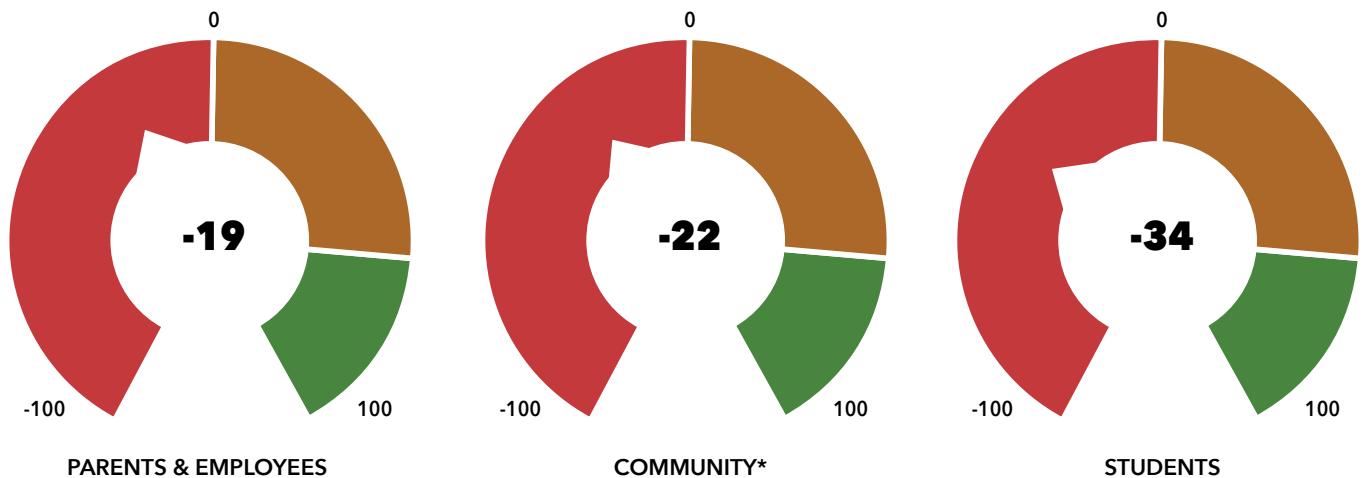
NPS is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters (see chart at right), resulting in a score between -100 to +100. (Passives are not part of that calculation.) Scores above zero indicate more promoters than

detractors, while scores below zero indicate a higher share of detractors. ISD 709's NPS is -19 among both parents and employees, drops slightly to -22 among community members and declines to -34 among students. These NPS results align with other perception findings in the survey, which indicate that strong positive views of the district exist but are not widespread across stakeholder groups.

Likelihood to Recommend a District School



NPS by Stakeholder Group



- To better understand these perceptions, focus group participants were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the district. Consistently, participants identified the district’s strongest asset as its people, describing staff, teachers and community partners as caring, passionate, creative and deeply committed to serving students and their families.
 - Several comments—particularly among community members and staff—pointed to strong, established relationships as being central to what works well in the district, leading to effective collaboration, creative problem solving and momentum in developing and expanding programs that benefit students.
 - Many participants also pointed to the welcoming, community-oriented culture at the school level, with staff often going beyond the basics to meet student and family needs and foster a sense of belonging. Calling the schools “a staple in the community,” a district leader commented that ISD 709 staff consistently offer all kinds of resources and support to families, instead of asking what the community can do for the schools.
- While some characterized the district’s reputation as generally positive and perceived ISD 709 as the obvious choice for families, others said that it “depends on whom you talk to,” with perceptions varying by neighborhood, demographics and personal experience. Some illustrative comments of the variation include:
 - “We provide a lot, and I think the community gets that.”
 - “[ISD 709] is a complicated district, depending on where you live.”
 - “Among most people I know the perception of the district is not super high.”
- These juxtaposing sentiments from the focus groups echo the duality—both positive and challenging—reflected in the most common words SCOPE Survey respondents associate with the district, including caring, community, inclusive, diverse, big, large, disorganized and divided, as illustrated on [page 51](#).
- Across most focus groups, participants described a district caught between “small-town feel” and big-district complexity, large enough to require complex systems but not large enough to consistently resource them.
 - Referring to recent “growing pains,” one district leader acknowledged that the growth has led to “lots of people power” while also making it difficult for staff at all levels to “get on the same page around expectations and implementation.” Another shared, “I don’t know if we’ve decided if we are small or large, culturewise. We are large but try to operate as small, and that can get us in trouble.”
 - Families echoed this conundrum, noting that leadership has touted the enrollment growth as a “good problem to have” while they worried about their children falling through the cracks and some schools “bursting at the seams.”
 - Comments from community partners suggested that the district’s size and complexity reduce its nimbleness, contributing to delays, stalled initiatives, multiple approval layers and difficulty identifying decision makers.
- Staff members in varying roles connected recent budget constraints and staffing reductions to capacity challenges, noting that even well-intentioned initiatives can falter when systems and roles are stretched thin.

- Families, community partners and staff across roles frequently linked significant turnover in district leadership in recent years to inconsistent information, unclear ownership of responsibilities and disrupted partnerships, particularly when relationships are tied to individual staff members rather than shared systems or processes. Participants said these disruptions contribute to stakeholder frustration and diminished confidence in the district.
 - Staff members said that staffing changes have disrupted both communication and role clarity. One commented, “I need a flow chart. I don’t know who is doing what anymore” at the district office, while another added, “There isn’t a consistent answer for any question, which creates confusion.”
 - Some staff members noted that vacancies often result in others’ assuming additional responsibilities that persist even after positions are filled. Several described the resulting capacity issues as unsustainable and contributing to disjointed, reactionary efforts that limit effectiveness.
 - Community partners also pointed to turnover as a challenge in working with ISD 709. One commented, “It takes a long time to find the right person to partner with and bring collaboration forward. Then the person leaves, and we have to start over.”
- A recurring theme across staff focus groups was the perception of a constant leadership initiative churn and shift in focus. Many staff participants believe this undermines districtwide alignment and limits follow-through, noting that initiatives appear to be often dropped or deprioritized before intended outcomes are realized. Illustrative comments include:
 - “The district is full of great people working hard for kids, but when you don’t have a compass set for you, you’ll never get where you need to be.”
 - “We have a strategic plan but how often do we talk about it? We started out talking about it, but now we just don’t, and data is never brought into our conversations.”
 - “Staff who don’t want to get on board know they can just wait it out because we’ll shift our focus pretty quick.”
- Focus group and SCOPE comments highlighted the breadth of programs, services and opportunities for students. Respondents cited the range of academic pathways and electives, student activities, early learning supports and post-secondary options as strengths that contribute to a perception of the district as offering diverse and meaningful opportunities. As one parent commented, “I’m super impressed that a public school district has a language immersion program. They deserve props for that.”
- However, despite recognition of staff’s efforts to promote inclusion and serve all students, participants frequently described disparities that exist across schools, including differences in class size, resource funding, course availability and extracurricular offerings. Community members also noted persistent achievement gaps affecting American Indian students, other students of color, students with disabilities and students from lower-income households.
- In nearly every focus group, participants described the city’s longstanding “east-west” divide as widely felt, influencing schools’ reputations and families’ enrollment choices. Even those new to Duluth said they quickly became aware of a perceived “haves and have nots”

dynamic and a prevailing belief that east-side schools are better than those on the west side.

- Several staff members and community partners said their personal experiences in west-side schools present a more complex picture than that narrative suggests, emphasizing strengths in school climate, student engagement, relationships and daily classroom experiences that they believe are often overlooked. As one participant noted, “Unless you go into those schools and see it, you wouldn’t know,” because “there’s just a history of negativity.”
 - According to some, this divide caused a “huge outcry” that derailed a school boundary study and redistricting initiative several years ago.
 - Numerous comments pointed to a perceived lack of transparency and shared understanding around student transfers, which participants said fuels perceptions of inequity and erodes trust, especially when students are allowed to transfer to already overcrowded schools on the east side.
- Some families and community members perceive that the culture and internal “politics” of ISD 709 (i.e., informal power dynamics or concerns about repercussions) make it difficult to openly acknowledge what isn’t working. A parent described this as the district trying “to paint a rosy picture.” Parents also expressed frustration when, in their opinions, difficult decisions are framed too optimistically or when communicated outcomes do not align with their reality.
- Many participants attributed ongoing community distrust to historical facilities and levy decisions made by previous administrations, most notably the decades-old “Red Plan.” Despite some acknowledging that the district is working to rebuild trust through transparency, others referred to a lingering “assumption of malintent.” Some expressed the concern that, instead of answering stakeholders’ questions about funding, “there’s a lot of sugarcoating.”
- Across staff focus groups, participants described the district’s decision-making process as unclear, layered and inconsistent, including instances in which schools received conflicting direction from different departments or members of the senior leadership team. They cited widespread uncertainty about who has authority to make decisions, what approvals are required and how to move issues forward.
 - Staff members noted that decisions can stall at higher levels for weeks, while time-sensitive issues affecting students or families remain unresolved. Although some district leaders expressed a belief that decision making is appropriately delegated, staff perceive authority as concentrated at the top. This disconnect contributes to hesitation, stalled action and erosion of buy-in.
 - Numerous examples pointed to added layers—such as intermediaries without decision-making authority—that contribute to “a game of telephone” and decisions being made without full context.
 - Staff participants described being asked to implement or communicate decisions before details are finalized, leaving those on the front lines to manage the confusion among families and the community.
 - Parents also perceive decision making as cumbersome, with one example

comment that, “I wish the people we talk to at the school day-to-day would be more empowered to solve a situation, rather than my yelling at the school board.”

- Focus group conversations also revealed that stakeholders are often unsure how—or whether—their input influences district outcomes. Many comments reflected frustration that feedback is requested but doesn’t appear to be meaningfully considered, with decisions perceived as largely predetermined.
 - Staff members said they often felt excluded from problem solving until after decisions were made, despite being closest to the work and responsible for managing impacts. One parent framed it as a “classic agency problem of too big a focus on administration and those who aren’t in the classroom where the business of learning takes place.”
 - Some noted that existing advisory structures are not consistently used as forums for collective problem solving. Instead, many see persistence, escalation or external pressure (e.g., angry parents, bad press or union involvement) as often more effective than formal feedback processes.
- Some participants noted recent improvements in some structures, systems and tools as positive developments toward greater consistency and coordination, even as they acknowledged uneven implementation.
- When asked on the SCOPE Survey whether it is easy to recognize communications from the district when they receive them, parents and employees expressed strong agreement, with 91% and 87% agreeing or strongly agreeing,

respectively. Community member responses were more mixed, with equal shares agreeing and undecided (48% each). Notably, across all three audiences, only single-digit percentages disagreed, suggesting that, at a foundational level, district messages are consistently recognizable (see charts [page 41](#)).

Communication Sources and Preferences

- ISD 709 uses ParentSquare, a digital school-to-home communication platform, to email a weekly e-newsletter, *District Digest* (pictured at right), and occasional announcements to families districtwide. A version of the newsletter with additional staff-specific information is also emailed via ParentSquare to all staff weekly.

According to the Communications Officer, the district adopted the platform several years ago as part of an effort to streamline parent communication tools. Nightly synchronization with Infinite Campus, the district's student information system, automatically enrolls parents to receive messages without requiring them to sign up separately. ParentSquare is accessible via both a web interface and mobile app, and district data show that more than half of current parents have downloaded the app, suggesting broad adoption.

- Each school also produces its own newsletter, typically shared with parents and staff through ParentSquare, on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis.
- Teachers are encouraged to rely on ParentSquare, along with Infinite Campus and Canvas, to communicate with families.
- Community members can request to receive the *District Digest* by emailing the Communications Officer. Currently, there are three such subscribers, including one local reporter.
- On the SCOPE Survey, respondents were asked to rate the value of various district information sources on a five-star scale,

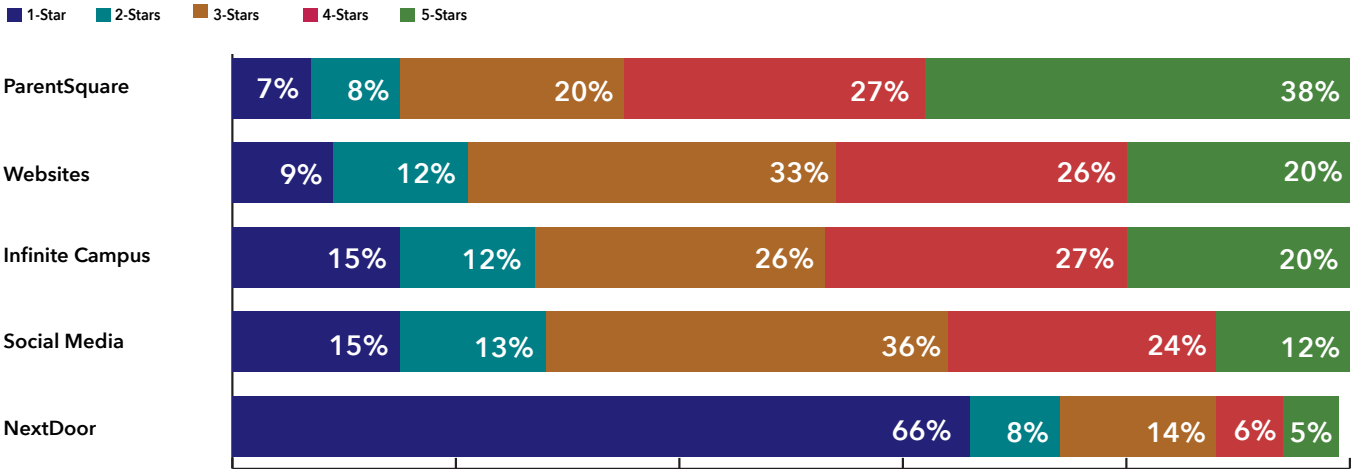
Dec. 15, 2025



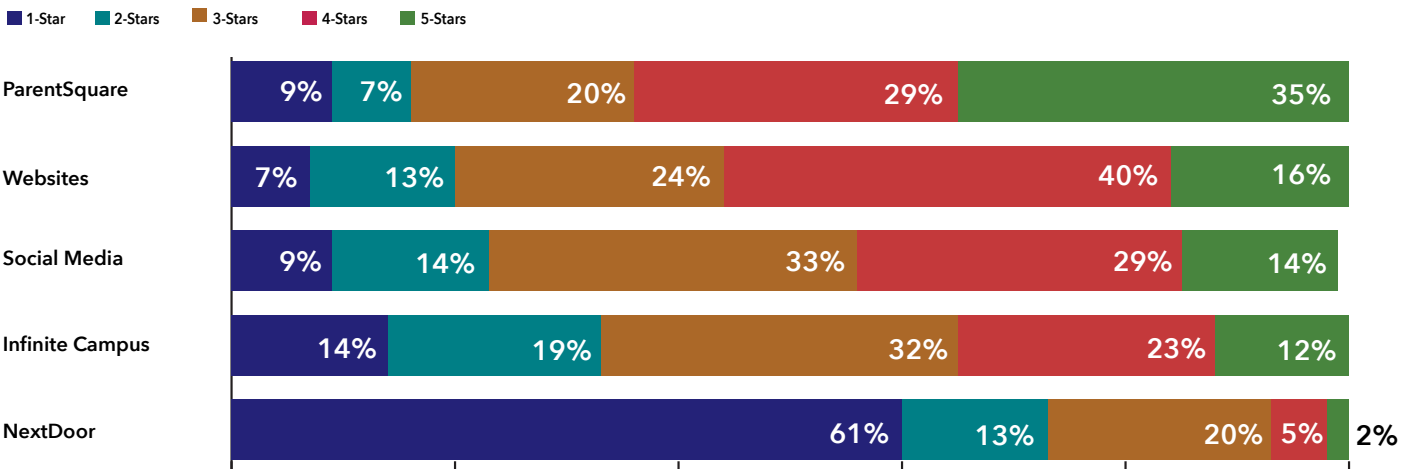
with 5 stars indicating the highest value as shown on the next page. Across audiences, respondents rated push-based, broadly accessible channels as high value.

- Parents and employees most often identified ParentSquare as a high-value source (65% and 64%, respectively), while community members were more likely to assign high value to social media (45%).
- Nearly half of parents also find high value in the Infinite Campus parent portal, reflecting its audience-specific access and relevance.
- District and school websites emerged as secondary and moderately valued information sources, with a majority of employees (56%) and nearly half of parents (46%) considering them high value, while about one third of community members also did, indicating a decline in perceived value outside internal audiences.
- NextDoor, a public app for neighborhoods, was consistently rated as low value across audiences.

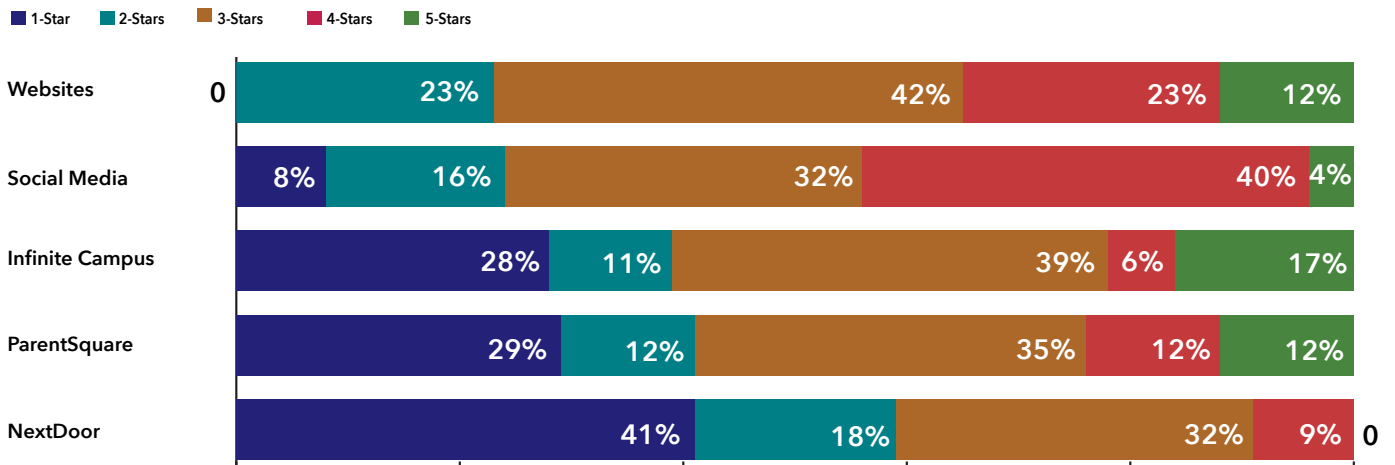
Value Rating of Informational Sources: Scale of 1-5 - *Parents*



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

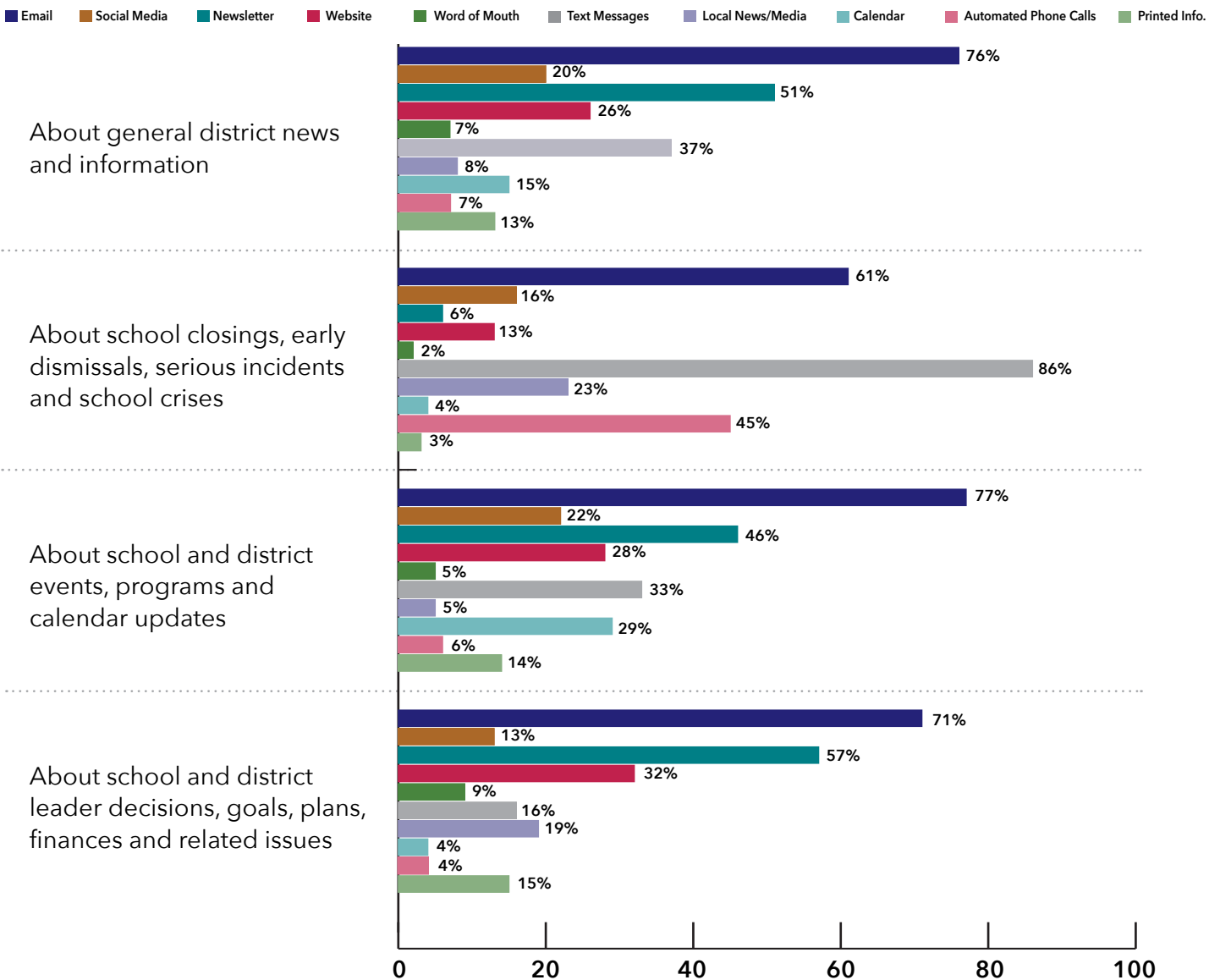


Value Rating of Informational Sources: Scale of 1-5 - *Community*

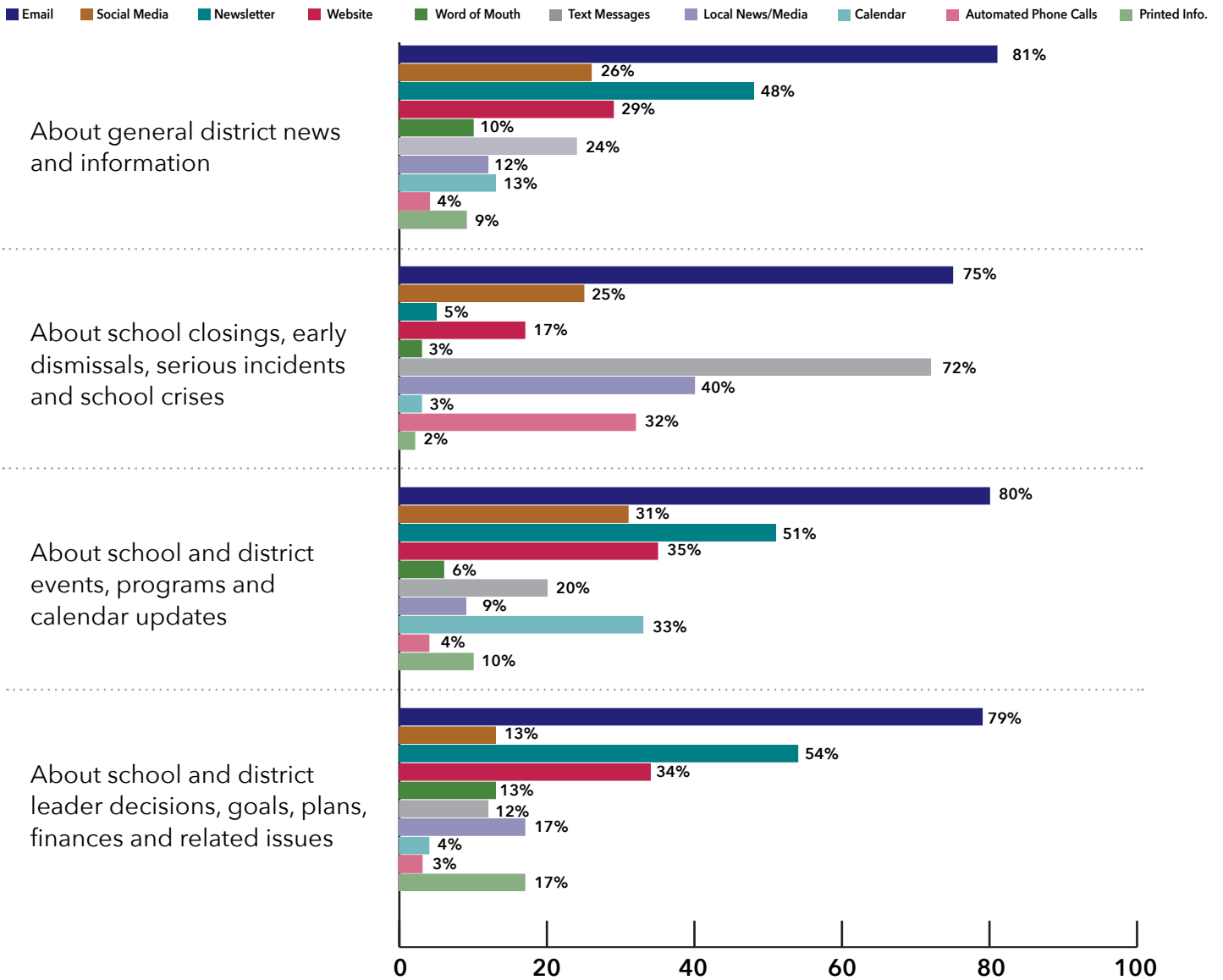


- Survey respondents also indicated their preferred sources for learning different types of information about the district. As shown below and on [pages 23-25](#), parents, staff and students prefer email for learning about most types of district information.
 - Among parents and employees, text messages join email as a preferred source, along with automated phone calls and local media, for situations such as school closings, early dismissals, serious incidents and school crises. Students, however, eschew text messages in favor of automated calls and local media.
 - Both parents and employees also prefer the *District Digest* newsletter for learning about general news, events, programs, leader decisions and related issues.
 - Preferences of community members are quite different, with local media, social media and/or the district website holding the top spots for all kinds of information, including crises.

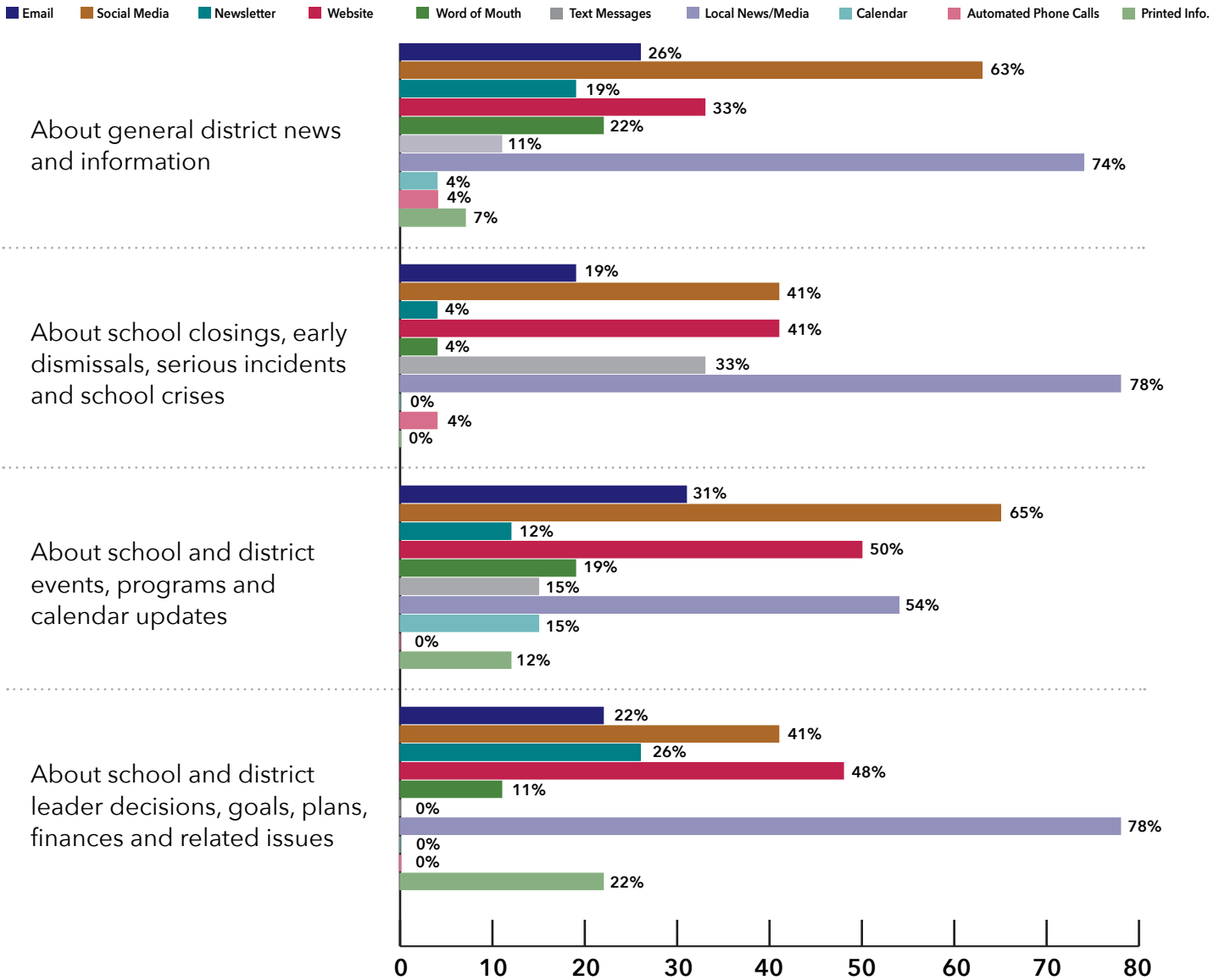
Preferred Methods of Communication for Different Types of Information - *Parents*



Preferred Methods of Communication for Different Types of Information - *Employees*

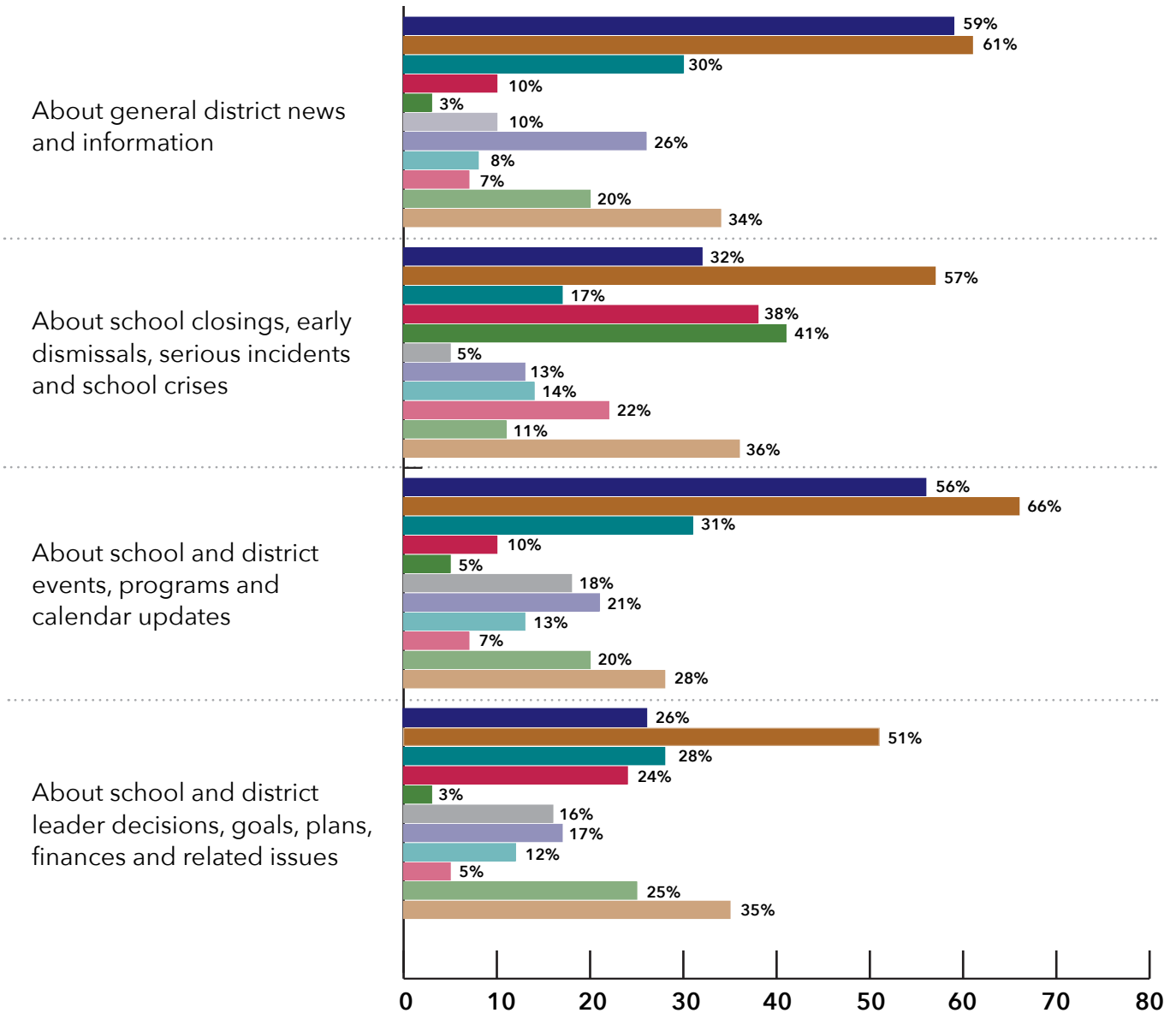


Preferred Methods of Communication for Different Types of Information - *Community**



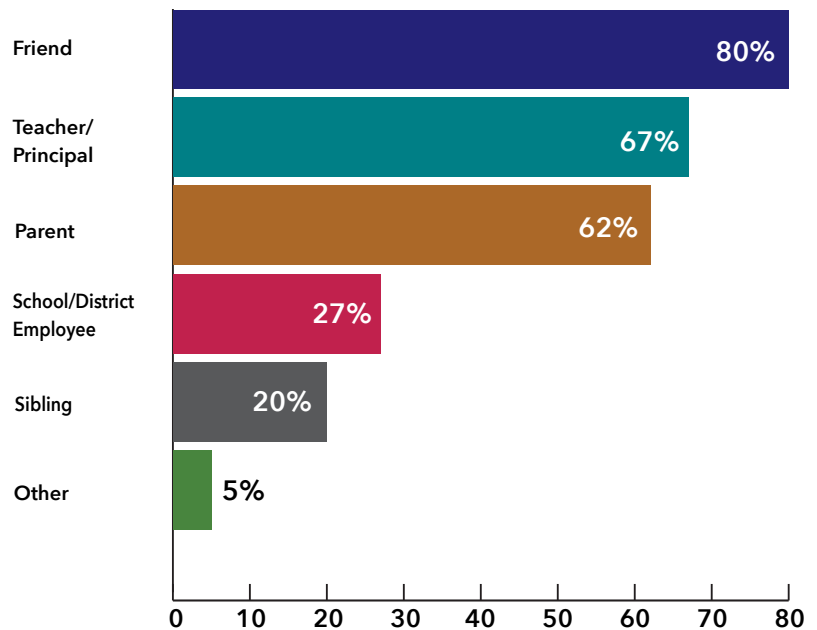
Preferred Methods of Communication for Different Types of Information - *Students*

■ Daily Anncmnts.
 ■ Email
 ■ E-Newsletter
 ■ Local News/Media
 ■ Phone Calls
 ■ Print Info.
 ■ School Assemblies/Mtgs.
 ■ Social Media
 ■ Text Messages
 ■ Website
 ■ Word of Mouth

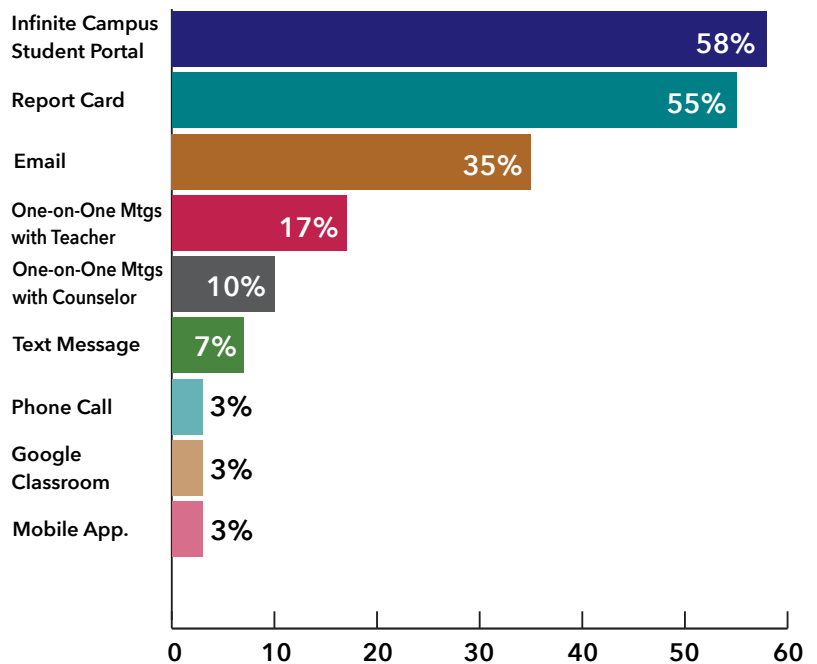


- Besides email, students' preferences (see chart [p. 25](#)) generally include daily announcements and what other people tell them. Among those students who rely on others for information, 80% said they hear things from friends, while 67% said a teacher or principal and 62% said a parent, as shown in the top chart at right.
- When students were asked how they prefer to receive communication about their progress in school and how to improve it, 58% said they prefer the Infinite Campus student portal, followed by 55% who prefer the report card, as shown in the bottom chart at right.

Who gives students information?

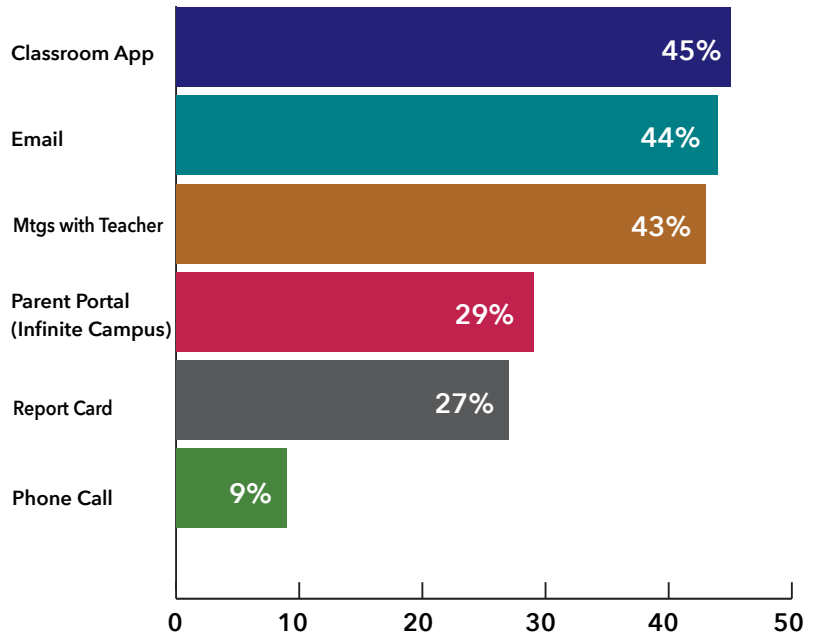


Preferred Methods of Communication for Information on Their Progress - *Students*

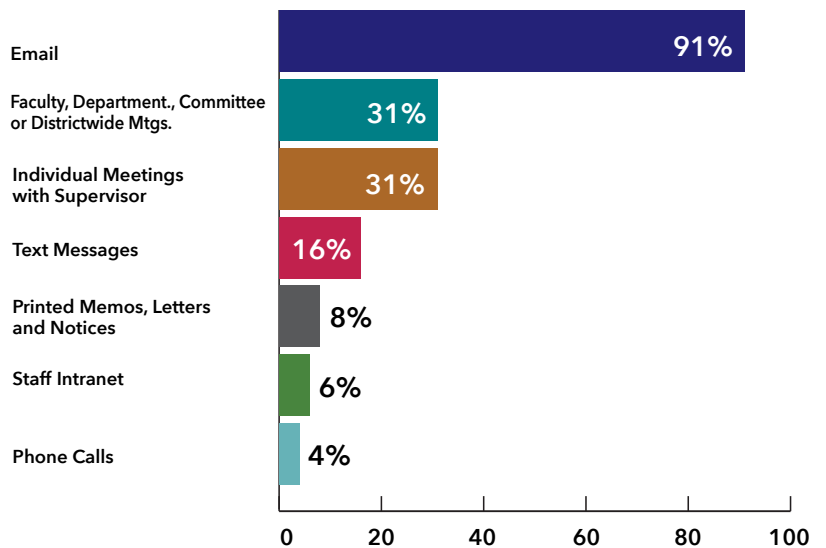


- When asked how they prefer to receive information about their student's progress and how to best support their learning, 45% of parents selected classroom apps (referring to ParentSquare, Canvas and Infinite Campus Messenger), followed closely by email (44%) and one-on-one meetings with their child's teacher(s) (43%), as shown in the top chart to the right.
- When employees were asked to identify their preferred methods for receiving information to help them perform their duties and support student learning, email was the overwhelming choice (91%), with faculty/department/districtwide meetings and individual meetings with a supervisor far behind (31% each), as shown in the chart below.
- Survey data showing strong reliance on email align with focus group feedback identifying ParentSquare as the district's primary communication tool, given that the platform distributes real-time messages via email notifications in addition to its app and web interfaces.
 - At the same time, some users described the platform as "clunky" and difficult to navigate, particularly when managing messages across multiple schools or, in the case of staff who are also parents, switching between staff and parent views. Several parents added that the volume of email messages can feel "overwhelming."

Preferred Methods of Communication for Information on Student Progress - *Parents*



Preferred Methods of Communication for Information Related to Job Duties - *Employees*



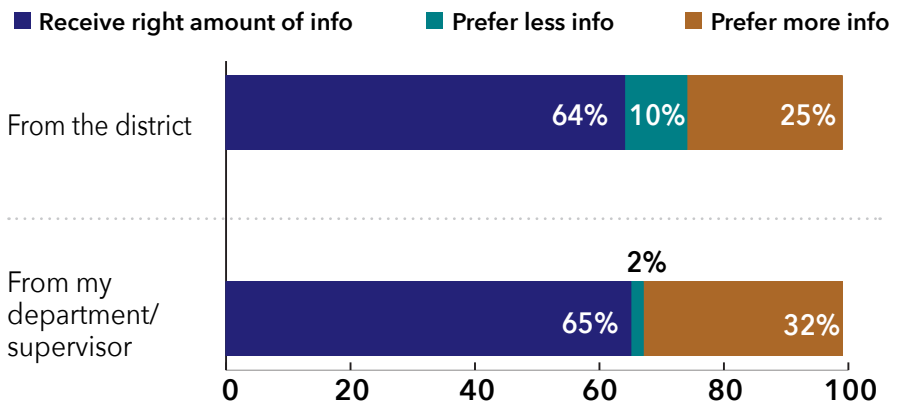
- Participants felt that the heavy reliance on ParentSquare limits the district’s ability to reach non-parent community members, who then often rely on external sources—such as local media and social media—for information about the district.
 - Survey comments echoed this perception, with one community member noting that “it is next to impossible to learn things unless community members go out of their way to get it.”
 - Another shared that “once a family has no one enrolled in the school district, any communication or information about the district is nonexistent, except when tax bills come due.”

would like to receive more information from their child’s teacher, and 38% want more from their child’s school. Perceptions of district-level communication were more evenly split, with similar proportions saying they would like more information (24%) and saying they receive too much (19%), while a majority (58%) felt they received the right amount of district information.

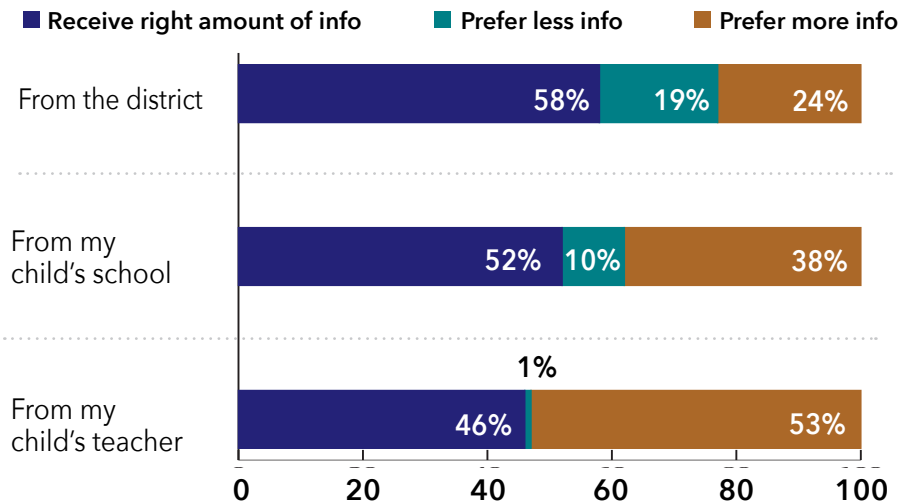
- The SCOPE Survey asked participants whether they receive the right amount of information from the district, schools/departments and teachers. As shown in the charts to the right:

- Among employees, about two thirds say they receive the right amount of information from the district and their department/supervisor (64% and 65%, respectively). One quarter (25%) want to receive more from the district, and nearly one third (32%) want more from their department/supervisor.
- Among parents, desire for additional information increases as communication becomes more localized. More than half (53%) said they

Quantity of Information - *Employees*



Quantity of Information - *Parents*



- In focus groups and survey comments, parents described feeling overwhelmed by the volume and frequency of communication across classroom, school and district levels, noting that the redundancy and sheer number of messages leads them to skim or tune them out altogether. As one parent shared, “I have become a skim reader, and I know I’m missing important things.”
- Parents shared a strong desire for clearer prioritization and purpose in district-level communications. Many suggested that district newsletters should focus on information most relevant to all families, such as grading period timelines, key dates and major programs or initiatives, while celebrations and “fluffy stuff” are better suited for social media or optional channels. One parent commented, “Our school sends out community happenings, and it just encourages me to read less because it’s a waste of my time.”
- Parents and staff also expressed frustration over having too many official communication channels to check or maintain, resulting in uncertainty about where accurate, up-to-date information can be found. As one staff member commented, “We have so many places where the answers live that we don’t know where to look, so we all just get lost.... It’s kind of a universal experience for parents, staff and teachers.”
 - Several pointed to inconsistent communication practices across schools as contributing to confusion for families, including variability in where teachers post assignments within the same platform. One staff member also described being directed to use Infinite Campus for official grading while the district website continued to reference Canvas for this purpose, and others in the same focus group said they had not received that guidance.
 - Parents and staff alike expressed a preference for the district to clearly define which platforms should be used for which purposes, rather than receiving duplicative information across multiple channels.
 - Parents frequently reported uncertainty about the preferred ways to communicate with teachers and schools, citing differences in expectations across classrooms and buildings.
- NSPRA used Meltwater, a media monitoring service, to analyze news coverage of ISD 709 from December 3, 2024, to December 3, 2025. (Its analysis included content from Citizen Portal AI, a third-party platform that uses artificial intelligence to publish summaries of public meetings, but as that content does not represent traditional earned media or independent reporting, it is excluded from the media metrics that follow.) The analysis finds that:
 - 221 news stories mentioned ISD 709 when looking at English-language news appearing in the United States and excluding coverage for school sports games, scores, schedules, etc.
 - 82% percent of the news stories were neutral, 14% percent were positive and 5% percent were negative. (Note: Meltwater’s sentiment analysis algorithm classifies articles as neutral if they appear to be reported accurately and objectively, as identified through keywords linked to emotions.)
 - Coverage spiked in July, September and October 2025, driven by repeated stories about statewide education funding in limbo (with peripheral mentions of the district), a shooting

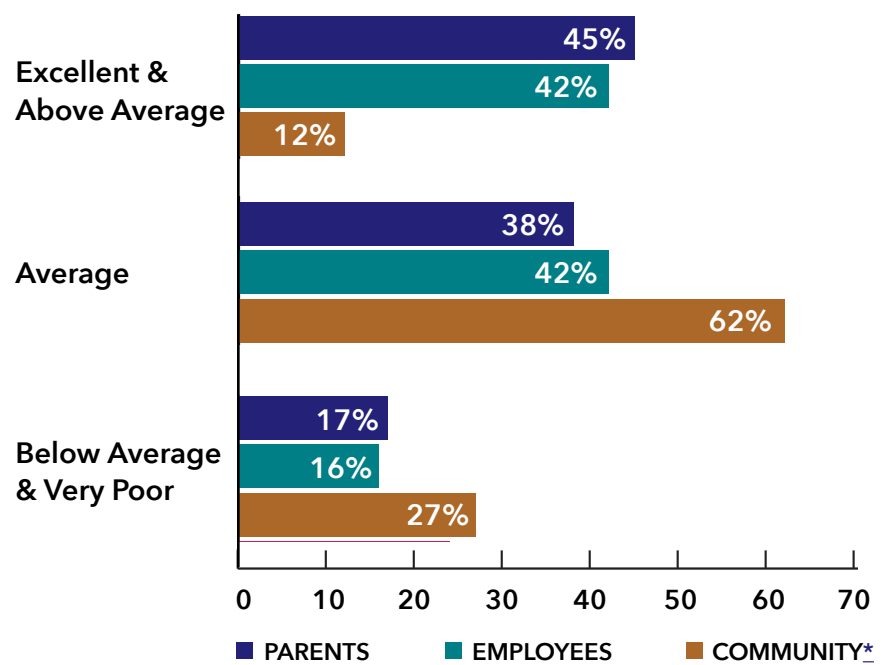
threat to an elementary school, state lawmakers' debate over school resource officers and an investigation into the alleged use of racial slurs during a football game between the district's two high schools.

- Other frequent article topics included school safety issues, funding cuts and staff and student recognitions.
- The local news media outlets that most frequently covered the district include *Duluth News Tribune*, Northern News Now and WDIO-TV.

Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with communication from ISD 709. Across stakeholder groups, the majority view district communication as average, above average or excellent, as shown in the chart at right.
 - Parents and employees expressed similar views, with slightly less than half rating communications as excellent or above average (45% and 42%, respectively), and similar proportions describing it as average.
 - Community members* reported the weakest perceptions overall, with only 12% rating communication as above average or excellent.
- Student responses about their satisfaction with communication from their schools suggest generally

Overall Satisfaction with District Communications



neutral perceptions, with a majority rating school communication as average (52%) and then equal percentages (24% each) rating it as above average/excellent and below average/very poor.

- In the SCOPE Survey, parents, staff and community members were asked to rate

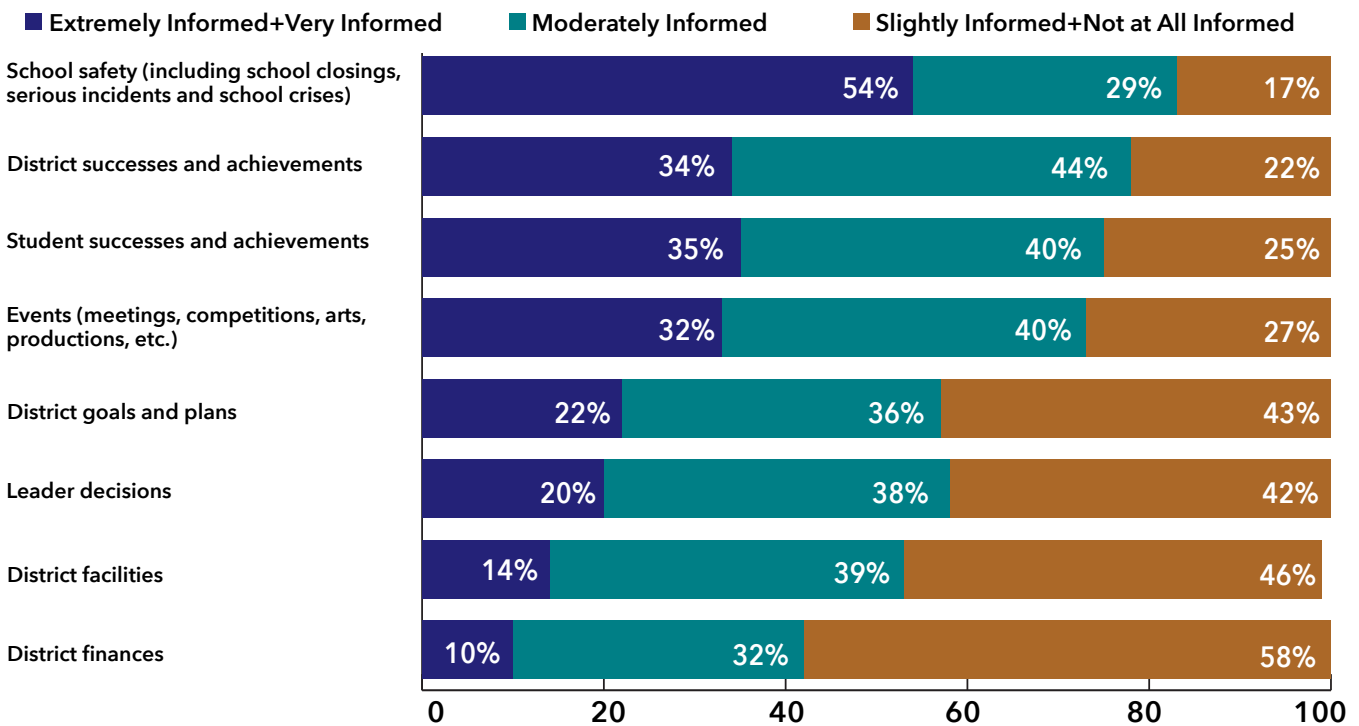
how informed they are on eight topics. As shown on pages 31-32:

- While a majority of parents and employees reported feeling at least moderately informed about most topics, district finances stand out as an area for growth. Fewer than half of parents (42%) and staff (44%) feel even moderately informed, pointing to challenges with establishing a basic shared foundation of knowledge about district financial information.
- Community members* reported the lowest levels of understanding around district finances, with just 31% saying they feel at least moderately informed. Other topics in which fewer than a majority feel at least moderately informed include district facilities, goals and plans, and leader decisions.
- By contrast, school safety and district successes and achievements were the areas in which respondents across all audiences felt best informed. Notably,

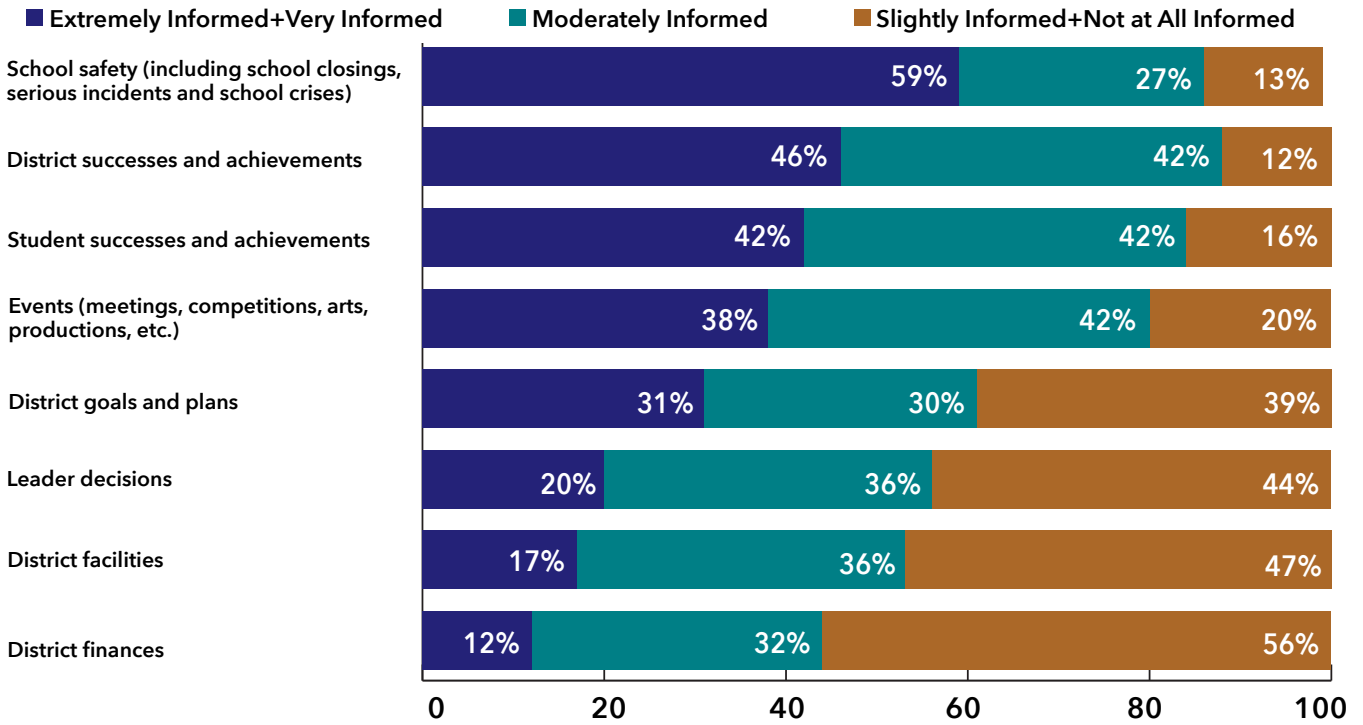
school safety was the only topic for which more than half of parents and staff reported feeling extremely or very informed, suggesting clearer, more consistent communication in this area.

- Focus group participants, particularly parents, were generally complimentary about ISD 709’s crisis communications. Staff credited the Communication Officer’s recent efforts to establish clearer protocols and create message templates and scripts as providing welcome support to school-level employees during a crisis, although others expressed frustration when messages are crafted without building-level input and are released to the public before sharing with staff.
 - Some staff comments reflected concern that the district’s emphasis on speed can result in messages going out with incomplete context, which they worry can fuel misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations about what can legally be shared publicly.

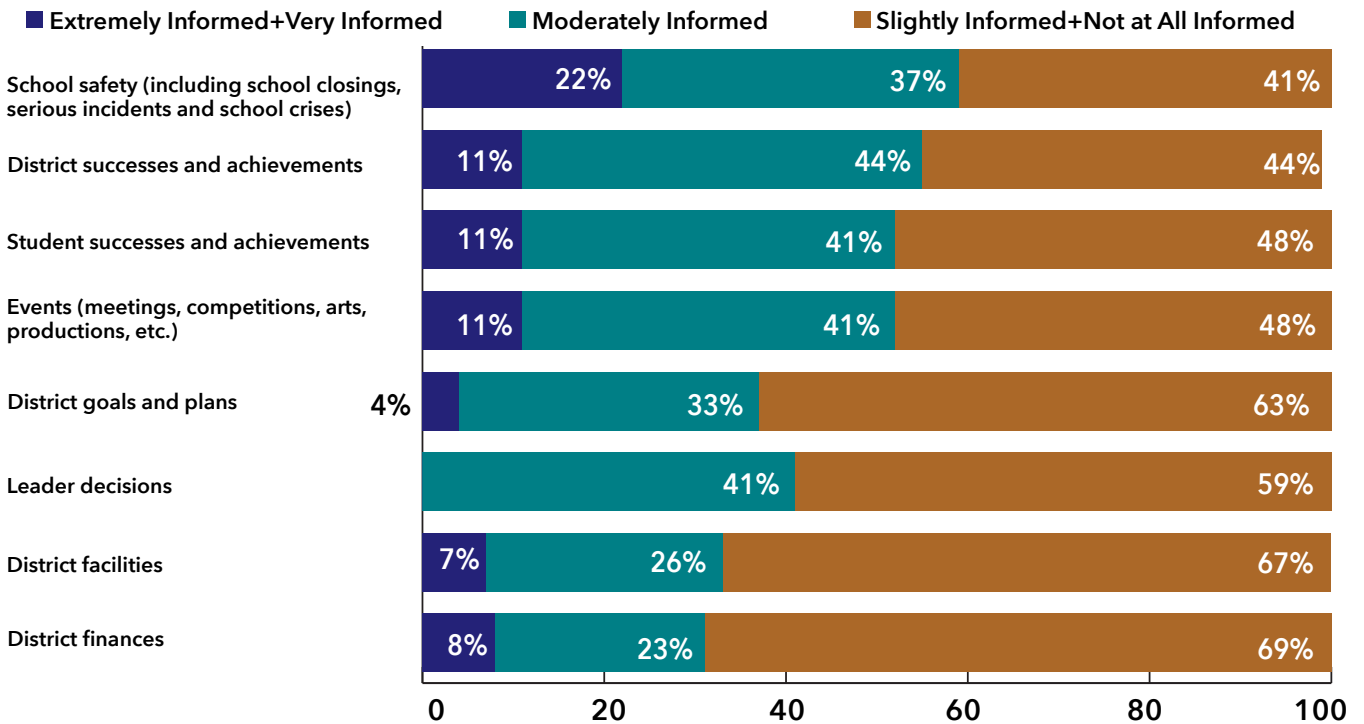
Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics - *Parents*



Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics - *Employees*

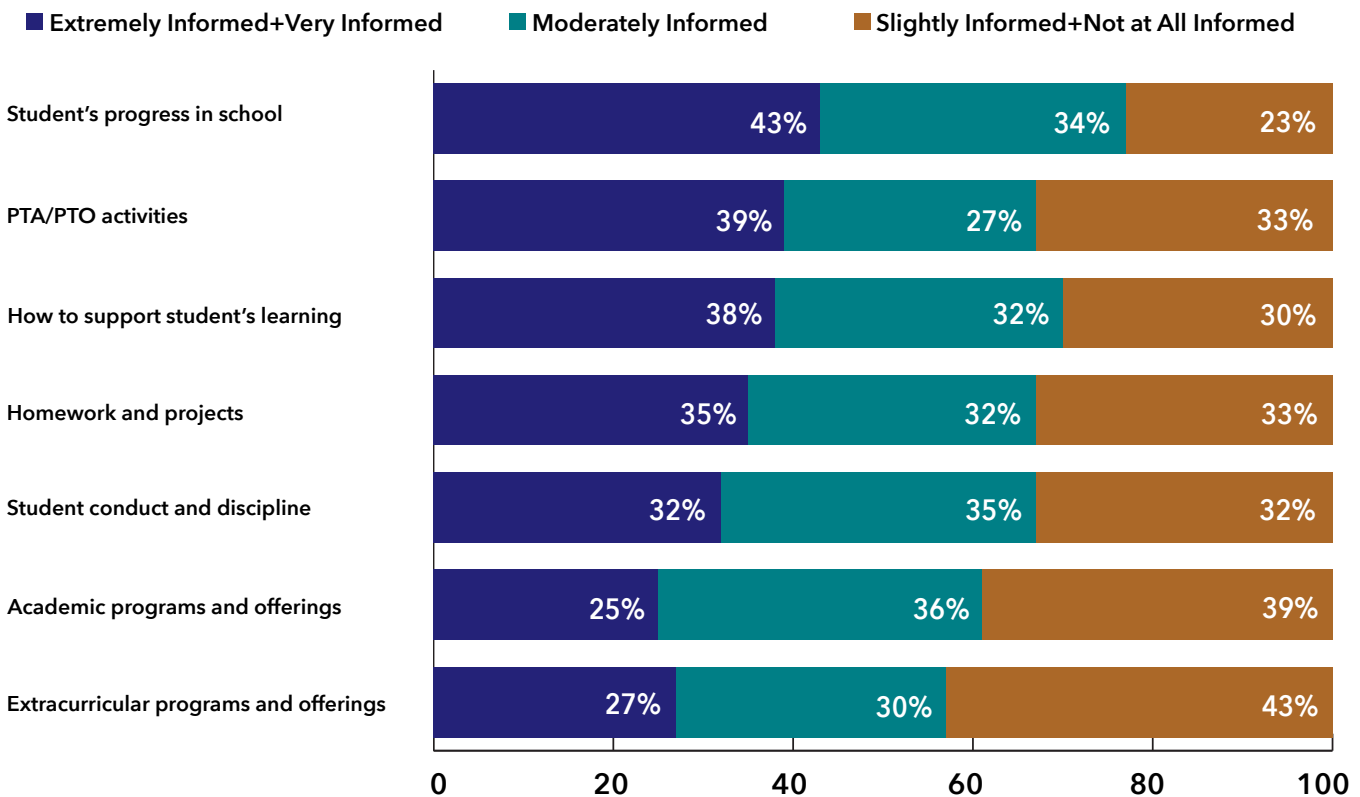


Level of Feeling Informed on Key Topics - *Community**



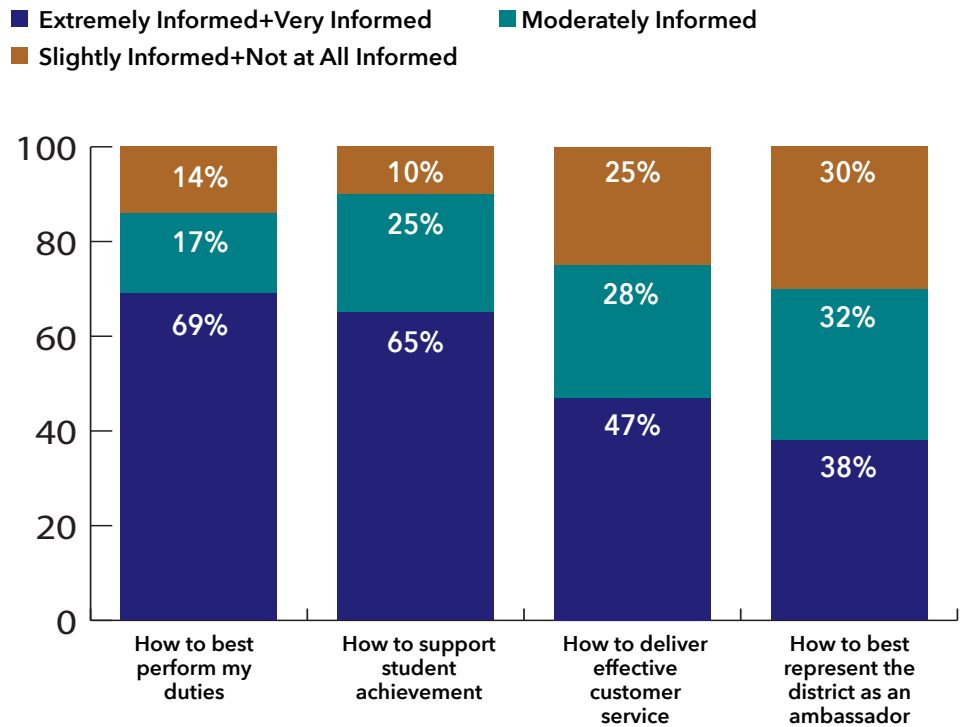
- Many participants noted that crisis communication practices vary by school, particularly whether staff at one school are notified when incidents occur at other sites.
- Focus group participants believed that the district rarely communicates clearly or proactively about high-impact issues—such as funding, curriculum, staffing, policy and long-term plans—and when information does exist, it is hard to find and insufficiently explained.
 - Many described having to rely on “insider knowledge” or persistence to locate information, with some adding that the BoardBook platform (housing School Board meeting materials) is difficult to navigate.
 - A staff member described budget messaging as “surface level at best... just a single district number, positive or negative,” adding that little effort seems to be made to educate stakeholders about where funding comes from or what it’s used for.
- An illustrative parent comment was a feeling that, “[District leaders] avoid the hard questions, and the information is nowhere to be found.”
- Across audiences, the district’s perceived lack of transparent, plain-language communication about budgets, priorities and trade-offs was viewed as eroding confidence in leadership, limiting public understanding and reducing community willingness to support major decisions and initiatives.
- The SCOPE Survey asked parents to rate how informed they felt on topics related to their child. The results indicate that parents feel best informed about their child’s individual experience in school.

Level of Feeling Informed on Areas Pertaining to Role as Parent - *Parents*



- More than three quarters (77%) reported feeling at least moderately informed about their child’s academic progress, including 43% who reported feeling very or extremely informed. A similar share (70%) reported feeling at least moderately informed about how to support their child’s learning.
 - Understanding declines as topics shift toward broader student programs, opportunities and expectations. About 4 in 10 parents reported feeling only slightly or not-at-all informed about academic programs and extracurricular offerings (39% and 43%, respectively).
 - In their focus group, parents echoed a desire for more information about academic programs, with comments such as, “The main point of school is academics, and so much of the communication is not about that” and, “We all think different things are important, but academics has to be up there.”
- When staff were asked to rate how informed they felt on topics pertaining to their jobs, findings show that employees feel well informed about their core responsibilities but less confident in their outward-facing roles.
 - Roughly 9 in 10 employees report feeling at least moderately informed about how to best perform their duties and how to support student achievement, with about two-thirds saying they feel extremely or very informed (69% and 65%, respectively).
 - By contrast, fewer than half of employees (47%) feel extremely or very informed about how to deliver effective customer service, while one quarter report feeling slightly or not-at-all informed.
 - Confidence is even lower when it comes to representing the district as an ambassador. Just 38% feel extremely or very informed, and 30% report feeling only slightly or not at all informed. Taken together, these findings point to gaps in how staff perceive their preparedness to communicate with families and the broader community.
 - In focus group conversations, staff members described the flow of information from district leadership to frontline staff as “hit or miss” and highly dependent

Level of Feeling Informed on Areas Pertaining to Role as an Employee - *Employees*



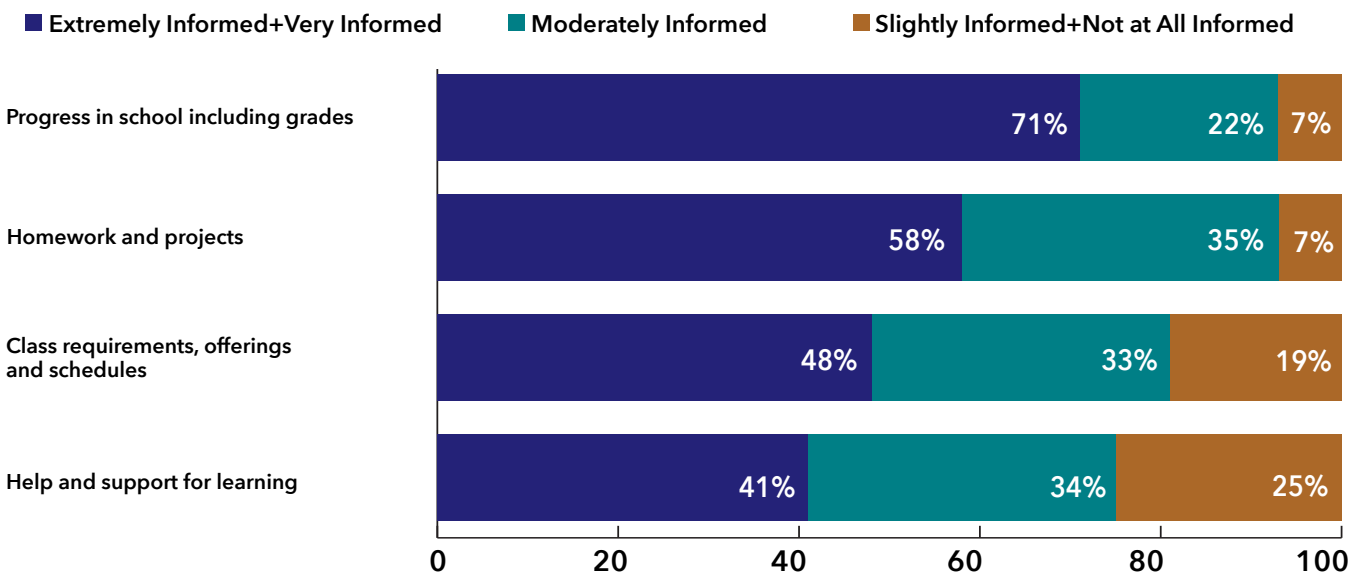
on individuals and how proactively they choose to communicate. Participants shared that “major breakdowns” can occur when those who were not present for discussions receive a “watered-down” version of information without sufficient context or clarity.

- Several non-certified staff comments reflected their feeling overlooked in information sharing and updates, despite being expected to implement procedures and support students day to day.
- Participants consistently described schools, departments and role groups operating in silos, with limited visibility into what is happening outside their own “bubbles.” Some noted that innovative practices, changes or initiatives occurring in one school or department are not often shared across the district.
- Staff also described a lack of clarity within and across departments about who is responsible for communicating what information, to whom and through which channels, resulting in communication that is not consistently targeted to specific audiences. An

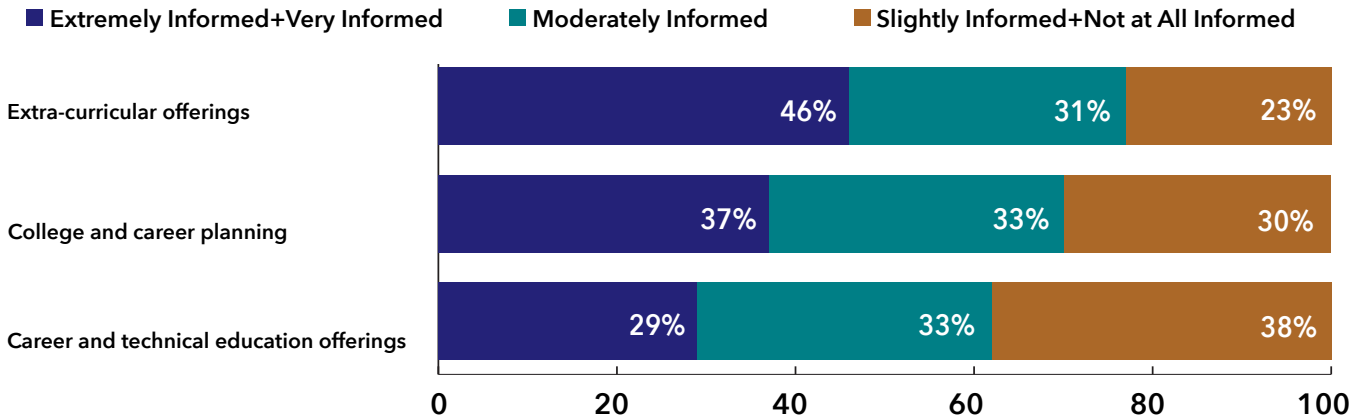
example comment was, “I have trouble seeing what our through line is from directors all the way down to teachers.”

- Several participants noted that in the absence of clear communication expectations or centralized coordination, individual departments often take it upon themselves to send newsletters or updates to staff. While intended to fill gaps, participants described this as contributing to a high volume of messages that is difficult to navigate, leading some to tune out district communications and creating confusion when messages from different departments contradict.
- Students were asked how informed they feel about topics related to their academic progress, school experiences and future opportunities. As shown below and on [page 36](#):
 - Findings indicate that students feel most informed about aspects of school that affect them day to day. Almost all students (93%) said they felt at least moderately informed about their grades and progress in school, as well as about homework and projects.

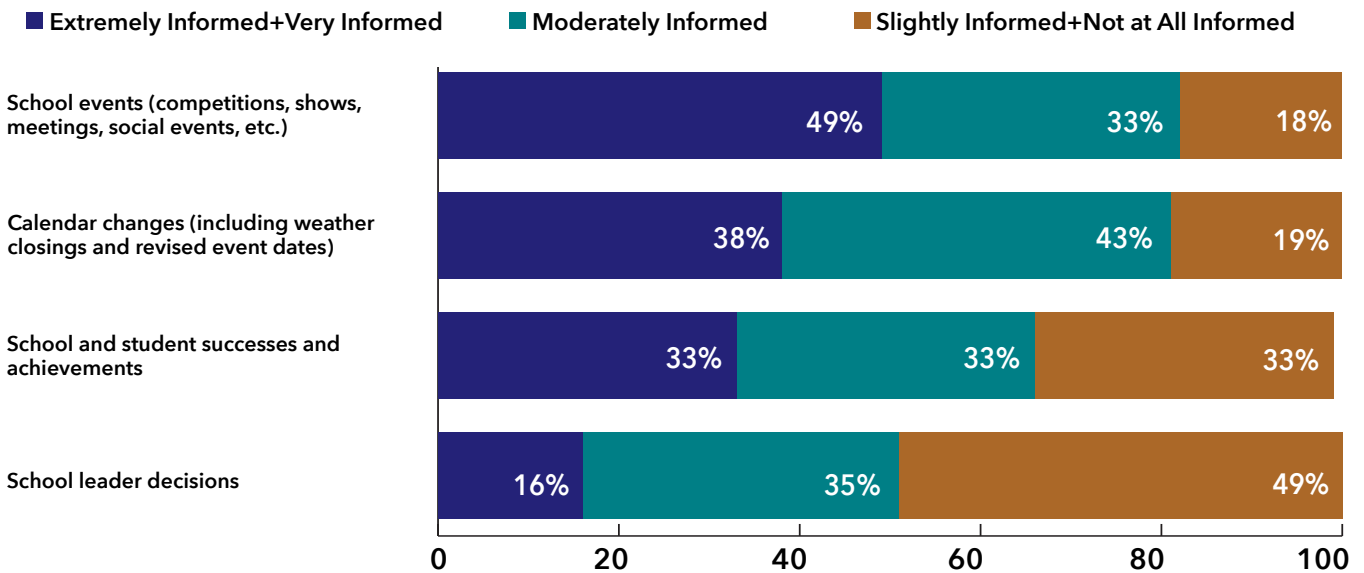
Level of Feeling Informed About Academic Progress, Class Requirements - *Students*



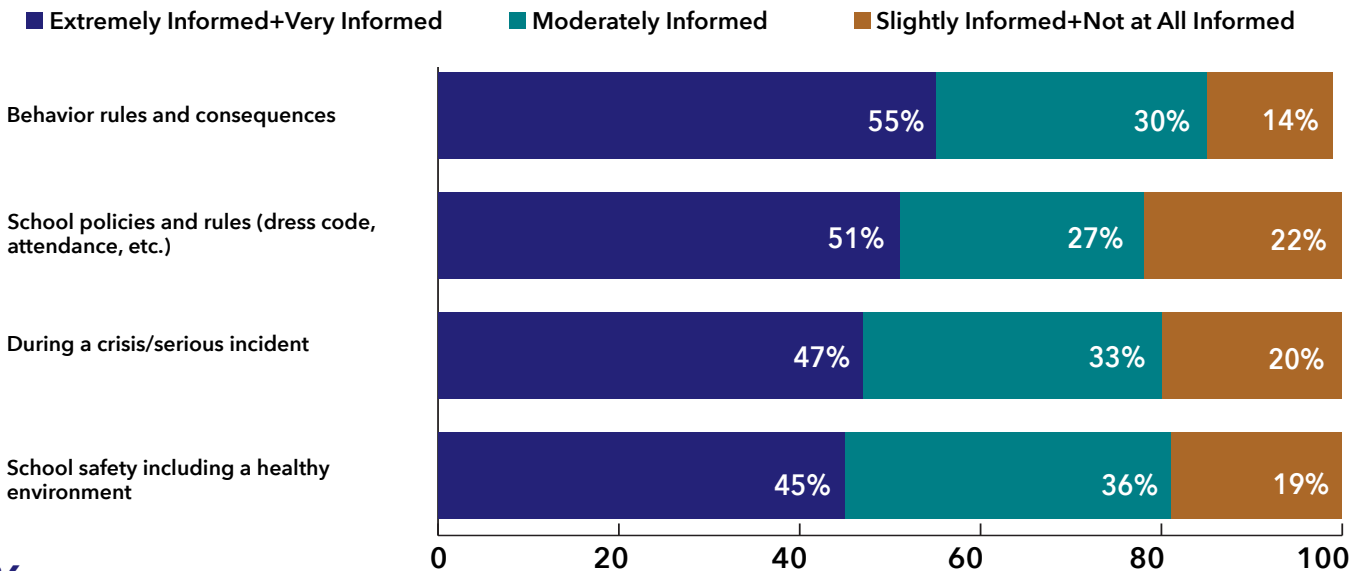
Level of Feeling Informed About Opportunities and Planning for the Future - **Students**



Level of Feeling Informed About Events and Issues That Affect Their School - **Students**

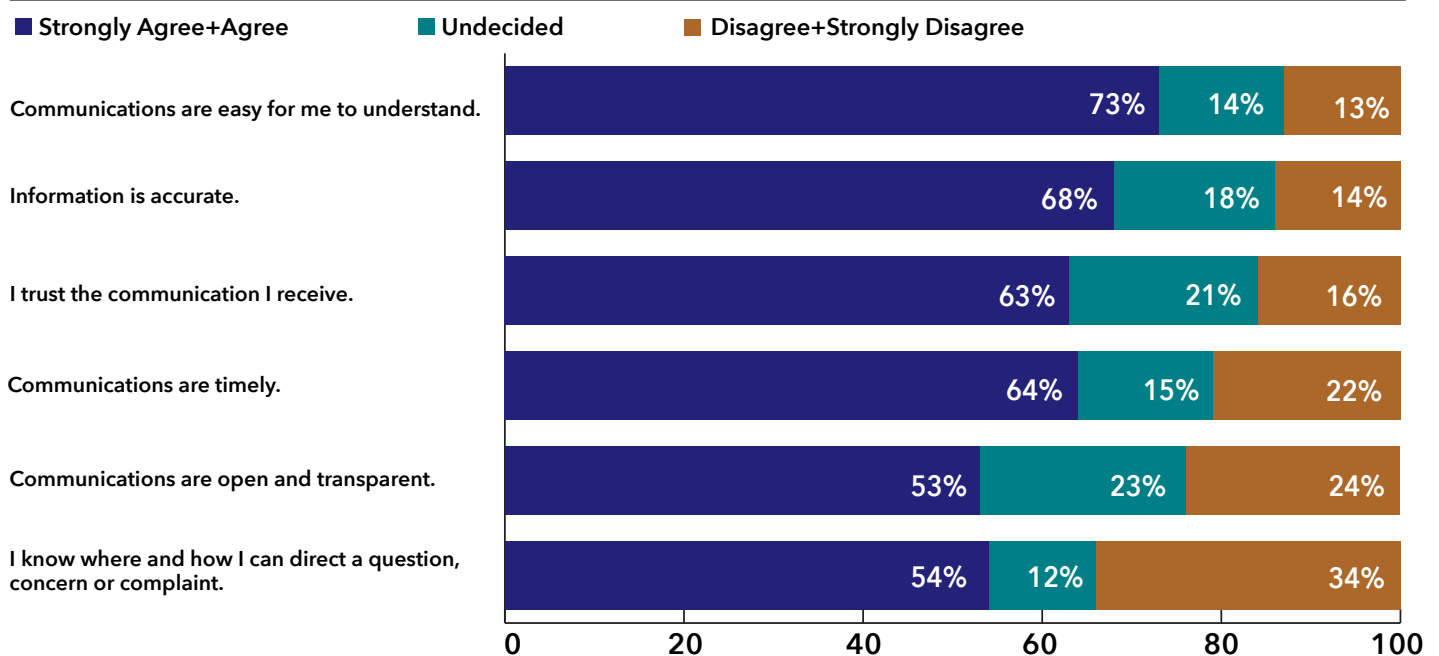


Level of Feeling Informed About School Rules and Issues Related to Safety - **Students**

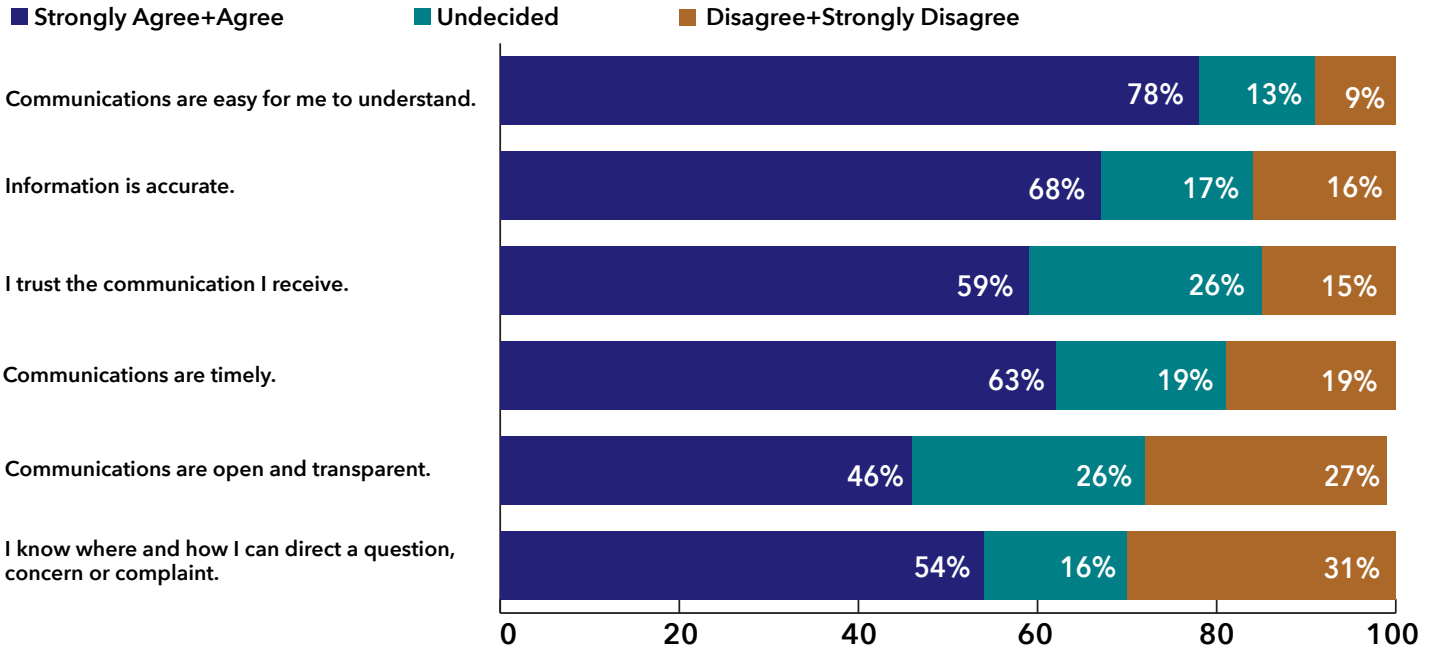


- Three quarters of students or more reported feeling at least moderately informed about a range of school procedures and supports, including behavior rules and consequences, school events and calendar changes, class requirements and offerings, school safety and crisis response, school policies, extracurricular activities and how to get help and support for their learning.
- Students reported lower levels of awareness in areas tied to long-term planning and leadership. At least 30% said they felt only slightly or not-at-all informed about college and career planning, school and student achievements, and career and technical education opportunities. Nearly half (49%) reported knowing little about decisions made by school leaders.
- In the SCOPE Survey, parents, employees, community members* and students were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements related to the quality of communication in ISD 709, with the results shown below and on [pages 38-39](#).
 - Parents and employees report generally positive perceptions on communication fundamentals. About three quarters agree or strongly agree that district communications are easy to understand, and roughly two thirds agree they are accurate and timely.
 - Agreement drops when it comes to navigating the system for information—just over half of parents and employees (54% each) say they know where and how to direct questions, complaints or concerns.

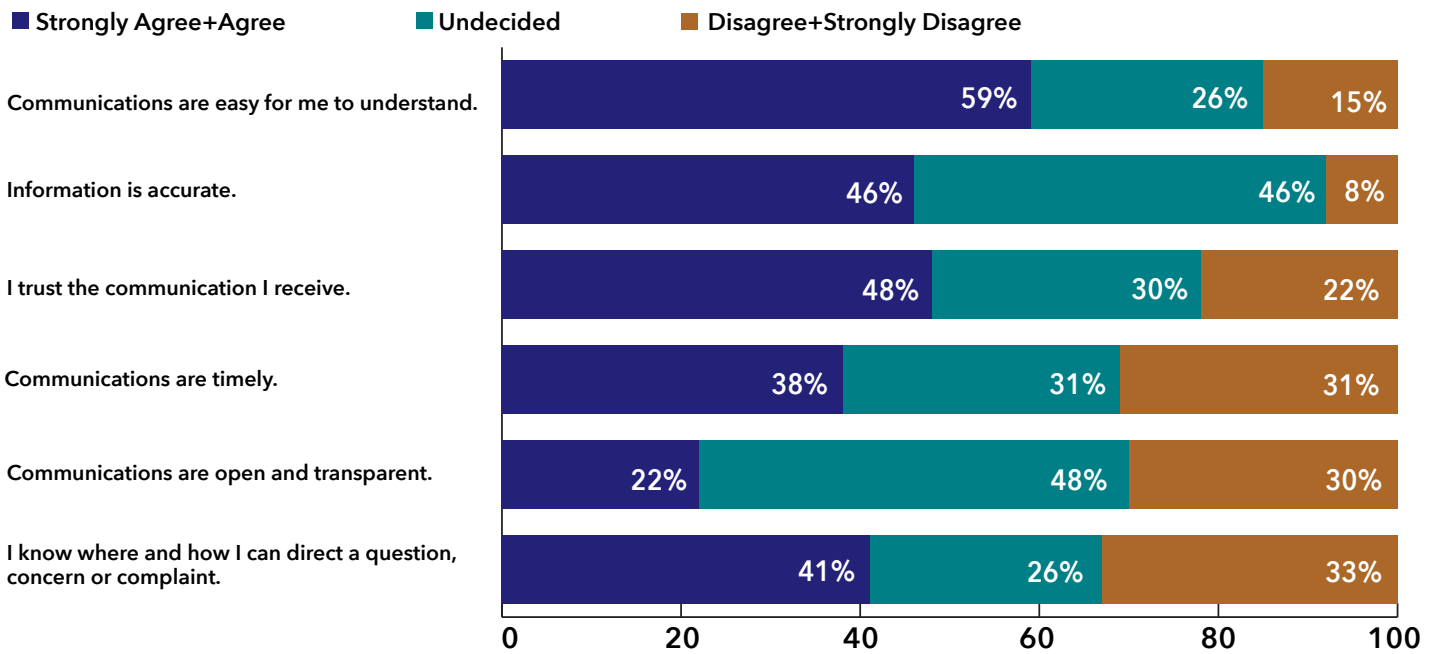
Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communication – *Parents*



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



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

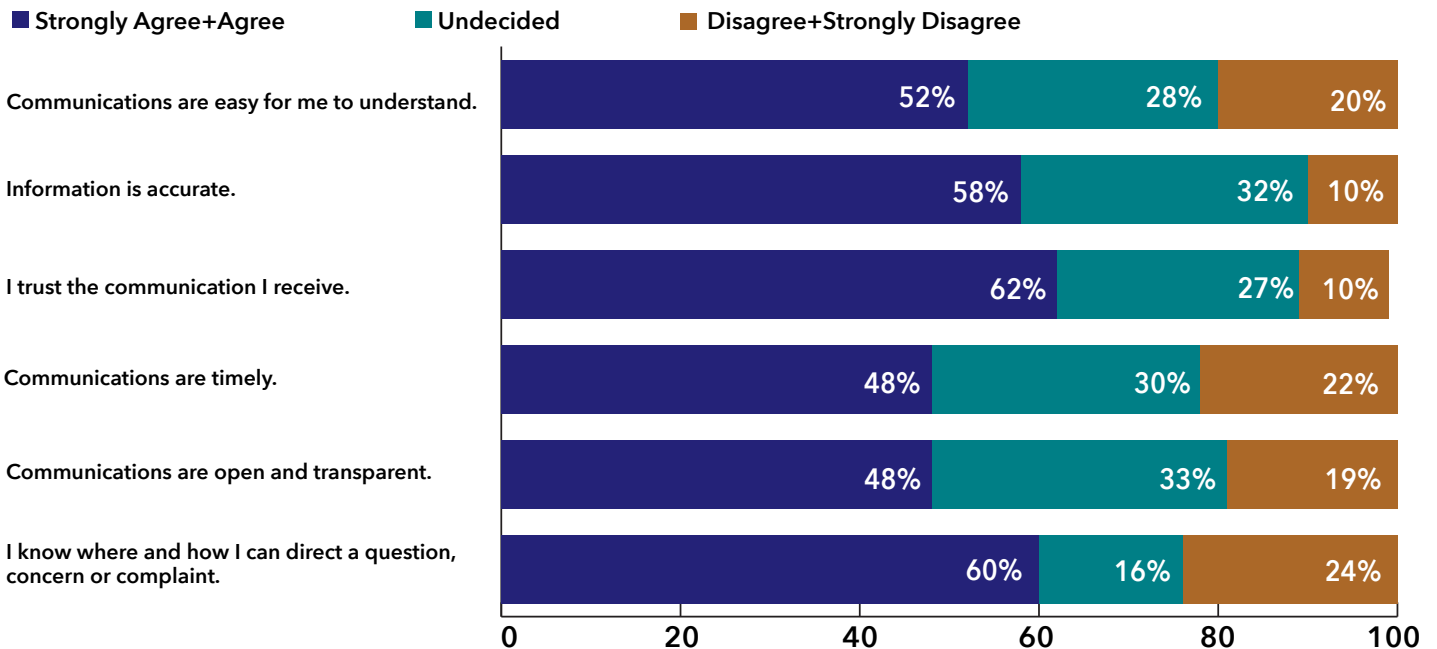


- For both parents and employees, trust in district communications outpaces perceptions of openness and transparency. Among parents, 63% agree communications are trustworthy compared with 53% who agree they are open and transparent. The gap is wider among employees, where 59% agree communications are trustworthy, but fewer than half (46%) view them as open and transparent.
- Community member responses reflect weaker and less settled perceptions overall. While a majority agree that communications are easy to understand, fewer than half agree with any of the other statements. For most measures, undecided responses represent the largest share.

Notably, nearly half of community members (48%) say they trust district communications, while fewer than one quarter (22%) agree they are open and transparent.

- Taken together, the findings indicate that for these audiences, communication is more often viewed as understandable and trustworthy than as transparent or easy to navigate.
- About half of students (48% each) agree that communications from their school are timely and transparent, but agreement is higher for trust, accuracy and knowing where to direct questions (62%, 58% and 60%, respectively), as shown below.

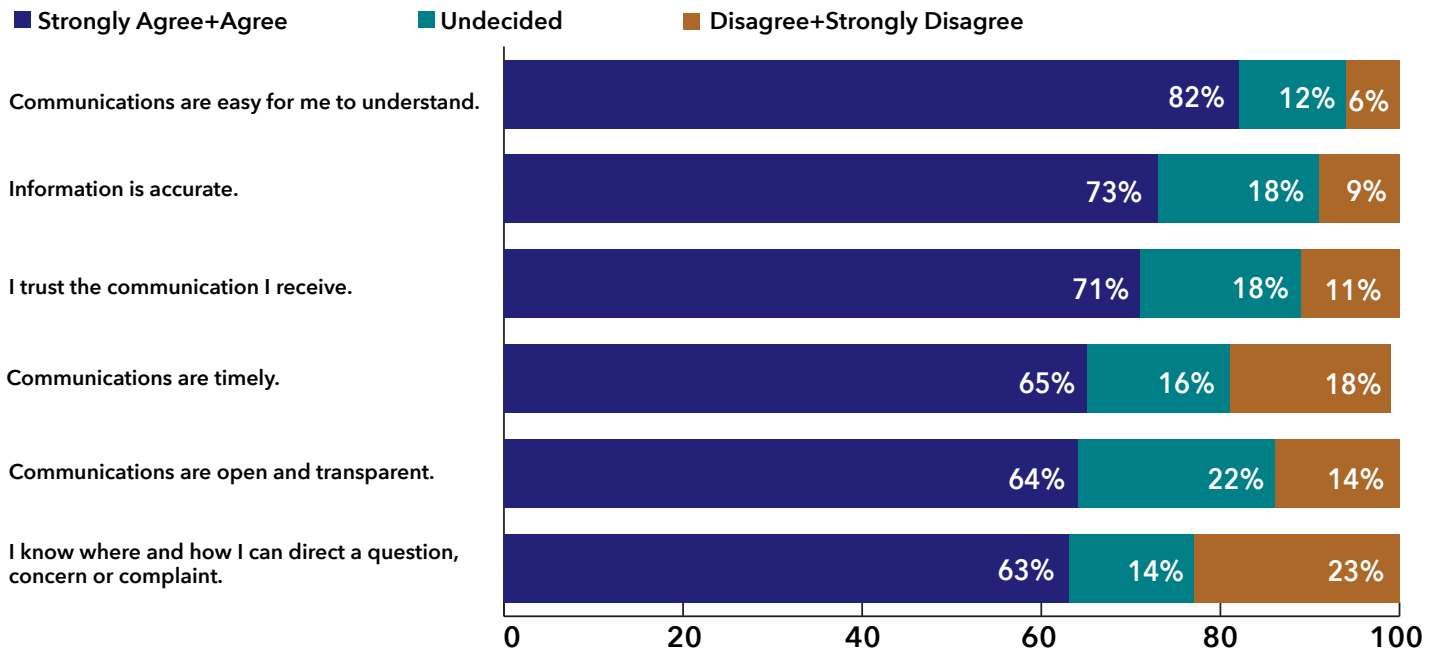
Level of Agreement With Statements About School Communication - *Students*



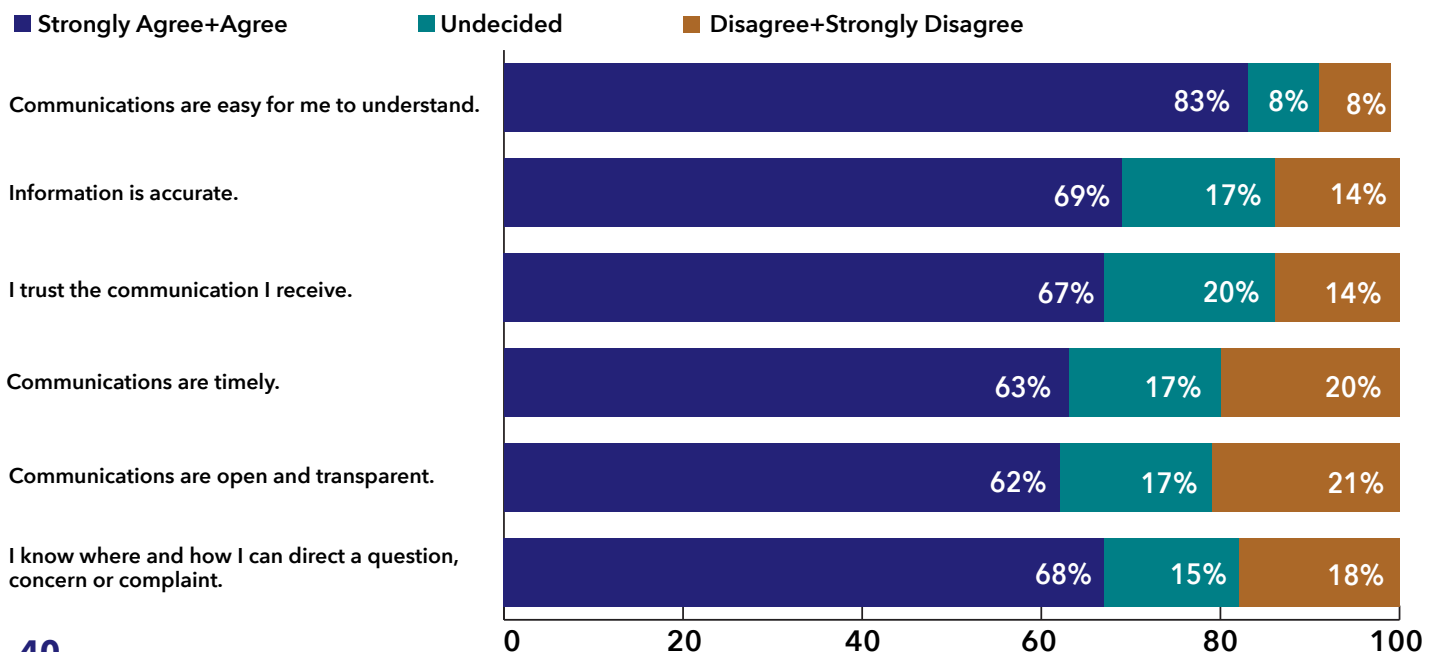
- Parents expressed slightly more favorable views of communication from their child’s school than from the district overall, particularly in terms of clarity, accuracy, trust and knowing where to direct questions. Perceptions of timeliness were nearly identical across school and district communications.

- Employees expressed similar views of communication quality at the district and school/department levels across most measures. Where differences emerged, staff reported greater transparency and more clarity about where to direct questions and concerns within their school or department.

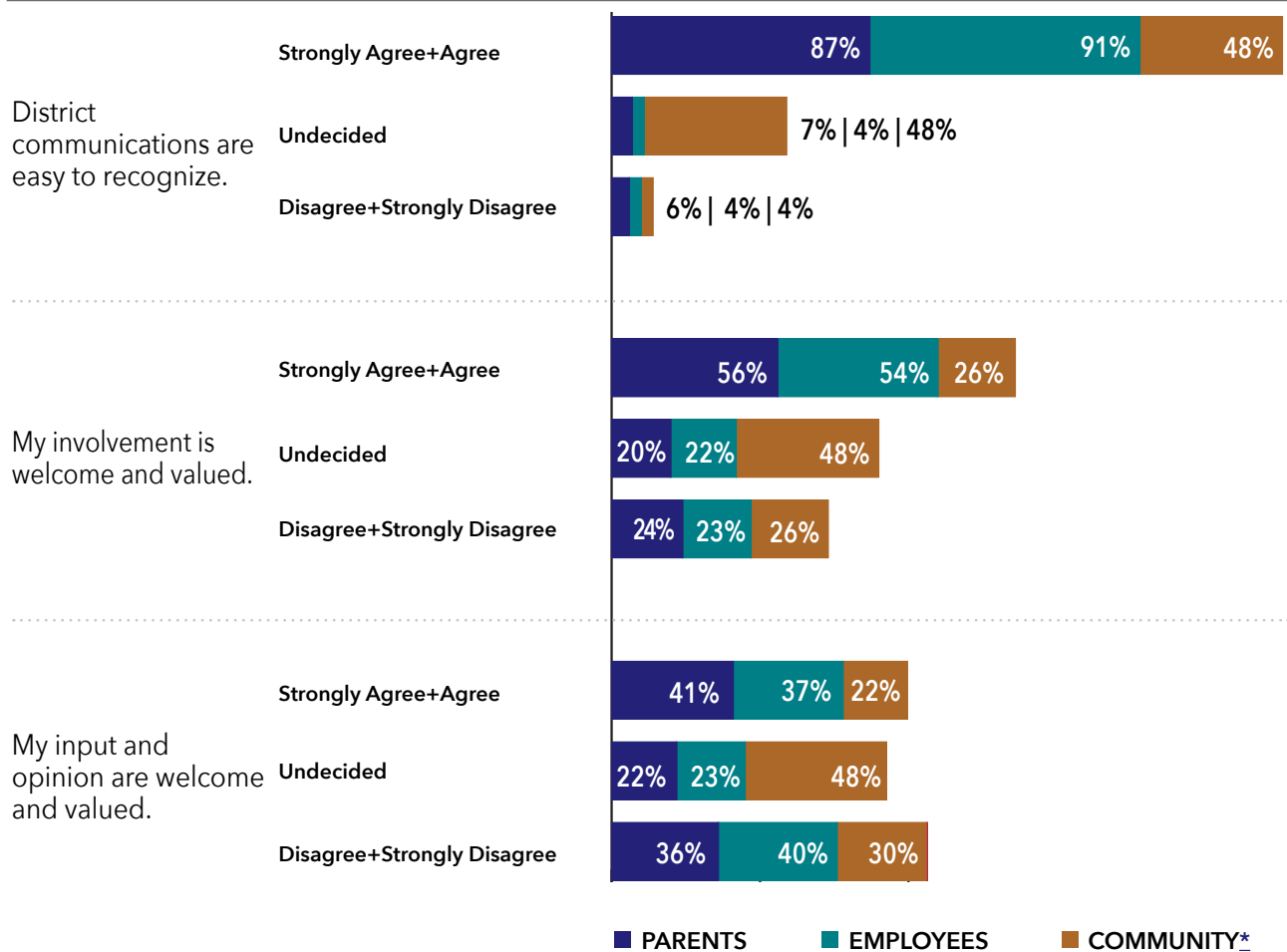
Level of Agreement With Statements About School Communication - *Parents*



Level of Agreement With Statements About Workplace Communication - *Employees*



Sense of Connection with the District



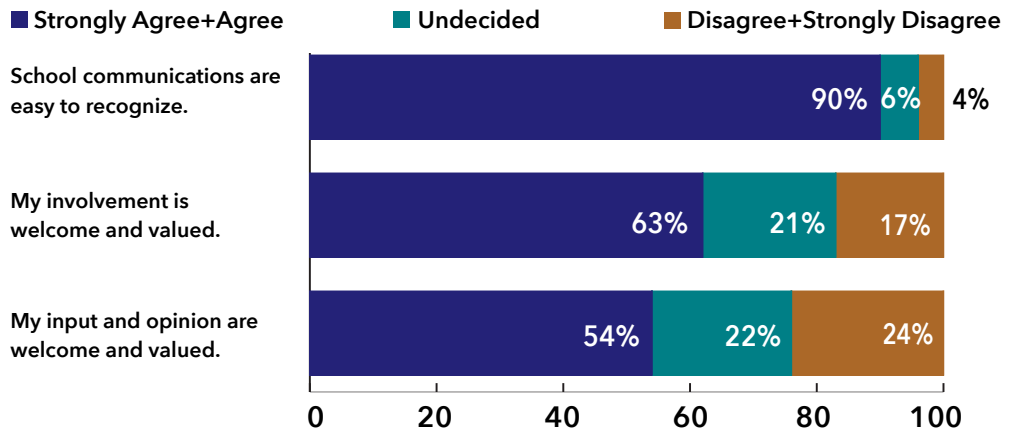
- Survey respondents were also asked about their sense of connection to the district, or for students, to their school.
 - A majority of parents and employees agree or strongly agree that the district welcomes and values their involvement (54% and 56%, respectively), as shown in the chart above. However, agreement drops when these same respondents are asked whether their input and opinion are welcome and valued. Fewer than half agree, and disagreement is at 36% among parents and 40% among employees. This gap echoes themes elsewhere in the audit where

stakeholders described being invited to participate but uncertain their input influenced decisions.

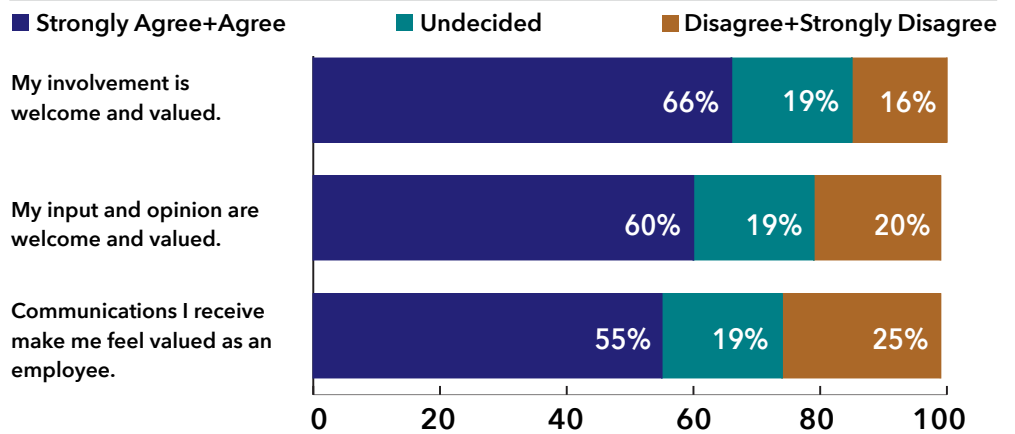
- Among community members, nearly half (48%) are undecided on whether their involvement or input is welcome and valued, suggesting low clarity or confidence in how to contribute.
- While 40% of students agree or strongly agree that their school welcomes and values their input and opinion, one quarter (26%) disagree, indicating an opportunity to invite more student voice.

- Parents and employees alike feel more connected at the school or department level than at the district level, as illustrated in the charts at right. While for both groups perceptions that their involvement is welcome are somewhat stronger at the school/department level, the largest gains in agreement are seen in perceptions regarding input. Agreement that input and opinions are welcome rises from district ratings by 13 percentage points among parents and by 23 percentage points among employees at the school or department level, suggesting that stakeholders experience a greater sense of influence closer to where their day-to-day interactions occur.

Sense of Connection to School - *Parents*



Sense of Connection to Workplace - *Employees*



- Frustration over unreliable internet and cell service within some school buildings surfaced in staff and community focus groups. Participants described these issues and the unavailability of guest Wi-Fi as frequently interfering with programming and support opportunities for families and community members.

Digital Communication Tools

District/ School Websites



- The district uses Finalsite's content management platform for its website (<https://www.isd709.org/>). The Communications Officer serves as ISD 709's primary webmaster. District-level departments are expected to designate a staff member to update their webpages as part of their assigned responsibilities; however, the effectiveness of this approach varies.
- In practice, responsibility for maintaining department pages is often assigned informally—frequently to a department leader's administrative assistant—rather than through a deliberate assessment of staff capacity, technical skills, or access to current information. As a result, content updates can be inconsistent and delayed.
- Currently a staff member at each school—typically someone in a technology role—receives a stipend to maintain the school-level pages. (Auditors were informed that the district may eliminate stipends for this work next school year). The Finalsite platform includes a "duplicate across sites" feature that allows a single page's content to be automatically replicated across multiple other pages using different templates. For example, the district-level Communications Office page appears within individual school websites in their respective design formats. This functionality reduces the number of pages staff must maintain and promotes consistency of information.
- The auditor used the [WebAIM website accessibility tool](#) to assess the homepage and individual school homepages for accessibility issues. This tool checks for potential barriers that might affect users with disabilities, including visual, hearing, motor or cognitive impairments. Ten errors were found: five missing form labels (visually hidden but located at the bottom of the homepage) and five broken ARIA references—the labels that help screen readers interpret interactive features—within the embedded calendar. Additionally, the tool found one color contrast error involving the "Powered by Finalsite" icon.

The tool also identified 74 alerts, which indicate potential accessibility issues that require manual (i.e., human) review, including:

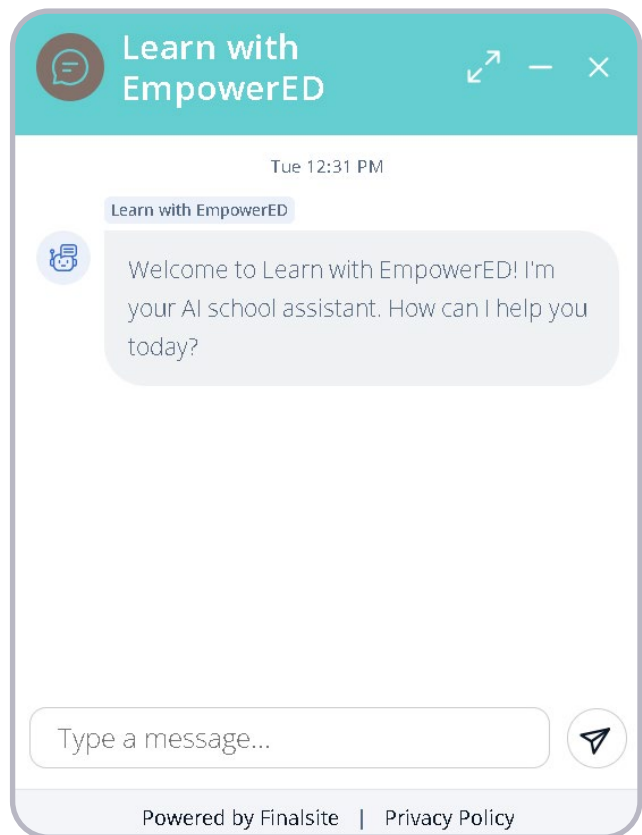
 - Six instances of long alternative text, in which image descriptions may be more detailed than necessary or duplicative of nearby text; and
 - More than 60 redundant links, which occur when multiple links on a page lead to the same destination.

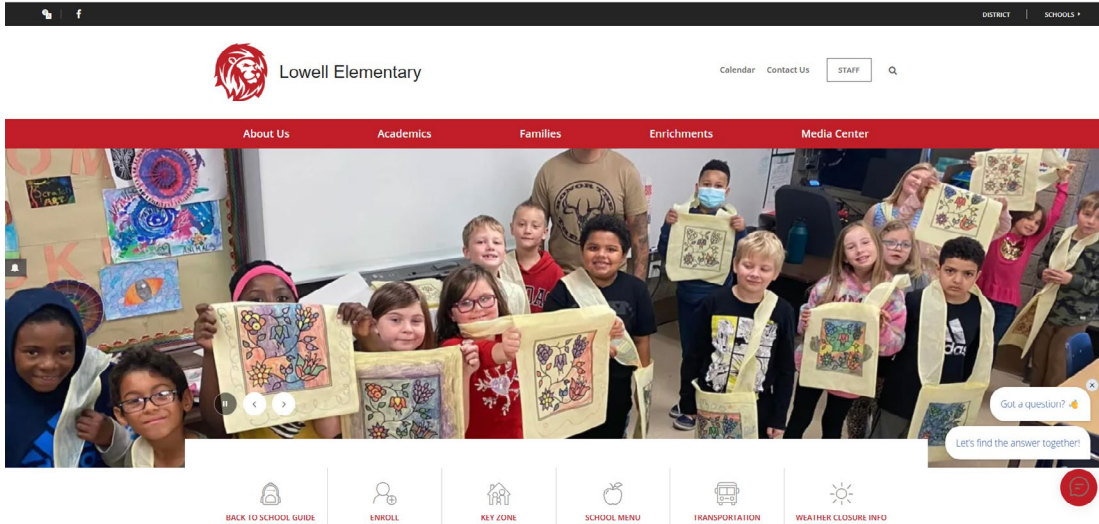
Both may create unnecessary repetition for screen reader and keyboard users.

- WAVE also identified 32 accessibility features and 70 structural elements on the homepage, which are potentially helpful for accessibility but require contextual review to ensure they are correctly implemented and used consistently.
- Assessments of school homepages indicated the same errors related to missing form labels, broken ARIA references and color contrast, along with varying numbers of similar alerts, features and structural elements requiring manual review.
- A link to the district’s website accessibility statement is easily found and appears in the footer of every page. The link opens a web page that displays the text of the School Board’s outdated 2018 website accessibility policy, instead of the current one, revised and updated in 2025. The statement contains two links to a complaint form, both of which return “404 - Page Not Found” errors; however, the page text does include contact information for submitting complaints.
- Some content, e.g., policies, forms and instructional plans, is posted as PDFs rather than HTML, requiring users to download, open and zoom in to view the content on mobile devices. PDFs can also be less accessible to individuals using assistive technology such as screen readers.
- The inconsistent behavior of internal links—some open in new tabs while others open in the same tab—may cause confusion for visitors.
- Much of the content on district-level pages is “evergreen” content that provides useful reference information. The homepage has a prominent “News & Announcements” section; however, during much of the audit period, the same three stories

appeared—one from December 2025, and two from October 2025—indicating that the website is not frequently updated with current news. A review of the News Archive confirmed this, with typically one or two news stories in a month and often several months between posted stories.

- An AI-powered chat bot (pictured below) was recently integrated into the district website in November 2025.
 - Based on several test questions posed by the auditor, the feature generally returned helpful information, along with direct links to relevant web pages.
 - Although focus group participants frequently referenced the website, none mentioned the chat bot feature, most likely due to the recency of its launch and limited time for stakeholder awareness.

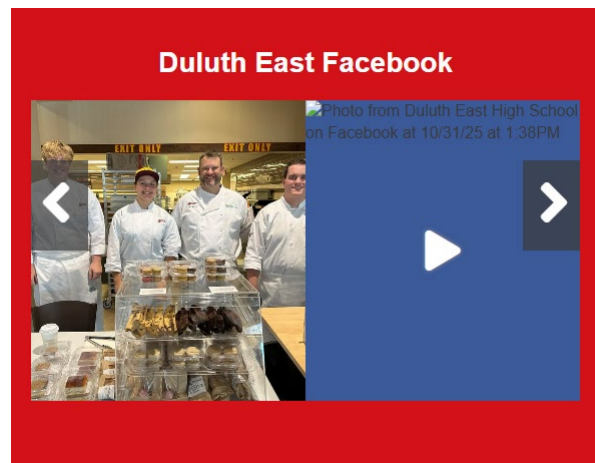




- Branding is present and consistent throughout most district-level pages. Most school pages (example pictured above) feature a different color scheme and a school-specific logo or generic paw print logo in lieu of district branding elements. However, page layouts are very similar across schools, creating familiarity for users, and a link to the district homepage is displayed in the top right corner of each school homepage.
- School navigation is also similar across buildings serving the same grade levels (e.g., elementary), although some schools offer content in many more areas than others. Also, at least one school includes a navigation link that all other schools include, but the page has no content. That said, school pages share a consistent footer that provides easy access to most third-party platforms used by parents and/or staff.
- While some schools display a calendar specific to their events, other schools' calendars display only district meetings and events or nothing at all. Because the calendar feature is visible on each site, visitors may assume it reflects that school's activities; when no school events appear,

it can suggest there are none scheduled rather than that the calendar is not being regularly updated.

- Text styles change throughout the school pages, using different fonts and text colors and changing text justification.
- Many of the school pages feature an embedded social media feed displaying the school's most recent Instagram or Facebook posts; however, many of the post visuals are not loading properly (example pictured).



- Some information on school pages is out of date. For example, the Principal pages on several school sites contain the same "welcome to the new principal" text that

was posted when the leader first came to the school.

- On many school pages, school news is difficult to locate and/or not timely. In many cases, the School News link takes the visitor to an archive of the school's newsletters, created in Smore, a platform for creating templated newsletters, and emailed to families through ParentSquare. In some cases, the most recent newsletter is from a prior school year. Other schools do not post news.
- Focus group and survey comments reveal that for them the district and school websites are not functioning as reliable, user-friendly hubs for information.
 - Staff and parents alike described the sites as unreliable for finding current information and "needlessly complicated" to navigate.
 - Participants said they primarily use the site to access links to third-party platforms because time-sensitive information is only pushed out through ParentSquare and rarely posted to the website for searching or later reference.
 - Parents frequently cited outdated pages, incorrect or incomplete calendars and broken or missing links across school websites, with some families reporting they no longer use the website at all.
- Although the current site is viewed as an improvement over the previous version, staff members expressed confusion over who has editing access, who is responsible for updates and whether authority sits at the school, department or district level.
 - Staff felt there has been no systematic training, guidance or scheduled review process to support consistent content management over time.
- At the same time, the Communications Officer shared that when individuals are assigned website responsibilities, she reaches out to offer one-on-one support or training resources.
- The difference between staff perceptions and this practice suggests a disconnect between existing procedures and staff awareness or experience of them.

District Staff-Only Website

- The district website has a "Staff" link, which takes employees to a password-protected staff-only website. Also built in Finalsite, the staff-only website uses the same page templates as the public-facing site, with a dedicated staff navigation menu embedded throughout.
- Each district department is responsible for maintaining its section of the staff site. Content updates appear inconsistent across departments. In some cases, pages are not regularly maintained due to competing priorities or staff turnover when responsibilities are not formally reassigned. In some instances, then, the task falls to the Communications Officer. A message on the landing page notes, "Please be aware that this side of the website is still being built out..."
- The auditor's review found many resources that are likely useful to employees, including information and forms related to business services, human resources, travel, immigration enforcement protocols, print shop services and grant proposals. However, much of the content is organized according to the district's departmental structure rather than according to how staff typically search for information. For example, reimbursement and professional leave forms are housed under "Business

Services” because that department oversees them, even though employees may not intuitively look there. In response to feedback that staff could not locate certain resources, the Communications Officer added direct links on the staff landing page to improve access.

- While a searchable staff directory exists within the staff site, the available contact information does not include job titles, limiting its usefulness when employees are trying to determine whom to contact for specific needs.

District/School Social Media

- ISD 709’s social media presence is primarily managed by the Communications Officer. Although there are a few department-specific Facebook pages, the district is endeavoring to consolidate them with the district’s official page.
- School social media pages are maintained by volunteer staff members—in some cases, the school principal—and some pages are more active than others, especially following a volunteer’s departure from the district.
- The auditor analyzed the district’s official social media pages for frequency of posts and engagement over two two-week periods (April 1-15, 2025, and October 1-15, 2025) and found the following:

- **ISD 709’s Facebook page** (<https://www.facebook.com/duluthpublicschools>) has more than 13,000 followers. Based on the two-week samplings, the district posts approximately 3-5 times per week with an average engagement rate of 1.7%. For the education industry, Hootsuite

reports an average engagement rate per Facebook post of 2.2% in 2025.

Posts typically announce school closures or upcoming events and opportunities, or they are celebratory in nature, often highlighting student and/or staff accomplishments as well as various holidays and educational appreciation days/months. Posts consistently include the familiar district hashtag #isd709EmpowerED, along with other descriptive hashtags. Posts that included a video or district-specific photo typically had higher engagement than other posts.

- **ISD 709’s Instagram page** (<https://www.instagram.com/duluthpublicschools/>) has 1,916 followers. Based on the sampling periods, the district posts up to 4 times per week with an average engagement

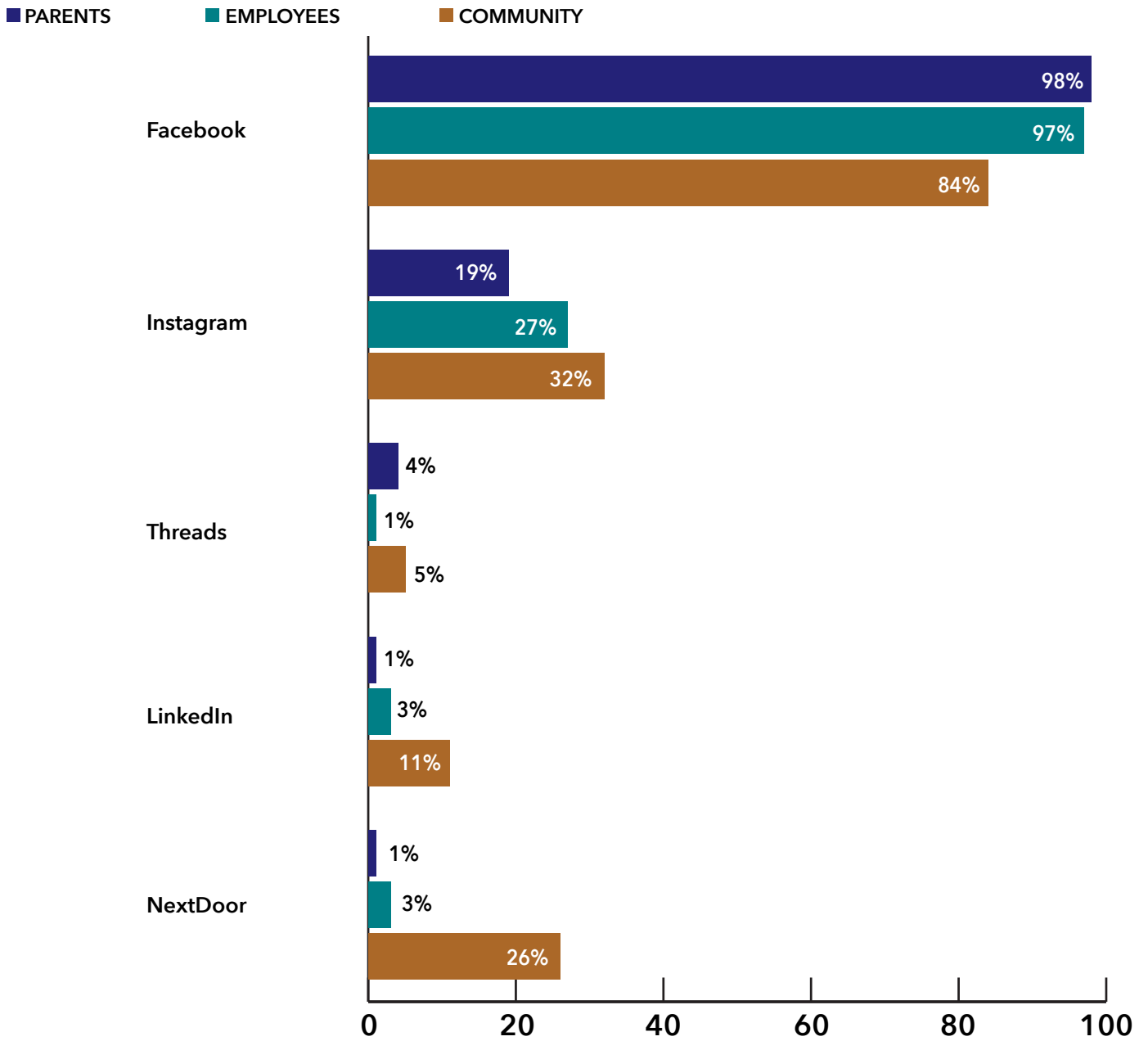


rate of 0.7%. For the education industry, Hootsuite reports an average engagement rate per Instagram post of 4.2% in 2025.

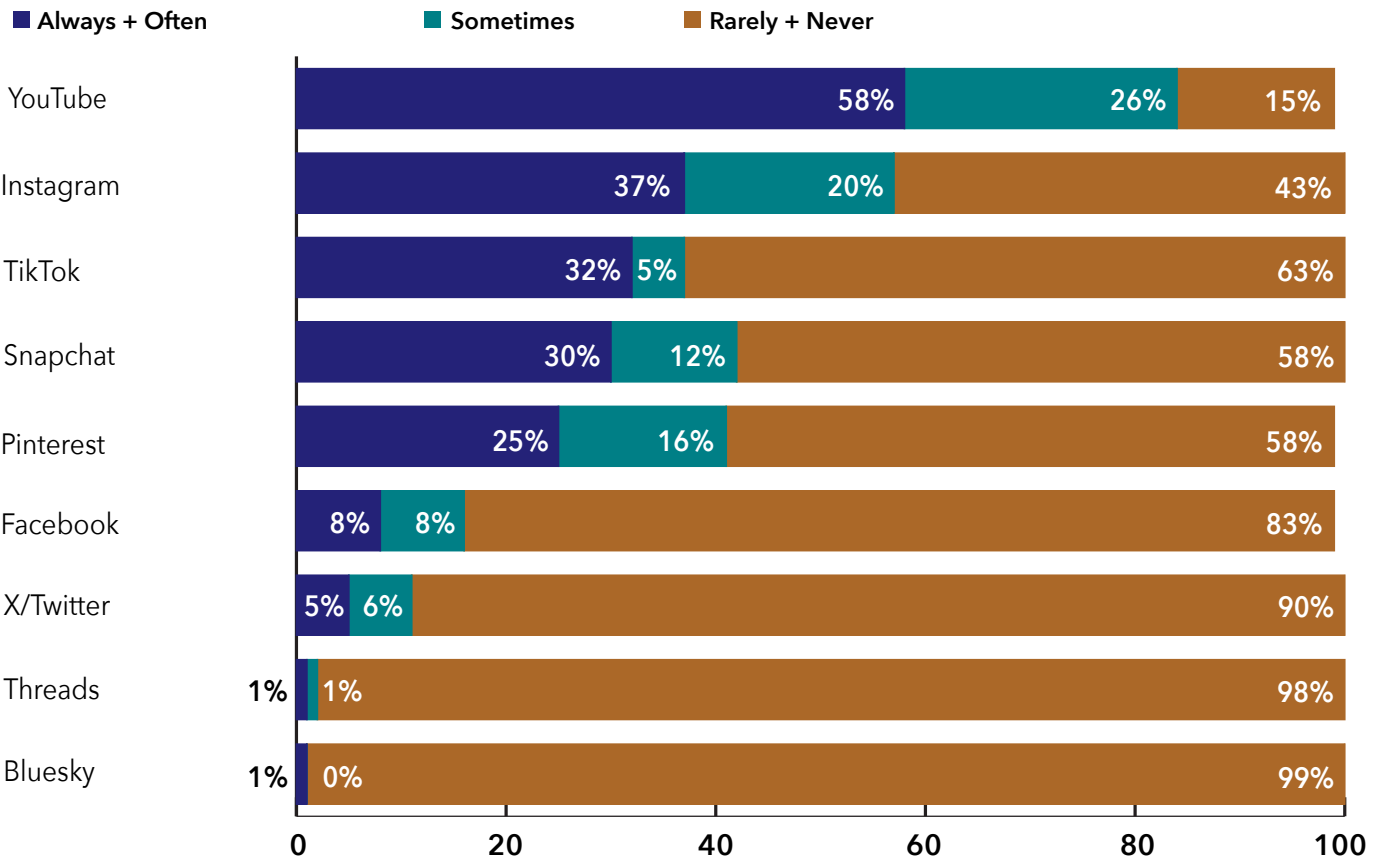
All of the posts in this sampling shared the same content featured in ISD 709's Facebook posts during the same time period. Many posts were images of flyers; however, accompanying post text typically summarized or repeated the information. Posts consistently included the hashtag #isd709EmpowerED, along with other descriptive hashtags.

- **ISD 709's LinkedIn page** (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/duluth-public-schools/>) has 487 followers. Based on the sampling periods, the district shares certain posts featured on other platforms. Engagement on most posts was minimal.
- The **district's Threads account** (<https://www.threads.com/@duluthpublicschools>) has 401 followers. Based on the sampling periods, the district posts infrequently—a few times per month—sharing certain posts featured on other platforms. Engagement on most posts was minimal.
- The **district's X account** (x.com/DuluthSchools) has 1,542 followers; however, a "pinned" post alerts followers that the account is not updated regularly.
- In the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked which social media platforms they use for updates about ISD 709. Facebook was cited by 98% of parents, 97% of employees and 84% of community members, significantly outpacing all other platforms, including Instagram, Threads, LinkedIn and Nextdoor as shown in the chart on the next page.
- Although survey results show that 26% of community members report relying on Nextdoor for district information, this figure is based on just 27 total community responses. Open-ended comments indicate that many stakeholders are unfamiliar with Nextdoor altogether or do not think of it as a place to seek school district information, raising questions about the effectiveness of staff time spent maintaining it.
- When asked about their general social media use (not specifically for district information), students reported meaningful engagement with only two platforms. Eighty-four percent said they use YouTube at least sometimes, and 57% said the same for Instagram. For all other platforms, a majority indicated they rarely or never use them.
- Across focus group and survey comments, participants expressed mixed engagement with district and school social media, with some parents valuing it for visibility into day-to-day school activities and others not using it at all. It was most often described as supplementary and best suited for highlights and storytelling, rather than a preferred or reliable source for need-to-know communication.
- Comments also suggested that the district should leverage social media more to share positive stories, especially to reach community members who otherwise rely on local news media. Speaking to this, an employee commented, "We need to do more to get the good news and feel-good stories 'out there,' to be picked up by local media and on our own platforms."

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



Social media platforms used by students



District/School Video Channels

- ISD 709’s main YouTube channel** (<https://www.youtube.com/@DuluthSchools>) has 500 subscribers and 689 videos. As noted on the district’s School Board webpage, the channel is used to broadcast live streams of school board meetings (run by the Technology Department) and to house recordings of board meetings, including listening sessions and committee meetings. At the time of the auditor’s review, the two most recent recorded videos were of meetings from August 2025, and all other recorded videos were from 2024 or earlier.
- The Communications Office maintains a YouTube channel, but it is used for video storage and not promoted publicly.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) of the school system and external opportunities (O) and threats (T) in the wider environment—known as a SWOT analysis—affecting the ability of ISD 709 to achieve its communication goals. Each item is addressed, either as something to build on or try to mitigate, in the recommendations of this report.

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
INTERNAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District leaders and the Communications Officer acknowledge gaps in strategic communication and have demonstrated openness to improvement by engaging in a comprehensive audit to inform more planned and systematized practices. • Strong school-level relationships among staff, families and community partners create a foundation for effective communication and engagement with students and families. • ISD 709 offers a broad range of programs and opportunities for students, including diverse academic pathways, electives and specialized offerings that many families view as a distinguishing strength of the district. • Equity and inclusion are clearly embedded in district values and messaging, providing a consistent anchor for future communication efforts. • The district actively cultivates community partnerships to enhance programming quality, expand access to services and support students and families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district does not yet have a strategic communication plan to guide priorities, messaging and audience targeting, though this audit report will aid in the development of such a plan. • The Communications Officer is not consistently included by leaders early in discussions and decisions on issues that affect families, staff and the community, limiting the district’s ability to support clear and proactive communication. • Limited communication staffing and unclear expectations for shared communication responsibilities constrain the district’s ability to expand or sustain highly effective communication efforts. • The district communicates inconsistently and with insufficient depth about high-stakes issues such as funding, staffing, curriculum and long-term plans. • Leadership turnover has contributed to communication practices that are driven by individuals rather than systems, resulting in inconsistency and unclear expectations. • Diffuse responsibility and unclear decision-making processes hinder timely information flow and leave frontline staff without sufficient context to communicate effectively.

EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values-based and community-focused content generates strong engagement, underscoring the need for clearer planning, framing and expectations for dialogue around complex or sensitive topics. • Strong pride in local schools and positive school-level relationships highlight a disconnect between first-hand, lived experiences and broader, negative district perceptions that could be addressed through more targeted, substantive and audience-centered communication. • Broad recognition of the district’s people, programs and commitment to students provides a platform to more clearly articulate the district’s value proposition and align communication with what families and community members value most. • Stakeholder expectations for clearer transparency and meaningful two-way communication create momentum for improving how feedback, decision making and follow-through are communicated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited direct communication with non-parent residents increases reliance on third-party narratives, reducing the district’s ability to shape understanding and build support among community members and taxpayers. • Lingering distrust tied to historical leadership decisions and engagement approaches continues to influence how current communication is received, regardless of intent or content. • Mixed and often negative perceptions of the district—particularly among community members and students—pose an ongoing risk to credibility and public understanding if not addressed through clearer, more substantive communication. • Persistent perceptions of an east-west divide undermine confidence in equity efforts and complicate districtwide messaging about fairness, access and shared priorities. • Budget pressures and enrollment growth strain staff capacity and morale, reducing the district’s ability to respond nimbly and consistently and, over time, threatening to erode trust and confidence among families and community members.

Benchmarking of Results

National Benchmark: SCOPE Survey Scores

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and community members. The auditor used this data to identify strengths and weaknesses of ISD 709's communication program, many of which are included in the Key Findings section of this report.

An additional value the SCOPE Survey brings is the ability to compare the district's survey results on issues that matter most in school communication with the results of surveys conducted by school districts across the United States. A sampling of ISD 709's results compared to the 150+ districts that have participated in the survey since its inception is presented in the SCOPE Scorecard on the next page.

Student responses, while collected, are not included on the scorecard due to a smaller comparable national dataset.

Interpreting Ratings

The rating numbers for each question, based on a 1-5 scale, correspond to the following descriptions depending on the type of question participants answered.

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

2. **When participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with specific statements, they responded using the following scale:**
 - 5 = Strongly agree
 - 4 = Agree
 - 3 = Undecided
 - 2 = Disagree
 - 1 = Strongly disagree
3. **When participants were asked to provide ratings about their perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications, they responded using the following scale:**
 - 5 = Excellent
 - 4 = Above average
 - 3 = Average
 - 2 = Below average
 - 1 = Very poor

Interpreting Score Differences

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

When comparing a district's unique score with the national average score, the meaningfulness of the difference depends on the context of the question and its response options.

A difference of 0.5 between one score and another—for example, between 3.0 and 3.5—represents a 10 percent difference in the response range. If two scores fall within the same numerical range (3 in this example), they might both suggest the same general sentiment ("moderately informed"). However, if two scores fall into different numerical ranges, they indicate very different sentiments (e.g., 3 is "moderately informed" but 2.5 is "slightly informed").

SCOPE Scorecard

		Duluth	Natl. Avg.	Natl. High	Natl. Low
PARENTS	General Perceptions				
	Overall perception of the district	3.3	3.8	4.7	2.6
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.4	3.8	4.6	3.1
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About district events (meetings, competitions, arts, productions, etc.)	3.1	3.4	4.1	2.5
	About crises/serious incidents	3.5	3.6	4.2	2.8
	About my student's progress in school	3.3	3.7	4.4	3.1
	About how I can support my student's learning	3.1	3.4	4.1	2.4
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.6	3.8	4.5	3.1
Trustworthiness of communication from my child's school.	3.8	4.1	4.5	3.4	
EMPLOYEES	General Perceptions				
	Overall perception of the district	3.2	3.7	4.5	2.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication	3.3	3.6	4.3	2.6
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About crises/serious incidents	3.6	3.5	4.2	2.8
	About how I can support student achievement	3.8	3.7	4.4	3.0
	About how I can best represent the district as an ambassador	3.1	3.3	4.0	2.4
	About topics that make me feel valued as an employee	3.4	3.3	4.1	2.3
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.5	3.7	4.3	2.7	
Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department	3.7	4.0	4.5	3.3	
COMMUNITY	General perceptions:				
	Overall perception of the district	3.0	3.4	4.5	2.1
	Overall satisfaction with communication	2.8	3.2	4.3	2.0
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About student success/achievements	2.5	3.0	4.2	2.0
	About district finances	2.2	2.5	3.6	1.7
	About school safety	2.8	2.9	4.0	1.7
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
Trustworthiness of communication from the district	3.1	3.4	4.3	2.2	

National Benchmark: *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

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

To date, rubrics have been completed for the following critical function areas:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Marketing/Branding Communications
- Crisis Communications
- Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns
- Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications

Benchmarking against the rubrics differs from other parts of the communication audit process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on survey results, what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews, or discovered in district materials. Instead, **it addresses how ISD 709's communication program compares to national, benchmarked standards of excellence in school public relations.**

Benchmarked Areas

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

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

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

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

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

CFA 6: Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns addresses specific instances in which districts must receive voter approval before spending the district's existing funds and/or levying a tax to raise funds for specific purposes. Before residents vote, there are foundational steps for building informed consent through communications on a district's operating budget, capital project proposal, millage increase or other bond/finance election campaign.

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

Benchmarking Scale

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

- **Emerging.** The program is in the early stages of development and largely responsive to immediate needs or problems, with minimal proactive planning. Goals, if articulated, are loosely defined with minimal alignment with district goals and objectives.
- **Established.** The program includes a series of defined approaches based on some research. Strategies, tactics and goals are defined. The program aligns with district goals and objectives. Some evaluation may occur.
- **Exemplary.** The program is conducted according to an articulated plan following the four-step strategic public relations planning process, a model of communications known by the acronym RPIE (Research, Plan, Implement,

Evaluate). The program is aligned with and integrated into district strategic plans. It is supported through policy, training and resources. Ongoing evaluation to improve progress is embedded into operations.

ISD 709 and the *Rubrics of Practice*

When considering ISD 709's communication program in light of this benchmarking scale and the essential program components of each benchmarked area, as detailed in the *Rubrics of Practice*, the auditor found the district to be **emerging** in its Comprehensive Professional Communication Program, Internal Communications and Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns; and **established** in its Parent/Family Communications, Marketing/Branding Communications, Crisis Communications and Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Communications.

The [Recommendations](#) in this report provide insight and advice that will help ISD 709's communication program continue to enhance its efforts in each benchmarked area. However, the Communications Officer can regularly use the *Rubrics of Practice* to make comparisons against national benchmarks. That might involve including self-assessment via the rubrics as an evaluation measure in the strategic communication plan, for example.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the 2023 edition of the *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures* is available in the NSPRA Online Store at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023>.

Recommendations

The findings of this audit suggest ISD 709 is at an inflection point: Strong communication instincts and leadership intent are in place, but greater coordination, consistency and capacity are needed to achieve lasting impact. Recent leadership transitions at the Cabinet level have shaped both internal dynamics and community perceptions, making this an especially critical time to build systems that endure.

The audit identified meaningful strengths on which the district can build. The Communications Officer demonstrates sound strategic instincts and has already introduced thoughtful processes, documentation and planning tools despite operating as a one-person shop. District leaders expressed a shared desire to build on these efforts by systematizing communication practices and elevating the role of communication in expanding reach, strengthening understanding and earning community trust and support. The district also actively cultivates partnerships with local organizations to enhance programming and student support, providing an additional foundation to amplify impact.

At the same time, the audit revealed structural constraints that limit how far these efforts can realistically extend. The scope and pace of district communication demands leave limited room for proactive planning, coordination and follow-through, particularly during periods of heightened activity or crisis. While some refinements and new approaches may be achievable within existing structures, many of the opportunities identified in this audit depend on having sufficient professional capacity to consistently support and maintain the systems the district is seeking to build.

Finally, findings underscore the importance of shared responsibility paired with clearer coordination. Staff widely recognize that communication is part of everyone's role; however, internal communication practices are often shaped by individual preferences about timing, channels and level of detail rather than districtwide norms. Fully capitalizing on this shared responsibility will require clearer expectations, common standards and coordination so communication efforts reinforce one another and support the district's broader goal of building understanding, trust and confidence over time.

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

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

Summary of Recommendations

1. Align communication staffing and capacity with district expectations and stakeholder needs.
2. Develop and implement a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.
3. Strengthen internal communication systems to improve information flow and staff readiness.
4. Increase transparency around decision-making processes and the role of stakeholder input to build and sustain trust in district leadership.
5. Shift district communication toward more targeted, substantive and audience-centered content.
6. Streamline and clarify the district's communication ecosystem to reduce overload and improve access.

Recommendation 1:

Align communication staffing and capacity with district expectations and stakeholder needs.

The communication demands of ISD 709 and its stakeholders exceed the realistic capacity of a single, full-time district communications position. The district's size, operational complexity and highly engaged stakeholder environment require sustained attention to routine communications, strategic planning and crisis response—often simultaneously.

In interviews, the Communications Officer described a near-constant crisis environment, noting that the longest recent stretch without a crisis was approximately two weeks. The auditor found that routine communications, such as website updates and planned initiatives, often pause for days or weeks when high-stakes events arise. During the audit period alone, the Communications Officer managed communications related to a wildlife sighting on campus, a serious medical incident at a school and the local impacts of federal immigration enforcement activity, while also responding to media inquiries, issuing official statements, addressing community concerns, managing threatening messages and coordinating logistics for a visit from a sitting U.S. senator. As these urgent responsibilities accumulated, numerous routine and strategic projects were necessarily deferred.

This constant triage environment also limits the district's ability to move from reactive to proactive communication. Focus group participants consistently praised the Communications Officer's efforts and professionalism while also emphasizing that the current level of communication staffing constrains what the district can reasonably deliver or sustain over time.

Audit findings reinforce this concern. Employees reported fragmented information flow, inconsistent messaging and uncertainty about where to go for timely, accurate updates, challenges that are exacerbated when communication responsibilities are dispersed across departments without centralized coordination. As an employee observed, "We don't have a lot of people working in communication. So much is owned by a lot of different people." The resulting piecemeal approach places additional strain on the Communications Officer and has not produced consistently reliable outcomes.

ISD 709 leadership has taken steps to strengthen community engagement efforts, as demonstrated by recent investments in platforms such as ThoughtExchange, SchoolMint and ParentSquare. These tools reflect a meaningful commitment to expanding outreach and modernizing communication channels. However, technology alone cannot carry the work. Effective use requires strategic oversight, content development, coordination and consistent follow-through. Without sufficient staff capacity to manage, monitor and refine these efforts, even well-intentioned investments risk underperforming and limiting the district's ability to fully realize their value. For example, the Communications Officer recently had to intervene when two leaders planned to launch overlapping stakeholder feedback exchanges to avoid stakeholder confusion and message fatigue.

This capacity concern is not new. In 2021, prior to hiring the current Communications Officer, the district received a communications structure analysis outlining staffing options. The consultants' review noted that maintaining a single-position model would likely require narrowing the scope of work, describing the role's existing responsibilities as a "full plate." Alternatively, it recommended adding a second position to carry the existing scope of work and expand the function. Ultimately,

the district retained a single-position model without narrowing expectations. As a result, the gap between desired outcomes and available capacity persists.

While there is no national staffing standard for school communications, comparative data provide helpful context. Results from the 2024 NSPRA Membership Profile Survey (<https://www.nspr.org/Membership/NSPRA-Membership-Survey-Reports/2024-NSPRA-Membership-Profile-Survey-Results>) indicate that ISD 709's staffing model is atypical for districts of similar size and budget:

- Among districts enrolling 5,000–9,999 students, 57% employ between two and seven communications staff, while 42% operate with a single staff member.
- 61% of one-person communication departments are found in districts enrolling fewer than 5,000 students.
- Just 11% of districts with annual budgets of more than \$150 million rely on a single communications professional, while 86% employ between two and 15 communications staff members—and half employ at least five staff members.
- Only 9% of one-person communication departments serve districts with budgets of \$150 million or more.
- Among districts with budgets of at least \$150 million, 63% allocate more than \$150,000 annually to communications. (The current-year budget for the Communications Office in ISD 709 is approximately \$123,000.)
- Of districts that allocate \$50,000–\$149,000 annually to communications, 68% have total district budgets under \$150 million, while just 17% have budgets of \$150 million or more.

#1

Align communication staffing and capacity with district expectations and stakeholder needs.

Collectively, these comparisons show that ISD 709's communications staffing and investment are more typical of much smaller districts, highlighting the need for additional capacity to strengthen strategic goals and reduce risk, such as delayed time-sensitive updates, missed opportunities for engagement and temporary gaps during staff absences.

Action Step 1.1

Create a specialist position to support the work of the Communications Office.



To create meaningful additional capacity, the district should consider adding a specialist position focused on tactical communication execution. This role should support day-to-day content production and digital communications, allowing the Communications Officer to concentrate more on strategic communication planning, leadership advisement and high-stakes communications.

In many districts, communications or digital communications specialists handle responsibilities such as website content management, social media publishing, photography, video production and newsletter coordination. Adding this capacity would allow routine communication work to continue even when the Communications Officer is managing

major initiatives or responding to crises. It would also create opportunities to expand into more proactive and engaging tactics, such as increasing the use of video storytelling so the district's YouTube channel becomes a regularly updated resource rather than primarily a host for board meeting live streams. Notably, the Pew Research Center [reported in 2025](#) that more U.S. adults (85%) use YouTube than any other social media platform.

Following is a potential division of responsibilities to consider:

Communications Officer

- Manages and directs department operations and budget
- Leads development and execution of the strategic communication plan
- Advises district leadership on communication implications of decisions
- Serves as primary district spokesperson and media contact
- Oversees high-stakes editorial content
- Leads crisis communication preparedness and response

Communications/Digital Communications Specialist

- Gathers news from schools and departments
- Prepares routine news releases and serves as backup media contact
- Coordinates district-level newsletters
- Supports website content development and maintenance
- Manages social media posting and monitoring
- Provides photography and basic video support for events and storytelling

Sample job descriptions and staffing models are available on NSPRA's website in the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) subsection on Staffing and Supporting Communications at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Staffing-and-Supporting-Communications>.

Action Step 1.2

Formalize and strengthen a districtwide network of communications liaisons to improve coordination, consistency and adherence to district communication expectations.



To address inconsistent information flow and fragmented routine communications, ISD 709 should formalize and better coordinate existing school- and department-based communication leads. In many cases, responsibilities such as maintaining school webpages or contributing resources to the staff website are already embedded in job descriptions. With stipends for school-based web updates being eliminated, the district should identify an individual at each school whose existing responsibilities naturally align with maintaining basic announcements and event updates. Collectively, these individuals represent a natural foundation for a districtwide liaison network that works in partnership with the Communications Office.

At present, schools and departments manage communications independently, using different tools, timelines and approaches. This decentralized model has contributed to uneven practices, information gaps and uncertainty about where staff and families should look for accurate, up-to-date information. By formally recognizing and convening these individuals

as a coordinated network, the district can align expectations and practices over time while still honoring site-level differences in need and capacity.

With training, guidance and ongoing support from the Communications Office, liaisons would serve as consistent points of contact within their school or department. They would help implement district standards, elevate local needs and manage routine communication tasks that cannot realistically sit solely within the Communications Office.

Responsibilities for liaisons may include:

- Coordinating timely submission of schedule, event and operational updates
- Maintaining accurate web calendars and core web pages for their school or department (See [Action Step 6.3](#))
- Supporting consistent use of district communication tools and features to improve readability and usability (e.g., effective formatting of school e-newsletters as described in [Action Step 6.5](#))
- Coordinating collection of department or school information for publication or submission to the Communications Office, based on district-defined workflows (See [Action Step 3.4](#))
- Serving as a point person or “champion” for their school’s or department’s section of the staff intranet (See [Action Step 3.3](#))

This model creates a practical bridge between districtwide communication expectations and school- and department-level execution. The Communications Office—perhaps the specialist position—would support this network by providing training, templates, timelines and best-practice guidance, helping liaisons understand not only how to share information, but what information is most important to share, when it should be communicated and where it should live.

Over time, it positions the district to reduce redundancy, increase consistency and make more intentional decisions about communication channels, while improving staff confidence that routine information is accurate, current and easy to access.

To be effective, this school/department liaison role should typically be assigned to a staff member who is closely connected to day-to-day operations and routine communications and who has the capacity to participate consistently, rather than a senior leader whose responsibilities may limit availability.

Find insights into elements of an effective liaison network in this guidance document from Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools: <https://nspra.co/4aE0MMm>.

Action Step 1.3

Expand storytelling capacity through high-quality, student-generated content.

In addition to staffing and structural solutions, ISD 709 can expand storytelling capacity by strategically leveraging student-generated content and, in doing so, elevate authentic student voice. As published in the 2025 NSPRA research report [Elevating Student Voice in School Communications: A Data-Informed Look at Emerging Practices in School PR](#), approximately half of districts currently share student stories in students’ own words, and among those that evaluate engagement, 61% report higher engagement with student-led content than with staff-created content.

Given current capacity constraints, this approach should focus on practical, well-defined contributions that support routine communication needs, particularly social media storytelling and basic content production, rather than creating a full-fledged student program. Under appropriate supervision, students

can learn valuable skills while assisting with capturing photos and short videos at school events, drafting captions or short features and completing routine communications tasks that free staff time for higher-stakes work.

Two scalable models may be most appropriate:

- **Supervised student support for social media storytelling.** Interested students with skills in photography, video or writing could contribute content on an as-needed basis, coordinated through building administrators or teachers. Students should receive basic guidance on style, ethics and permissions, with final editorial decisions remaining with the Communications Officer.
- **A limited student communication internship.** One or a few high school students could serve as unpaid interns providing supervised assistance with routine communications tasks such as drafting articles, updating website pages and supporting social media content creation. Internships should emphasize skill development while maintaining realistic expectations for staff supervision.

NSPRA's report on student voice (available at https://nspira.informz.net/NSPRA/pages/Student_Voice_Report) outlines considerations and best practices for incorporating student work into district communications.

Members also have access to NSPRA Plus (<https://plus.nspira.org>), NSPRA's first-of-its-kind on-demand learning library for school communicators. Searching "student voice" on the platform returns several webinars that offer considerations and examples for how student storytelling has been implemented in practice.

When exploring the possibility of a limited internship or student storytelling initiative, it is important to note that ensuring student-generated content meets district standards,

board policies and legal requirements requires staff oversight. Involving a supervising teacher—such as one connected to a relevant career education pathway—is recommended unless Communications Office staffing is expanded.

Recommendation 2:

Develop and implement a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

The day-to-day demands of a busy school district—particularly in a one-person communications office—can easily crowd out time for planning and evaluation. As noted in [Recommendation 1](#), capacity constraints have required the Communications Officer to prioritize immediate needs over longer-term planning. When this happens, communications tend to become reactive, with significant effort spent responding to urgent requests rather than advancing clear priorities, reinforcing key messages or intentionally engaging stakeholders.

The Communications Officer demonstrates strong strategic thinking and consistently considers long-term goals and potential outcomes. However, the pace and volume of daily responsibilities limit the time available to translate that strategic insight into a formal, measurable plan. Without protected time for planning, alignment and evaluation, communications risk producing high output without a shared framework to guide decisions about audiences, messages and timing.

Feedback from the SCOPE Survey and focus groups suggests that ISD 709 is experiencing these challenges. Stakeholders described reactive communication, initiative churn and inconsistent messaging, along with perceptions that the district is not sufficiently transparent about important issues or decisions. Even if these perceptions are not accurate, they represent a public relations challenge that must be addressed. In requesting this audit, district

leadership and the Communications Officer acknowledged that too much communication is starting from scratch rather than building on a shared strategic foundation.

Without a clear framework to guide decisions about audiences, messages and timing, communication can become overwhelmed by volume and urgency, resulting in significant activity without clear purpose. As a result, opportunities are missed for proactive outreach that strengthens the district's brand, supports educational goals and builds trust over time. In the absence of a strategic communication plan, districts also risk losing control of their story—allowing outdated or incomplete perceptions to persist and shape public understanding, even as conditions, leadership and priorities evolve.

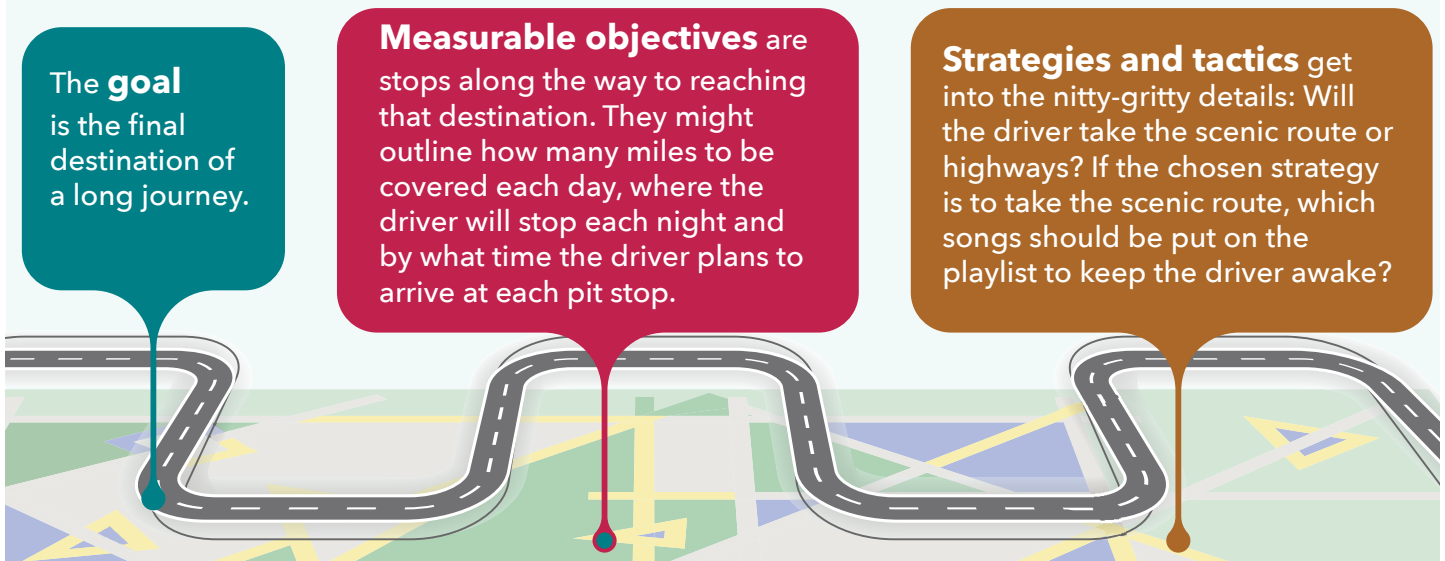
With the addition of the recommended specialist position, ISD 709 will have an opportunity not only to increase output but to better delineate and coordinate responsibilities. A formal, written strategic communication plan should clarify key audiences, core messages, measurable objectives and roles, outlining how the Communications Officer and the recommended specialist position will collaborate to maximize impact. This structure will help ensure that expanded capacity translates into greater focus, consistency and effectiveness rather than simply more activity.

To align with both current and future capacity, the strategic communication plan should also explicitly identify which communication activities are priorities—and which are not. Establishing clear criteria for when the Communications Office will lead, support or decline requests will help prevent overload and reduce the cycle of reactive work that stakeholders described.

The following action steps are designed to help ISD 709 embed strategic communications into its daily work, shift from reactive to proactive practices and strengthen stakeholder confidence and trust.

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

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



Action Step 2.1

Follow the four-step strategic public relations planning process.

Developing a strategic communication plan helps to maximize the number of stakeholders who are receiving information while also impacting their attitudes and actions. In school communications today, the most effective plans focus on engaging stakeholders with key messages, as well as informing them, because simply generating more communications does not guarantee understanding.

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

addition to goals and objectives, the plan should include specific strategies, target audiences, key messages, timelines, staff responsibilities, desired outcomes and specific evaluation criteria for each initiative. Making time to create such a plan will provide a “road map” (illustrated above) to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of all district communications.

Research

Research and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders’ needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize any relevant, top-line findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit Report, including the SCOPE Survey data, will be an excellent starting point, providing a deeper understanding of communication sources, preferences and perceptions than the district had prior to conducting the audit.

NSPRA regularly issues [research papers](#) [on hot topics in school communications](#), but following are some additional data sources worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan:

- **Reports specific to the school system:** Enrollment, student poverty, tax base growth/decline, school climate survey results, analytics for current communication tools, state school report cards, school ratings by news media and specialized websites, etc.
- **Local community demographics:** National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau (<https://data.census.gov/>) and local county/city/town websites.
- **National public opinion on schools:** PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>), Gallup polls on education (<https://www.gallup.com/topic/category-education.aspx>) and EdChoice Schooling in America Poll (<https://www.edchoice.org/schooling-in-america-survey-dashboard/>).
- **Global communication trends:** Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>) and Gallup Workplace Insights (<https://www.gallup.com/topic/workplace.aspx>).

As part of the research phase, identify all communication, public relations, marketing and engagement activities currently happening in ISD 709. The materials gathered and provided to the auditor for this audit report are an excellent starting point. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics, such as managing website content, district e-newsletters, building e-newsletters, social media postings, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, etc. Be sure to also include any regular staff efforts to build relationships

#2

Develop and implement a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.

with internal and external stakeholders: parent conferences, advisory groups, business partnerships, open house programs, news media relations, participation in community organizations, etc.

The compilation of this research will provide an accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations. It also will provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities related to the communications function and help determine where (and if) they fit into the overall plan.

Plan

Planning is the foundation of the RPIE process. This may be the heavy-lifting phase of creating a communication plan, but completing the following steps will help keep communications staff and district leaders aligned on department priorities throughout the year:

- **Set measurable objectives:** Start the planning phase by outlining your big picture goal (a future ideal state of being relevant to ISD 709 and achievable through communications), and then break that down into shorter-term measurable objectives that focus on the changes you want to see in awareness/knowledge,

opinions/perceptions and behaviors among your key audiences. Think of objectives as the desired outcomes, stated in a way that can be measured later. Objectives should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). For example, a measurable objective for ISD 709 might be:

- **Objective:** By the end of the 2026-27 school year, at least 60% of all stakeholder groups will say they are moderately to extremely informed about the district's finances.
- **Identify stakeholder groups:** Stakeholder groups, or target audiences, are the individuals who are interested in and/or impacted by the district and its initiatives. A strategic communication plan often has a unique set of strategies, tactics and key messages for each stakeholder group. While it may not be necessary to include all of these potential audiences, some common stakeholders for districts include:
 - Parents broken down by grade levels or another identifier such as "active/involved" or "non-English-speaking"
 - Employees, sub-grouped into teachers, principals, operational support staff, instructional support staff, directors, department heads, etc.
 - Business and community partners, including civic and faith community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents and others active in the school community
 - Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children in schools
 - Students, such as seniors or those participating in student government
 - Elected officials
 - Media representatives

To deepen audience understanding, consider developing simple stakeholder personas—fictional, representative profiles based on real stakeholder types. These personas can help clarify communication needs, emotional triggers and preferred channels. For example, a "busy parent" persona might rely heavily on mobile-friendly updates and quick visuals, while a "support staff" persona might prefer consistent updates via printed materials or supervisor reminders. Using personas encourages empathy and can help ensure communication is truly designed with the audience in mind.

- **Determine strategies for each objective:** Strategies describe broad approaches to how you will achieve your objectives, while tactics specify the particular elements (e.g., tools, activities) that will be used to implement each strategy. Distinguishing between strategies and tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. Example strategies for the prior example objective might be:
 - **Strategy:** Make easy-to-understand, contextual financial information available via multiple communication channels.
 - **Strategy:** Tell the district's financial story through student programs and opportunities to demonstrate how community investment translates into meaningful outcomes for students.
- **Create key messages for each audience:** For each target audience, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the communications, and use that information to build targeted key messages. People's attention spans and time are limited, so messages that are

short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategies in the prior bullet, following are example key messages:

- **Key message:** To respect our community's investment in their local schools, the district is committed to ensuring that our financial information is easily accessible and understandable.
- **Key message:** District funding supports student programs and opportunities that directly benefit students and prepare them for their future in a global community.
- **Determine tools and tactics:** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the most effective tactics and tools for communication deployment. Sample tactics for the previously shared example strategies might be:
 - **Tactic:** Design an infographic that illustrates the budget story and post it prominently on the website and in all district publications.
 - **Tactic:** Create a short video explaining the budget and how it is developed.
 - **Tactic:** Develop a recurring "Your Investment at Work" feature across district channels that highlights a specific student program or learning opportunity and explains, in plain language, how district funding supports it and the impact on students.

Be sure to consider the target audience when selecting communication tactics; for example, if school staff meetings don't include all employees, consider sharing the information in the employee newsletter or inviting all staff directly.

Assess any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds

that may need to be allocated.

Example expenditures in a year-round communication plan include digital equipment, communication software, service subscriptions, office supplies, publication printing, advertising (print and digital), contracted translation services and professional development.

Consider the needs of families whose primary language is other than English. The district already uses web and newsletter platforms with built-in translation capabilities and contracts with a professional language translation service to support student-specific family needs, such as providing an interpreter for school meetings with a parent. To increase equitable access to information, consider also using this service to translate public-facing documents and publications intended for diverse community audiences.

A good rule of thumb is to offer translations if 10% or more of the population living in an area speaks the same non-English language. (This aligns with the federal threshold for translations related to the healthcare industry.)

- **Set timelines:** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation. Formal evaluation will come at the end of implementation, but the plan should also identify key times to assess progress during the implementation phase to see if modifications are necessary.
- **Assign responsibility:** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not solely the responsibility of the Communications Office; other district and

school staff may need designated roles to reach communication goals. In ISD 709, where directors and principals often serve as both decision-makers and frontline communicators, the plan should spell out when and how leaders at each level are expected to communicate decisions and what support they can expect from the Communications Office. It should also clarify when engaging the Family and Community Engagement Specialist is appropriate.

As ISD 709 works through the planning process, ensure that the following questions are addressed for every major initiative the district undertakes:

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

Implement

As part of the communication planning process, implementation focuses on who will do what, when, where and how in relation to the strategies and tactics identified during the previous planning stage. Once a plan is developed and ready to roll out, though, implementation is when communicators take action on the plan.

Planning for Communication Equity

Equity in school communications means ensuring that all key stakeholders—regardless of language, role, ability or access to technology—can receive, understand and act on school or district information that is relevant to them.

As part of its planning process, the Communications Office could develop and adopt a communication equity checklist to assess each message or initiative before deployment. This includes reviewing whether materials are translated when appropriate, available in accessible formats and distributed across platforms that reach both digital and off-line audiences

Evaluate

When creating the strategic communication plan, identify evaluative measures to be used later to determine success in achieving the stated goals and objectives. Those evaluative measures might take the form of survey responses, participation numbers, election results, user analytics, etc. This data can inform future updates to the communication plan.

As work begins to develop the strategic communication plan:

- Visit NSPRA Plus at <https://plus.nspr.org/> to watch the webinar “A (Not-So) Secret Recipe for an RPIE Strategic Communication Plan,” presented by an award-winning and accredited school communicator.
- Visit the Strategic Communication Plans section of NSPRA’s Gold Mine at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans> to find strategic

communication plan templates, including one for use with an audit report.

- Review these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:
 - **Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools** – <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1675894676/acpsk12vaus/k7wz2y76pwuxfu1fuj78/ACPSStrategicCommunications%20andCommunityEngagementPlan.pdf>
 - **Shelby County (Al.) Schools** – <https://nspra.co/4rGJLJ3>
 - **Rockwood (Mo.) School District** – <https://www.rsdmo.org/departments/communications/comprehensive-communications-plan>

Action Step 2.2

Include proactive issues management as a component of communication planning.

A deliberate effort to understand and foresee community sentiment around potentially controversial topics can help build understanding and support for key initiatives by allowing the district to explain proactively before controversy breaks down trust.

Issues management creates the ability to anticipate and prepare for a potential crisis before it occurs by monitoring trends. It is a proactive exercise in which communicators listen carefully and help shape the outcomes instead of waiting to react after an issue has erupted into a crisis. This means consistently including the Communications Officer in high-level leadership meetings to identify communication opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked. While this inclusion occurs at times, it should become an automatic, early step in the process.

Proactive issues management is an integral part of any well-planned, strategic communications program. It not only helps school systems avoid crises, but it also helps build trust and goodwill by demonstrating awareness of and concern for stakeholders' priorities.

As demonstrated in the previous [examples](#) for objectives, strategies and tactics, consider adding an objective related to issues management to the strategic communication plan. By proactively addressing issues on the horizon and equipping district, department and school leaders with talking points to start the conversation, the district can frame the conversation about itself on its own terms rather than allowing others to do so first.

Action Step 2.3

Focus strategies on increasing stakeholder understanding and engagement.



During focus group discussions, many parents noted feeling overwhelmed by the volume of communications they sift through daily, including often lengthy e-newsletters. For some, this led to missing important messages.

As the Communications Officer plans her work and as other leaders consider their communications to internal and external audiences, focus on achieving desired outcomes with these stakeholders rather than on delivering more information. While stakeholders often need to see a message multiple times before they act on it, a greater volume of communications does not necessarily translate to stakeholder action when that volume is seen as overwhelming, distracting or unfocused. When key messages need to be delivered, start with the audience in mind and consider the following:

- What does the intended audience want and need to know?
- What is their current level of understanding?
- What do they need to do with the information?

Prioritize using tools for communication that have been shown to secure the greatest level of stakeholder engagement. A communication tactic should be used because it is the best tool for the job, not just because it is available. To guide this effort, use data from the [Key Findings](#) on which communication tools are most effective in reaching different audiences.

Action Step 2.4

Include crisis communications as a component of strategic communication planning.

Formal crisis communication planning is a hallmark of highly effective school communication programs. As part of its strategic communication planning efforts, the district should consider incorporating a dedicated crisis communication component within the overall plan or developing a separate, robust crisis communication plan that complements the district's broader crisis management protocols.

SCOPE Survey results indicate that stakeholders feel more informed about school safety issues than about many other district topics, reflecting the district's efforts to communicate during and following school incidents. However, interviews and focus groups surfaced some confusion about communication roles during crises, particularly the division of responsibilities between the Communications Office and school-level staff.

To prepare this report, the auditor reviewed a draft Crisis Communication Handbook that already includes several strong foundational elements, such as guiding principles, a matrix outlining communication channels for different types of incidents, and draft message templates and scripts. The document remains unfinished, however, largely due to capacity constraints typical of a one-person communications office.

Notably absent are clear decision-making and approval protocols, role delineation and expectations for who drafts, reviews, approves and disseminates messages, and guidance on when and how others should be consulted to inform messaging. These are precisely the elements that benefit most from intentional planning and shared agreement and understanding in advance of a crisis. For these reasons, the district should consider formalizing and completing this work through the strategic communication plan and/or by strengthening the communications components of the district's crisis response plan.

The plan should also expand upon the varied communication demands of different types of crises, ranging from urgent, short-term incidents (e.g., a bomb threat or intruder) to longer-term events with sustained impacts (e.g., severe weather, natural disasters or cyberattacks). Clear protocols for communicating with parents and families are especially important, including guidance on how to explain delays or limits on information sharing when privacy concerns or emergency response priorities require restraint.

Be sure to explore these elements when completing the crisis communication plan to facilitate quicker and more streamlined dissemination of information:

- **Assign specific crisis communication responsibilities.** Clearly define communication responsibilities at both the district and building levels and outline the expected sequence and flow of information. Doing so allows

administrators and educators to focus on managing the crisis itself, while ensuring the Communications Officer can focus on timely, accurate information sharing or activate a clear process for delegating tasks when appropriate.

The district's Initial Incident Notification Expectation flow chart provides a strong foundation by clarifying the initial contact chain and sequence; however, expanding this guidance to address communication roles and responsibilities beyond the initial notification would ensure greater clarity for all involved throughout the duration of a crisis.

The organizational structure of an emergency response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should still be designated to take charge of specific communication responsibilities, including:

- Leadership advisement
- Internal communication
- External communication
- News media relations
- Communication command center operations
- Electronic communications (website and social media posts and monitoring)
- Research and media monitoring
- Donations and volunteer management
- Special events (e.g., memorial services)

While the Communications Office should take the lead in many of these areas, assistance from other departments may be needed in a crisis situation. Make it clear within the organization where responsibility lies for each of the above areas of communication and who will act as backup in the event of a crisis.

- **Expand the definition of affected stakeholders:** Beyond those enrolled or working at a specific location, when a crisis happens at a school, the impact often goes beyond that one location. In focus groups, participants shared that they sometimes heard about incidents at other schools through the grapevine or local media rather than directly from the district. Keep in mind that multiple situations make an incident at one location a concern for many across the district: Students in a single family may attend multiple schools, relatives may work in other schools and staff may travel from one school to another.

Early, proactive and broad communication to staff, parents and community members during a crisis reduces the void that others may fill with erroneous information. Following are ways to expand who can access crisis information without overwhelming the email boxes of those who are less directly affected and potentially less interested in the crisis:

- Develop and promote a crisis alert list that people can sign up for to receive school crisis information. When a school-specific crisis occurs, send targeted communications to directly affected staff and families, and send an email to the crisis alert list instead of the entire district.
- Develop and promote a crisis alert webpage that is activated only during a crisis. Maintain the same URL for consistency. Let people know where they can find the latest updates on active or recent school crises. Share the link via social media for direct access to updates.
- **Set expectations for staff communications:** Staff members can be important information ambassadors during a crisis. Employees should be

updated and, if possible, they should hear what is happening before messages are sent to parents and the community. People will expect that they know what is happening. Uninformed employees will eat away at the community's confidence and trust in the school's response.

While all crises are unique, and therefore will be responded to differently, a carefully crafted and frequently updated crisis communication plan would build on the Communications Officer's work to date, reduce uncertainty during high-pressure situations and establish consistent expectations around roles, responsibilities and timing. Over time, this clarity helps position the district as a credible and reliable source of information when tensions are high and trust matters most.

NSPRA provides extensive resources to support crisis communication planning in the Crisis, Health, and Safety Communications section of its Gold Mine (<https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Crisis-and-Safety-Communications>). Resources include an award-winning crisis communication plan, templates and samples for use during crisis events and examples of how to share safety information on websites.

NSPRA Plus (<https://plus.nspra.org>) also features hundreds of webinars and workshops on topics such as crisis communications, strategic planning and stakeholder engagement, offering practical guidance to support the district's communication plan and other recommendations in this report.

Action Step 2.5

Review the communication plan with administrators.



Responsibility for the daily exchange of information extends beyond the official work of the Communications Officer, so it is important

to clarify and delineate communication roles, responsibilities and the expected flow of information for administrators, who also serve as communicators in their leadership roles.

The auditor recommends that the Communications Officer review the strategic communication plan with administrators—including directors, program managers, coordinators and school-level leaders—to familiarize them with and engage them in understanding, supporting and endorsing the communication strategies.

Periodically, the Communications Officer should also use part of leadership meetings to review progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This will keep communications staff energized on impactful communications work and help administrators understand why the Communications Office may sometimes have to decline new projects or ideas that are less aligned with the plan and/or beyond current capacity.

Action Step 2.6

Provide regular updates on the communication plan to the school board.

When the strategic communication plan is finalized—and following annual updates—consider having the Communications Officer discuss it at a school board meeting. Highlight the plan's major components and, later, the progress made toward achieving the objectives. This helps school board members stay informed about communication strategies and activities and their alignment with district goals. It also reinforces transparency and signals publicly the district's commitment to communication with its stakeholders.

Recommendation 3:

Strengthen internal communication systems to improve information flow and staff readiness.

Feedback from ISD 709 employees in focus groups and on the SCOPE Survey revealed persistent challenges with the flow of information across the district. Employees described receiving messages from multiple departments and levels, at varying times and levels of detail, with no single, trusted source they could rely on for current and accurate information. As one employee noted, "I'd love a resource explaining whom to contact for specific needs. Right now I ask the person who's worked here the longest." Another shared, "I often go to the news to look things up because I hear something happened but don't receive internal updates."

These inconsistencies contribute to frustration, information overload and a lack of confidence among staff in knowing what they are expected to understand, share or act upon. They also undermine employees' ability to serve as effective communicators with families and the broader community, a critical role in a district where staff are trusted sources of information.

Clear internal communication systems are especially important during periods of leadership transition or organizational change, when staff rely more heavily on consistent processes than informal norms or institutional memory.

Maintaining a districtwide culture of communication that prioritizes clarity, consistency and timeliness in internal communications is foundational to improving external engagement. When employees trust that they will receive accurate information,

understand decision-making context and know where to go for answers, they are better equipped to support district initiatives, reinforce key messages and contribute to a more informed and confident community.

Action Step 3.1

Consistently take an employees-first approach to disseminating information.



Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. When employees feel they are "the last to know" or learn about district issues first through non-district channels (e.g., news media, parent conversations), they feel less valued and are less prepared to serve as district and school ambassadors.

Highly effective communication programs, by contrast, prioritize ensuring that staff receive timely, accurate information. By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and supporting them in that role with targeted messages and updates, the district can expand its communication outreach while building trust and credibility both internally and externally.

Following are suggestions for maintaining an employees-first communication process:

- **Communicate key messages internally first:** Make timely communication to staff a high priority. Employees are frontline communicators and should receive important information, particularly about issues that affect their jobs and workplaces, before the media and families whenever possible. Allow sufficient time for employees to receive and read the information before public distribution, and schedule communications for times

where most staff are likely to have access to email.

- **Include administrative assistants and office managers in the communication loop:** Particularly during crisis situations, these employees become a trusted source of information because of their frequent interactions with staff. As the first point of contact for many employees, parents and visitors, they can influence communication flow and the climate of a building as much as a principal or department administrator.
- **Use the most effective vehicles, based on the urgency of the message:** [Key Findings](#) data on employee communication preferences and the urgency of the message should guide channel selection. Regular meetings and email are appropriate for ongoing or upcoming issues, while text notifications may be more appropriate for urgent announcements.
- **Share information in staff settings that allow for questions and discussion:** Unless employees understand the rationale behind an issue or decision, it is difficult for them to become advocates. Complex topics, such as policy changes or program adjustments, are often better communicated in staff meetings where questions can be asked and answered for an entire group at the same time.

Action Step 3.2

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

Clear, consistent internal communication processes help reduce confusion, improve message clarity and ensure that important information moves efficiently through the

#3

Strengthen internal communication systems to improve information flow and staff readiness.

organization. Focus group participants described wide variation in how information is shared depending on location and supervisor, differences that directly affect staff understanding and, ultimately, communication with families and the community.

In their 2023 book, [Writing for Busy Readers: Communicate More Effectively in the Real World](#), Harvard researchers found that every time a reader encounters written content—including emails, texts and articles—they go through a four-step decision-making process:

1. Deciding whether to engage with the written content
2. If they decide to engage, deciding whether to engage now or later
3. Deciding how much time and attention to allocate to reading the content
4. Deciding whether to respond or react to the content

That's a lot of decisions for each email that comes through, and it reinforces the need for stronger signaling and structure in internal messages so staff can quickly understand the purpose of the message, whether it applies to them and whether action or sharing is expected. Research on communication for busy readers reinforces that when ISD 709 employees open a message, they are rapidly

deciding whether to engage, when to engage and how much attention to give—making clarity and prioritization essential, not optional.

Using consistent message structure—including brief summaries, clear headings, bulleted information and explicit calls to action—reduces cognitive load and improves message retention, particularly for staff managing high volumes of communication. Simple design standards, such as consistent headers, spacing and emphasis, further support clarity and help employees quickly identify priority information. Structure is not bureaucracy, but instead, is a tool for efficiency and understanding.

To support this approach, internal messages should use subject lines that clearly identify both the topic and intended audience (e.g., “Calendar Changes for Elementary Staff” rather than “Newsflash” or “Update from Administration”). Messages should also begin with a brief summary of key points before expanding on details, allowing readers to grasp the essentials even if they have limited time to review the message.

While the Communications Officer can support consistency by working with senior leadership to clarify internal communication processes and preferred channels, improving internal communication practices is not solely the responsibility of communications staff.

Audit findings and focus group feedback suggest that communication habits vary across departments and schools, underscoring the need for shared expectations and leadership modeling at all levels. Consistent tone and language across internal messages will help staff feel confident sharing information externally and help reduce the risk of mixed, incomplete or inaccurate messaging during high-stakes situations. These outcomes are best achieved when expectations are embedded in clear, shared leader communication processes rather than left to individual interpretation.

Communication process guidance for leaders may include:

- **Defined roles and channels:** All district, department and school leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and prioritize sharing relevant and time-sensitive information with their staff. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in writing and discussed at meetings of district and school administrators so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.
- **Clear delineation of responsibilities:** Audit observations and survey data indicate that stakeholders do not believe that information consistently flows efficiently. A visual chart defining communication roles and responsibilities for administrators and departments (see example on [page 79](#)) can help address this.
- **Use of meeting-level communication cues:** Another simple way to reinforce communication expectations is to add checkboxes—“FYI,” “To Be Shared,” and “Confidential”—to meeting agenda items. The facilitator for each topic should clarify how attendees are expected to use the information. For items marked “To Be Shared,” leaders should specify when, how and by whom the information will be communicated. By labeling agenda items this way, leaders reduce ambiguity, prevent unintentional information bottlenecks and help leaders understand when they are expected to amplify a message (see example on [page 78](#)).
- **Consistent development of talking points for all major initiatives:** A standardized process for developing and vetting talking points for leaders around major initiatives can ensure their staff receive consistent information, including context about decision making and anticipated impacts.

Example: Meeting-Level Communication Cues

Agenda Item / Topic	FYI	To Be Shared	Confidential	Sharing Responsibility
Budget development update		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Directors, assistant superintendent share with direct reports and ensure team-level follow-up; Communications Office prepares FAQ for newsletters, website
New director appointed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			Communication Office and HR handling announcement
Community partnership proposal			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	For meeting discussion only until feasibility and MOU draft are reviewed
Enrollment marketing campaign	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			Communication Office to launch and announce districtwide next month

The points can be drafted by those responsible for the issues, but they should then go through the Communications Office to check for ease of understanding and to coordinate distribution.

- **Clear timing expectations:** Setting expectations for the timing of communications will support more consistent practices across buildings and alleviate anxiety about when information can be expected. Following are types of expectations that should be considered:
 - Staff should receive important information at least 30 minutes before parents/caregivers and the community so that they can serve as front-line communicators and ambassadors for the schools and district.
 - Information employees need to know should be delivered at least 48 hours before they need to act on it.
 - Some staff have limited opportunities to check their work email and/or cell phone during the day while school is in session, so try to schedule communications to staff for when they are most likely to be able to read and respond to the information.

- Consider also the timing of nonessential messages. Employees said the district often sends emails/newsletters on Sundays, when they want to spend time with family or not focus on their job. Scheduling those staff messages for Monday morning may result in higher readership.

At least annually, share the communication protocols with all administrators to help ensure future information is provided to staff in a timely fashion. Following are two examples of guides for administrators that set clear communication expectations. More can be found in NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff>.

- Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School – <https://nspra.co/3Onlick>
- Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools – <https://nspra.co/4rnNgne>

Useful resources for strengthening communication practices are also available on

Example: Administrator Communication Roles Chart

Staff Position	Type of Information To Be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Communications Office	District-level updates on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine matters that impact more than one school • Urgent matters that impact any school • Major district wide initiatives Staff and student stories that illustrate the district mission, vision and goals	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media • News releases to media • Paid ad placements Annual Report Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent + Board President	School Board decisions	Board meetings Email/phone/in-person responses to community members' inquiries Website (News & Announcements)
Superintendent's Executive Assistant	School Board meeting agendas School Board policy changes	School Board webpages
Chief Academic Officer	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpage Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Community meetings District newsletter
Chief Business Official	Budget and finance updates	Business office/budget webpages Administrative and staff meetings Emails to staff Board meeting presentations Annual Report
Director of Facilities	Bond/capital project updates	Facilities project webpage Administrative and staff meetings Emails to staff Board meeting presentations Annual Report
Director of Human Resources	Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items	HR webpages Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Board meetings
Principals	School-level updates on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-specific routine matters • School-specific urgent matters • Major district-wide initiatives (using tool kit provided) 	School-level tools for internal and external audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails • Automated messages • Text messages • Website • Print/digital newsletters • Social media

NSPRA Plus at <https://plus.nspr.org>, including the 2025 “[Comm Camp for District and School Leaders](#)” PR Power Hour recording.

Action Step 3.3

Develop a more robust, true staff intranet to provide targeted, up-to-date information to all employees.

Staff intranets can be a valuable internal communication tool when done well, particularly when they function as a must-visit destination that balances essential information with engaging, timely content.

ISD 709 currently maintains a staff-only website connected to its public site. The platform includes useful functionality as a document repository, with features that support consistency and accuracy such as document version control. However, SCOPE Survey data indicate that the current staff site is not functioning as the primary internal communications hub. Only 6% of employees identified it as a preferred method for receiving work-related information, and it was not mentioned in staff focus group discussions.

Instead, employees consistently described difficulty locating current and accurate information, noting that information “lives in too many places” and that “one department says one thing, and another says something else.” These comments suggest that staff do not see the existing internal systems as providing a reliable, centralized source for district information.

Although email remains employees’ preferred method for receiving information, reliance on mass email alone—particularly in a district with nearly 1,800 employees across varied roles and locations—limits the district’s ability to effectively target messages or support later retrieval. Staff noted that communication is more

effective when it is tailored to specific groups, explaining that “we do a better job when we can chunk into groups,” rather than relying on mass communications that attempt to serve everyone at once. In addition, referring back to information shared via a staff e-newsletter can be difficult without remembering exactly which issue contained the original message.

A true staff intranet is not simply a password-protected website or document repository, but a secure, integrated platform that combines well-organized workplace resources with “news feed” features that highlight key district messages and reinforce internal culture. Effective intranets are typically permissions-based, allowing content to be targeted by role, department or location to support problem solving, reduce silos and increase engagement.

Based on audit findings, intranet features that ISD 709 could most benefit from include:

- **A dynamic, districtwide staff directory** linked to Human Resources systems for regular updates, providing a reliable way for employees to identify job titles, roles, locations and contact information and to stay informed about new hires
- **Department- and school-owned content areas** that allow staff closest to the work to add and update news, announcements and resources without relying on communications or technology staff
- **Ad-hoc collaborative team spaces** that connect employees to shared communications and resources regardless of physical location
- **Push-notification options** that alert employees via email when new or updated intranet content is posted

Dedicated intranet platforms such as [ThoughtFarmer](#), [Unily](#), [Simpplr](#) and similar tools are designed specifically to support role-based targeting, content governance and internal

engagement, capabilities that are difficult to replicate using basic document repositories or static internal websites. District leaders and the Communications Officer may also find value in reviewing these effective intranet models implemented by other organizations:

- The effort by Mutual of Omaha, outlined in the PRSA Silver Anvil Award Application “Taking Workplace Solutions to the Next Level Through Internal Communications,” was undertaken to combat research showing that internal communication at this large employer was falling short in its effectiveness (<https://www.prsa.org/conferences-and-awards/awards/search-silver-anvil-case-studies>).
- The 2017 NSPRA Gold Medallion winning entry “BOCES Employee Resource Tool (BERT): Using a social intranet to increase employee engagement” describes Capital Region BOCES’ successful effort to improve internal communications and staff collaboration—after many ill-fated attempts—by launching an intranet (<https://nspra.co/4tH0w6o>).

Action Step 3.4

Rethink the staff e-newsletter to better prioritize and curate internal information.



As the district works to strengthen its intranet as a centralized source for staff information, the staff newsletter can be refocused to emphasize clarity, prioritization and shared values rather than completeness.

Reviewing the structure and purpose of the staff newsletter can help reduce redundancy, improve readability and elevate the most important internal messages. Focus group feedback and survey comments indicate that newsletters containing too many unrelated

items or duplicative updates contribute to information overload rather than clarity.

Rather than functioning as a comprehensive repository, the newsletter is most effective when designed as a curated gateway that highlights priority topics and directs employees to additional detail housed elsewhere, such as intranet or website pages, department resources or relevant family-facing communications. Information intended primarily for parents or the community can be summarized only as needed for staff context, helping to reduce duplication and keep staff-specific information front and center.

Consistency and message quality are best supported through a clear process for collecting, vetting and scheduling department contributions, with the goal of consolidating information into a single, well-coordinated staff newsletter rather than multiple department-specific publications.

For recurring or annual topics, a shared content calendar can guide planning, with a single, appropriate point person from each relevant department (not necessarily the most senior leader) responsible for submitting and maintaining information. Aligning this role with ownership of corresponding intranet or resource pages helps ensure accuracy and consistency across internal communication channels.

Regardless of the pace or scope of intranet improvements, a more intentional, curated approach to the staff newsletter strengthens internal communication by helping employees more easily identify priority information, shared values and expectations.

Find inspiration in some of the NSPRA Award of Excellence-winning internal newsletters available at <https://www.nspra.org/Awards/Award-Winners/Publications-and-Digital-Media-Excellence-Winners-2025#newsletter>.

Action Step 3.5

Establish baseline communication expectations and resources for new and existing employees.



While employees are often viewed as ambassadors for the district, focus group feedback and SCOPE Survey data indicate that many staff do not feel adequately informed or prepared to represent the district in conversations with families or the community. Rather than creating a formal ambassador program, ISD 709 can focus on providing all employees with clear, foundational information about how district communications work and where to find accurate information.

Collaborating with Human Resources to incorporate a concise communication orientation component into onboarding for new employees and periodically refreshing this information for existing staff supports clarity without adding significant workload for a one-person communications department.

Core elements may include:

- An overview of official communication channels and platforms, their purpose and available training opportunities
- A link to the expanded staff directory on the intranet
- Where to find accurate information on district initiatives or emerging issues, including the district's strategic plan
- Basic expectations for sharing information and responding to questions
- Media relations and social media guidelines

- How and when to notify the Communications Office of newsworthy activities
- General information about the district and local community history

Providing this shared baseline supports a more consistent internal communication culture and helps employees feel more confident answering questions and reinforcing district messages in their daily interactions.

Download an employee communications training slides template, which was shared by NSPRA at the October 2025 conference of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators, at the following links:

- Canva - <https://bit.ly/4lblRmg>
- PowerPoint (go to File > Download > .pptx) - <https://bit.ly/4reBzOM>

Recommendation 4:

Increase transparency around decision-making processes and the role of stakeholder input to build trust in district leadership.

As noted in the [Key Findings](#), stakeholders generally view district communication as trustworthy, but are less likely to describe it as open or transparent. Many respondents across all groups also disagreed that the district consistently values or welcomes their input. Focus group feedback reinforced these perceptions, with participants expressing a desire for clearer information about how decisions are made, who is involved and how stakeholder input influences outcomes.

While transparency is often discussed in terms of external communication, audit findings in ISD 709 indicate that internal clarity around decision-making authority and delegation is closely tied to public trust as well. Employees described uncertainty about where decisions are made and how that authority is distributed across the organization. This uncertainty was raised by both central office staff and school-based leaders during focus group discussions. At the same time, some district leaders expressed a belief that decision making is routinely delegated. This disconnect contributes to frustration, delays and perceptions that meaningful decisions are made by a small, centralized group. Families echoed related concerns, expressing a desire for more decisions to be made by school leaders they know and trust.

Communication researchers, as well as NSPRA auditors, have found that it is rarely possible to satisfy the desires of all interested groups when organization leaders must make decisions that affect multiple stakeholder groups with diverse perspectives. However, organizations

that prioritize informed consent around the decision-making process can reduce perceptions of winners and losers. In other words, stakeholders are more likely to accept decisions they may not fully support when they believe the process was fair, transparent and reasonable.

Building confidence in a school district's decision-making processes is not without challenges, and struggles to ensure that all voices are heard are not unique to ISD 709. NSPRA auditors consistently hear from parents and staff in many districts that they question whether their input is genuinely wanted or meaningfully considered, even when invited through surveys or meetings. Increasing transparency around decision-making processes, both internally and externally, is one of the most effective ways to minimize divisiveness, reduce delays and build shared understanding and trust.

The following action steps are intended to strengthen transparency by improving communications clarity and consistency in the decision-making process, both internally and externally, while also reinforcing appropriate delegation and leadership at the school and department levels.

This work, which should become part of the strategic communication plan, does not need to be completed all at once. ISD 709 should view the strategic communication plan as a living document, developed in phases and refined over time as capacity allows. These practices are most effective when implemented consistently over time and scaled to available leadership and communication capacity, rather than launched all at once.

Action Step 4.1

With all major decisions, consider first how best to include stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Not all decisions in ISD 709 require stakeholder input, but when deciding whether and how best to include stakeholders in the decision-making process, leaders should first ensure internal clarity about decision ownership and the purpose of stakeholder input—including whether stakeholders are being asked to inform, shape or react to a decision—before engagement begins. With that foundation in place, keep these general tips in mind:

- **If a decision has already been made, do not ask for input from stakeholders.** Stakeholders will feel their input doesn't matter when they perceive that district leaders have already decided on a direction for a particular issue.
 - The more controversial a decision is likely to be, the more likely it is that the district should involve its stakeholders in the decision-making process.
 - If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined due to state or federal mandates or budget constraints, it is less likely to require input. Instead, focus messaging on building understanding around the situation that led to the particular decision, why it was made and how it will benefit stakeholders.
- **Give input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Asking for input and then appearing to ignore it is one of the quickest ways to cause stakeholders to disengage from their schools. Respect stakeholders and give their input due consideration.

#4

Increase transparency around decision-making processes and the role of stakeholder input to build trust in district leadership.

- If they suggest alternatives, research their ideas and give feedback regarding what those ideas would cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.
- If stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision.
- When reflecting on public input, always be considerate of those who provide it, whether they represent a small or large part of the community.
- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. Explain why the group's input is being sought, how it will be used and whether decision authority rests at the district, department or school level.

Action Step 4.2

Clarify and consistently communicate decision-making roles and expectations.

Audit findings suggest that perceptions of centralized decision making and stalled progress in ISD 709 are often rooted less in the decisions themselves than in how clearly decision-making roles and expectations are communicated across the organization. When staff and school leaders are unsure where authority resides or whether they are empowered to act, hesitation and frustration can follow, even when leadership intends decisions to be made closer to students and classrooms.

ISD 709 should take intentional steps to improve how decision-making roles and expectations are communicated internally, ensuring greater alignment between leadership intent and staff experience. This may include:

- Clearly articulating, in accessible and consistent ways, which types of decisions are typically made at the district, department and school levels, and which require broader consultation or approval.
- Communicating expectations about when school and department leaders are empowered to make decisions independently, versus when their role is to provide input or implement direction.
- Establishing and communicating clear escalation norms so staff understand when issues should be resolved locally and when they should move to district leadership.
- Reinforcing these expectations through existing communication channels, leadership meetings and onboarding processes so they are understood as

shared norms rather than informal knowledge.

By improving clarity and consistency in how decision-making roles are communicated, the district can reduce unnecessary delays, strengthen leadership at all levels and create conditions that support more timely, transparent and trusted decision making.

As part of this effort, the district may find it helpful to broadly categorize decisions (e.g., instructional, operational, budgetary, student experience) and clarify typical ownership and input expectations for each category.

Action Step 4.3

Establish consistent systems for communicating pending decisions.



Organization leaders may hesitate to share details about a decision or initiative before those details are fully formed, aiming to appear decisive and avoid raising expectations around ideas that may not advance.

However, the process of keeping stakeholders informed begins before the decision-making process has begun and continues during and after the decision is made. If stakeholders don't know a change is being considered, they can't offer input. Moreover, gaining support for a specific solution depends first on establishing a shared understanding that a problem exists and warrants attention. Seeking input and informed consent starts with sharing information.

Communicating about pending decisions also provides an opportunity to reinforce clarity about decision ownership. As issues and options are shared, leaders should be transparent about who is responsible for advancing the decision, where input is being gathered and at what level the final determination will be made.

- **Consider incorporating communication protocol questions into discussions of major decisions at ISD 709.** Using a consistent set of questions helps leaders approach decisions through a shared communication lens, reducing last-minute confusion, duplicated effort, and the perception that communication expectations are subjective or situational. This approach can be piloted during Cabinet meetings and adapted for department, school-level and committee meetings. When discussing potential decisions, leaders should ask the group to consider:

- ***What is the issue, problem or opportunity?*** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue and the specifics that stakeholders need to know about it.
- ***How does this issue affect stakeholders?*** Consider how a particular issue will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district. Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue. They are the ones directly (or perceived to be directly) affected by it.
- ***Who owns this decision, and what role do other leaders or stakeholder groups play in informing it?*** Clarify whether the decision will be made at the district, department or school level, and communicate that distinction consistently.
- ***What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?*** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.
- ***How will this issue be communicated?*** Consider how the district will outline

and present the issue to stakeholders. Identify the strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group. Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.

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

Consider creating a reusable discussion guide that includes these questions, so leaders across departments consistently approach decisions through a communication lens.

- **Develop and implement feedback loops.** Consider creating “What We Heard” features in various district and school communications to highlight the status, results and next steps regarding pending or recent public input requests. These could take the form of brief videos on websites and social media or encouraging principals, directors and other district leaders to share “What We Heard” information with their staff during meetings. These updates should include information on how stakeholders are, were or can be involved in the decision-making process as well as how their input has been or will be used.

Beyond reassuring those who gave feedback that their input was heard, this approach also provides ongoing opportunities to raise awareness among all stakeholders about the issue or opportunity being discussed, potentially mitigating any 11th-hour opposition from those who feel “blindsided” by the eventual decision.

Action Step 4.4

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

One of the challenges of effective engagement is to broaden the voices that are included in any engagement process. It is tempting to seek out supporters or go back to the same people who always respond when a request for input is made rather than to seek new and different voices from people that are otherwise less likely to get involved. However, with the goal of honoring all voices, it is important for ISD 709 to be intentional about who is invited to participate in its decision-making processes.

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

When engaging in a decision-making process, consider which stakeholders may be directly affected by the decision, as well as those who may perceive themselves or those they care about to be affected by it, directly or indirectly. Make sure representatives of those stakeholder groups are reflected among the voices heard during input-gathering stages.

Action Step 4.5

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



Make sure that the announcement of any major decision in ISD 709 is accompanied by information about the feedback that was collected in the decision-making process—beyond a generic “thank you” to those who gave their input—as well as the data used to make the decision.

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

A strong example of this practice recently occurred following the district’s first use of ThoughtExchange to gather input on the school calendar. Rather than simply announcing the final calendar, the follow-up message explicitly linked community feedback from the exchange to specific calendar decisions, demonstrating how input shaped the final outcome. By connecting engagement to action, the Communications Officer reinforced that participation mattered. This example illustrates the type of transparent, feedback-informed communication described in this action step and demonstrates that, when time and capacity allow, the district is well positioned to operate in a more strategic, impact-oriented manner.

As stakeholders see evidence of their input being valued, rather than simply being told that it is, they also will be more willing to answer

future requests for input. Sharing the results of this communication audit report with, at least, all focus group participants is a great step for ISD 709 to show its use of communications input.

Action Step 4.6

For quick and informal staff input, try rounding conversations.

The practice of “rounding” is not scientific like a survey, but it is a quick way to gather first-hand input from staff while demonstrating that leadership cares about staff members and their input. Rounding conversations are useful for major decisions, but can also be used successfully for smaller issues that may only affect a single department or school.

Here is how rounding conversations work:

- The district, department or school leadership team develops two or three questions where the answers would provide helpful staff insight into an issue.
- Principals, directors and/or department leaders informally ask 5-10 staff members these questions.
- Responses are shared with the applicable leadership team for consideration in their decision-making process.

Action Step 4.7

Raise awareness of feedback channels and how to use them most effectively.



SCOPE Survey data and focus group feedback indicate that many employees, parents and community members are unsure where and how to direct questions, concerns or ideas, contributing to perceptions that issues must

be escalated to district leadership to receive attention.

ISD 709 should clearly and consistently communicate how stakeholders can share feedback on routine issues, including which types of concerns are best addressed at the school, department or district level. Doing so helps ensure feedback reaches the individuals best positioned to respond and reduces unnecessary escalation or delays.

This information should be shared at least annually through existing communication channels and incorporated into onboarding materials for new employees and families. Clear guidance on feedback pathways supports timely responses, reinforces trust in school- and department-level leadership and improves stakeholders’ experience navigating the district.

Following are examples of school district webpages that outline whom to contact with concerns or questions:

- District Communication Pathways, Ramsey School District, New Jersey – <https://www.ramsey.k12.nj.us/page/communication-pathways>
- Protocol for Parent to School Communication, West Aurora School District 129, Illinois – <https://www.sd129.org/district/departments/community-affairs/parent-communication-protocol>
- Report a Concern, Highline Public Schools, Washington – <https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/student-support/report-a-concern>

Recommendation 5:

Shift district communication toward more targeted, substantive and audience-centered content.

Findings from the SCOPE Survey, focus groups and the website review indicate that while ISD 709 communicates frequently, stakeholders often feel underinformed about complex, high-impact issues that shape their experience with the district. Parents, staff and community members consistently expressed a desire for clearer explanations of why decisions are made, how processes work and what changes mean for students, schools and the community. Topics such as budgeting, facilities planning, curriculum changes and policy development are frequently perceived as lightly or not at all addressed, difficult to find on existing channels or shared too late to support understanding.

This recommendation responds directly to those findings by shifting communication efforts from primarily event-driven or celebratory content to more intentional, audience-centered messaging on high-impact issues. These actions emphasize planning for understanding rather than volume, enabling the Communications Officer to focus limited capacity on the issues that matter most, present information in accessible and relevant ways, and give stakeholders the context they need to engage constructively. Taken together, they support broader community understanding, reduce misinformation, and help rebuild trust around critical district matters.

Action Step 5.1

Incorporate planning principles into communication initiatives that improve stakeholder understanding and awareness of important district matters.

In addition to developing an annual or multi-year strategic communication plan, the Communications Officer should use a streamlined, mini planning template to guide communication around specific high-impact issues, projects or initiatives, such as policy or curriculum changes, facilities planning, boundary studies or leadership transitions. These focused, topic-specific plans support clarity and intentionality, ensuring stakeholders receive timely, relevant information about issues that affect them.

These brief planning tools are not full campaigns but practical guides to structure conversations with administrators and departments, clarify communication objectives and align messaging with stakeholder needs. They help prioritize meaningful content over routine updates, moving beyond posting documents or procedural notices to provide context, explain purpose and highlight implications in plain language.

A streamlined, issue-based plan may include:

- The primary communication goal or intended impact
- One or two measurable objectives tied to understanding or awareness
- Priority audiences affected by or interested in the issue
- Available communication tools and channels

- A simple chart outlining strategies, tactics, responsibilities and timing, as needed

Survey and focus group feedback suggest stakeholders want more than basic announcements; they are seeking insight into how decisions are made and why they matter. When complex information is shared only through board agendas, minutes or technical documents, it often goes unseen or unabsorbed. Using a focused planning approach encourages the district to translate “business documents” into accessible, feature-style content—such as newsletter or web articles that summarize key points, highlight trade-offs and explicitly answer the “so what?” for families and staff (see [Action Step 2.3](#)).

Several high-impact topics emerged repeatedly in survey results, focus groups and the auditor’s materials review as areas where more intentional, issue-based communication would support understanding:

- **Curriculum or program changes:** Parents expressed limited awareness of what their children are learning and where to find clear, accessible information, indicating a potential need for brief, plain-language explanations and ongoing context.
- **Facilities planning and enrollment-related decisions:** Nearly half of parents and staff reported feeling underinformed, suggesting the need for proactive communication that explains the purpose, process and implications of facilities planning—not just final outcomes. The Communication Officer’s plan to use ThoughtExchange to facilitate public engagement around these issues is a strong one.
- **Middle school transitions:** Parents and students described uncertainty and anxiety about the transition process, signaling an opportunity for targeted communication that clarifies expectations

#5

Shift district communication toward more targeted, substantive and audience-centered content.

and supports readiness. For example, a focused plan might identify parents of incoming sixth graders as the audience, clarify key milestones and expectations, provide resources for readiness and promote upcoming information sessions.

- **Community partnerships and initiatives:** Focus group participants noted general awareness of partnerships but limited understanding of specific initiatives or their benefits. This suggests an opportunity for more intentional storytelling that connects partnerships to expanded student access and clear community value. For example, the district could feature the PORT CARD initiative, which provides electronic library cards to all ISD 709 students, allowing them to borrow books and other materials from the Duluth Public Library. Highlighting the experience of a student whose access to books sparked a new interest in reading would help make the initiative’s impact concrete and relatable.

The goal is not to over-communicate every issue, but to ensure that even minimal communication about significant matters is intentional, understandable and audience-centered. Applied selectively, this approach helps prevent confusion, reduce misinformation and support informed engagement around

issues that most impact students, families or employees.

For several examples of project-specific communication plans, check out the 2025 NSPRA Gold Medallion and Golden Achievement Award winners' entries at <https://www.nspr.org/Awards/Award-Winners>.

Action Step 5.2

Create and implement a comprehensive, year-round budget communication strategy.

In nearly every communication audit NSPRA conducts, stakeholders consistently feel least informed about district finances compared with other key topics. This pattern holds true for ISD 709. In the SCOPE Survey, 58% of parents, 56% of staff and 69% of community members reported being only slightly or not at all informed about district finances.

While stakeholders are rarely well informed about school finance—sometimes by choice—public school districts rely on sustained community understanding and support to maintain operations and educational quality. Budget communication, therefore, is not optional or episodic; it is a core leadership responsibility, particularly during periods of financial pressure or change.

For ISD 709, this challenge is compounded by lingering distrust tied to past financial decisions and a perception among some community members that financial information is limited, difficult to locate or shared only after key decisions are made. Focus group participants described feeling disconnected from budget discussions, noting that “very little finance information is shared” and that even when they seek it out, it is not easy to find or understand. As one participant observed, “A public that doesn’t understand it is not going to support it.”

To address these conditions, the district should adopt a proactive, year-round budget communication strategy as a defined component of its strategic communication plan (see [Recommendation 2](#)). Treat financial information as a high-stakes topic requiring clarity, consistency and relevance—not just during budget season, but throughout the year.

At a minimum, this should include the following integrated elements:

- **Build a baseline understanding of district finances over time.** Rather than relying on dense documents or one-time presentations, the district should consistently share accessible financial information in manageable pieces. This includes explaining where funding comes from, how dollars are allocated and what constraints or trade-offs exist. Tactics may include short financial “quick facts,” infographics, brief videos and recurring budget content embedded into existing district communication channels such as newsletters, social media and the website.
- **Clearly explain the budget development and decision-making process.** Demystifying how the budget is built—and when and how decisions are made—can significantly improve trust. The district should publish a clear, visual budget timeline that highlights key milestones, decision points and opportunities for input. Plain-language budget summaries and visuals should be used to explain changes from year to year and the rationale behind major priorities.
- **Make financial information easy to find and easy to use.** The auditor observed basic budget information on the district website. The district should expand its budget webpage to serve as a single, trusted source for comprehensive financial information. This page should

house budget summaries and priorities, timelines, infographics and expanded FAQs. All budget-related communications should consistently link back to this resource.

At the same time, the district should not rely solely on stakeholders to seek out financial information on their own. The current Q&A on the budget webpage directs community members to “check the website” or review monthly committee updates embedded within board documents to stay informed about the district’s financial status—an approach that is unlikely to generate meaningful awareness or engagement. Key budget updates should instead be proactively disseminated through existing district communication channels, including the proposed community-focused version of the *District Digest* (see [Action Step 6.4](#)), so that financial information is regularly delivered to families and community members rather than merely available.

- **Connect financial decisions to student experience and community values.** Numbers alone do not build understanding. Budget communication should explicitly connect financial realities to student learning, staffing, programs and services the community cares about. Using stories, examples and visuals to show the real-world impact of budget decisions helps stakeholders understand not just what is happening, but why it matters.
- **Equip leaders and staff to serve as credible budget communicators.** Board members, district leaders and school administrators should receive clear talking points and concise “quick facts” so they feel prepared to answer questions and address misinformation consistently. When leaders share aligned messages and practical examples, confidence and credibility increase.

Over time, stakeholders experience budget communication as transparent, accessible and relevant, resulting in greater understanding of the district’s financial realities, increased confidence in decision making and improved readiness to engage constructively around high-stakes financial issues. Sustained, proactive communication also helps reduce the influence of lingering mistrust or outdated narratives by replacing speculation with consistent, factual information.

This one-page poster from Chesapeake (Va.) Public Schools is an effective example of presenting financial information with infographics: <https://nspra.co/3OdOaEr>

This brochure from Broadalbin-Perth (N.Y.) Central School District is a special budget edition newsletter that combines compelling infographics with a more thorough narrative dive into the district’s finances: <https://nspra.co/3NXOIOD>

More resources and sample communications can be found on NSPRA Plus by applying the “Finance Communications” filter (<https://plus.nspra.org>) and in the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section of the NSPRA website under Budget Communications (<https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Budget-Communications>).

Action Step 5.3

Create an editorial calendar to plan ahead for storytelling around high-impact, high-stakes issues.

For a one-person communications operation, planning ahead is essential. An editorial calendar provides a practical, time-saving tool to anticipate when and how major issues, decisions and milestones will require proactive communication, reducing last-minute pressure

and helping the Communications Officer focus effort where it adds the most value.

Rather than serving only as a scheduling tool for events or celebrations, the editorial calendar should be used to map out storytelling opportunities tied to high-impact topics such as budgeting, facilities planning, enrollment shifts, program changes or strategic initiatives. Planning these moments in advance allows the district to sequence information thoughtfully and provide context before questions or concerns escalate.

Using a storytelling approach helps translate complex or factual information into messages that are understandable, memorable and relevant. By pairing key facts with real-world examples (e.g., how a decision affects classrooms, staffing, student opportunities or community priorities), the district can connect information to shared values and lived experience. This approach adds meaning without adding volume.

In developing the editorial calendar, the Communications Officer should:

- Identify predictable decision points, milestones and pressure moments for major initiatives.
- Plan when explanatory, context-setting content should be shared in advance of formal actions.
- Align stories to priority audiences and communication objectives.
- Balance factual updates with narrative elements that explain purpose and impact.

Used this way, the editorial calendar becomes a strategic efficiency tool, helping the district consistently deliver value-centered communication on the issues that matter most, while making the best use of limited communications capacity.

In the NSPRA Connect online member community at <https://connect.nspra.org/>, there are numerous posts with [discussions about editorial calendars](#) and workflow management. An NSPRA Mini Labs [webinar on workflow management tools](#) is also viewable on NSPRA Plus at <https://plus.nspra.org/>.

Recommendation 6:

Streamline and clarify the district's communication ecosystem to reduce overload and improve access.

As noted earlier in the [Benchmarking of Results](#) section of this report, ISD 709's parent and family communications reflect an established level of practice, with a solid foundation in place. District-wide adoption of ParentSquare, consistent delivery of the *District Digest* and SCOPE Survey results showing strong recognition of district messaging indicate that these efforts are working. The opportunity now is to build on that foundation by steering communications from volume to value so families can more easily find, understand and act on what matters most.

Survey data in the [Key Findings](#) show that most parents do not want less information from the district, their child's school or their child's teacher. At the same time, focus groups revealed persistent frustration with how information is delivered—specifically, the number of platforms families must monitor and the difficulty of finding information again once it has been shared. This is a common challenge in many school districts.

A 2024 study by the communications platform SchoolStatus found that half of parents use three or more platforms to communicate with their child's school. In the 2025 *Today's Parent* essay "My Inbox Is Full of School Emails And I Can't Take It Anymore," one parent wrote, "We receive all the information, but we only need about 20 percent of it. And because of the overload, we're missing the stuff that actually matters. There has to be a better way."

Parents are juggling many responsibilities beyond their relationships with a school, and each comes with its own communication

tools and frequent messages. As a result, parents can get overwhelmed, start to tune out communications and miss something important from their child's school. They want to be informed and support their children's education, but they need communications that are relevant, predictable and easy to access when they choose to engage.

Addressing these concerns requires greater consistency and intentionality across school and district communication systems. The following action steps focus on clarifying expectations, standardizing practices and making information easier to find and reuse without increasing message volume.

Action Step 6.1

Use SCOPE Survey findings to establish a common framework for parent communications.

Survey data on stakeholders' communication preferences (see [Key Findings](#)) should be used to guide school and district staff in the purposeful use of communication channels. It's important to use this data not only to see which channels to use, but which channels not to use. One culprit for the overload with communications appears to be the tendency to send the same message on every available channel.

While parents have varied preferences for where they access information, most do not want repeated messages from multiple sources. Consistent, thoughtful use of selected tools will help ensure messages are noticed and valued. This framework should also include recommended timelines for releasing information and responding to inquiries.

To support implementation, this guidance should be reviewed with principals, assistant principals and department leaders and

reinforced annually during back-to-school meetings. In addition, the Communications Officer should convene school and department communication liaisons at least twice a school year to reinforce expectations, share best practices and support coordination, consistent with the liaison network described in [Recommendation 1](#).

For a reference, see the Osceola School District's "School Communication Guidelines" on when to use what communications platform, available in NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on "Training - Administrators, Board Members, Staff" at <https://nspra.co/4c19K8T>.

Action Step 6.2

Clarify and communicate expectations for updates to parent portals and other parent communication platforms.

Parent portals such as Infinite Campus and Canvas are essential communication tools, but their effectiveness depends on clear, shared expectations for how they are used. As noted in the [Key Findings](#), parents and staff described confusion stemming from inconsistent practices across schools, such as differences in whether grades are communicated through Infinite Campus or Canvas, and variability in where information is posted within the same platform.

If expectations already exist for how educators should use parent portals and other classroom-level tools, they should be reviewed for clarity, specificity and consistency—and reinforced regularly. If expectations are unclear or unevenly understood, the district should convene a small working group of teachers, parents and administrators to define practical, shared guidance that clearly specifies which platforms are used for which purposes and what families can expect to find in each.

#6

Streamline and clarify the district's communication ecosystem to reduce overload and improve access.

Once established, these expectations should be communicated clearly to families through school websites, parent handbooks and other commonly used channels, and updated promptly when changes occur. Documenting these platform-specific decisions in the district's strategic communication plan will help ensure expectations are clear, consistently communicated and updated intentionally, rather than relying on informal directives or one-off reminders.

Action Step 6.3

Expand use of district and school websites as centralized repositories for key information.



Stakeholders repeatedly described how difficult it can be to refer back later to useful information that has been shared in a school or district e-newsletter. While email is effective for sharing timely updates, it is not well suited for long-term reference, especially when messages are buried in inboxes. A more permanent, organized approach to housing key information would make it easier for families and staff to find what they need when they need it, while also reducing the need for schools to resend or re-explain the same information.

Similar to the recommended use of an intranet as a centralized repository for staff information, school and district websites should serve as the primary, long-term home for key news updates intended for families. High-priority information should be posted as news stories on district and/or school web pages and then pushed out through e-newsletters or other channels to place the information in front of readers. This allows schools and departments to resurface the same information when needed by linking back to the original web posting, offering a timely reminder and easy access without crowding out newer or more localized updates.

Consistent use of a communications-defined taxonomy or category tagging system when posting announcements will further improve searchability and usability for visitors, supporting both day-to-day access and longer-term reference.

From Ad Hoc Updates to Structured Oversight

ISD 709 has established roles for maintaining school and department website pages—including stipend-supported school webmasters and designated department staff—but the current structure relies heavily on informal delegation rather than coordinated oversight.

Responsibility for maintaining accurate and timely content should remain distributed at the school and department level. At the same time, the district can better leverage existing effort by aligning website responsibilities with the communications liaison network ([Action Step 1.2](#)) and formalizing routine touch points with the Communications Office. The goal is not to centralize all work in Communications, but to move from ad hoc maintenance to a more intentional management model.

With support from the recommended specialist position ([Action Step 1.1](#)), the Communications Office could:

- Develop a concise website reference manual outlining roles, accessibility standards and posting expectations.
- Offer structured onboarding and periodic refresher training for all staff with editing access.
- Establish a scheduled annual (or ideally semiannual) website review cycle to remove outdated content, verify links and assess accessibility compliance.

These efforts would create predictable checkpoints without transferring ownership of content to the Communications Office.

This coordination becomes especially important in light of upcoming ADA Title II digital accessibility deadlines requiring compliance with WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards. One success strategy outlined in NSPRA's report *From Compliance to Culture: Advancing Digital Accessibility in K-12 Education* (<https://www.nspira.org/News/new-report-examines-the-state-of-digital-accessibility-in-k-12-education>) is to prioritize remediation of high-traffic webpages and essential family resources while building long-term systems for compliance. Particularly for document-heavy pages, consider implementing DocAccess, a web accessibility tool that automatically converts PDFs into screen reader-friendly HTML transcripts aligned with the required standards. Although such tools do not guarantee full legal compliance, they can reduce manual remediation workload, improve navigation and searchability, and support accessibility while the district develops permanent solutions for accessible document creation.

Taken together, these steps toward clear expectations, shared standards and regular review will help ensure that web-based information remains accurate, accessible and aligned across schools and departments.

Action Step 6.4

Provide clear, proactive guidance for families and the community on where and how to find information.

Many participants shared that they are unsure where to look for information and often stop checking certain platforms altogether. As communication practices are clarified or updated, the district should actively explain these changes rather than assuming stakeholders will notice them.

Consider simple, repeatable tactics to guide families and community members, such as:

- A brief “How We Communicate” overview included in new family welcome materials
- An expanded Communications Office webpage explaining which channels are used for different types of information
- Simple infographics that schools can include in newsletters or post online

This guidance should mirror the district’s successful promotion of ParentSquare, where the purpose and use of the tool are clearly explained across the district and school websites. Applying this same clarity to all communication channels will help stakeholders—and staff responding to questions—quickly identify the right source.

Find examples of this type of guide at the following links:

- “How We Communicate With Families” flyer, Lake Stevens School District, Washington – <https://nspra.co/3OVAXjk>
- “How We Communicate” webpage, Arlington Heights School District 25, Illinois – <https://www.sd25.org/parent-letters-newsletters/how-we-communicate>

The auditor further recommends developing a simple web-based form that enables community members to request inclusion on the *District Digest* distribution list. Subscribers could receive a community-focused version that excludes family-only updates. Once implemented, the district should widely promote this option to ensure broad awareness and access among community stakeholders.

Action Step 6.5

Make information easier for audiences to consume.

Even with clearer infrastructure and reduced redundancy, communications will be less effective if messages are difficult to scan or organized around internal content categories rather than reader needs. High-volume communications, such as district and school newsletters, should be structured to help readers quickly understand what is new, what is important and what, if anything, requires action.

Rather than organizing newsletters primarily by standing topic categories, consider grouping information in ways that reflect how audiences read and prioritize information. For example, newsletters may include:

- A consolidated section for new or time-sensitive updates
- A brief reminders section for previously shared information that families may need to revisit
- A clearly labeled upcoming events or dates section

To further support skimming, newsletters should include a clear list of articles or topics at the top of the message that functions as a table of contents. The abbreviated list of stories that appears in the ParentSquare email header when a new newsletter is sent provides a useful model. For schools using platforms such as

Smore, use built-in table-of-contents features to generate this list automatically. In all cases, item titles should be written as clear, specific headlines (e.g., Tips to Help Your Child Avoid the Flu) rather than generic labels (e.g., From the Nurse's Office), allowing readers to quickly identify content that is relevant to them.

These expectations should be documented in the staff communications guidance described in [Action Step 6.1](#) and reinforced through the communication liaison network ([Action Step 1.2](#)), which can serve as a practical forum for sharing examples, troubleshooting challenges and supporting consistent implementation across schools.

Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions	100
What Is NSPRA?	101
Audit Team Vitae	103

Focus Group Discussion Questions

All Participants

1. What do you see as the school system's strengths? What areas could be improved?
2. How would you describe the school system's image in the community?
 - a. What would you tell someone new to the area about the district?
3. How well does the school system communicate about important issues like school funding, legislation, curriculum or operational changes?
 - a. Where could it improve?
 - b. Are there topics you'd like more information about?
4. How effectively does the school system communicate during serious incidents or crises (e.g., bomb threats, employee misconduct, protests)?
 - a. How could this be improved?
5. When district or school leaders are considering major issues that may affect you, do you feel that your input is welcome and valued?
 - a. What makes you feel that way?
 - b. How would you prefer to share your input?
6. What does the school system do well when it comes to communicating with you? In what ways can it improve to better meet your preferences or needs?
 - a. Is information delivered in a timely manner?
 - b. Are the newsletters helpful and informative?
7. What do you see as the biggest communication challenge the district faces?
 - c. Do the school or district websites provide the information you need? Are they easy to navigate?
 - d. Do the district's social media channels meet your information needs? What could make them more useful or engaging?

Additional Questions: Staff

1. How does information flow from district and school leaders - such as chief officers, directors and principals - to employees?
 - a. Is the flow of information generally smooth and timely?
 - b. If not, what happens as a result of the breakdowns or delays in communication?
 - c. What about between departments (e.g., administration, transportation, food services)?
2. When you need a decision or approval to move forward on something, what is that process like for you?
 - a. What helps that happen efficiently—and what sometimes gets in the way?
 - b. How do you think the district's approach to making decisions affects the staff you work with?"
3. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community? Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

- **Connect and Grow:** This unique professional community includes the NSPRA Connect online forum, Mentor Match, APR Learning Cohort and national leadership and service opportunities.
- **Expand and Elevate:** Through digital e-newsletters and alerts, free PR Power Hour webinars on tactics, free Leaders Learn webinars on strategies, on-demand learning and National Seminar scholarships, members expand their knowledge and elevate their work.
- **Share and Learn:** Members have access to best practices at www.nsprapro.org, including the NSPRA Gold Mine, topic-specific resources (crises, budget/finance, communication training, strategic communications plans, etc.), salary and career surveys and more. Members also enjoy access to NSPRA Plus (<https://plus.nsprapro.org/>), an exclusive on-demand learning library for school communicators that features hundreds of webinars and workshops to support ongoing professional growth.

With more than 90 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. The association offers useful communication products and programs as well as an annual [NSPRA National Seminar](#), the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America. NSPRA also offers a [National School Communication Awards](#) program, which recognizes individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Audit Team Vitae

ISD 709's NSPRA Communication Audit Report was developed by a team with extensive background in developing and managing communication and public relations programs for school districts and education agencies. Following are brief descriptions of their backgrounds and experience.

Jessica Scheckton, APR, PMP

NSPRA Communication Research Specialist

Lead Auditor

Jessica supports NSPRA's audit and research services through her work in project management, survey design, data analysis and communication audit development. She draws on extensive experience from her tenure with the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service, where she led and supported district-wide research initiatives, audits and strategic communication plans. Her combined strengths in project management and school PR ensure audit processes are thorough, efficient and grounded in real-world district challenges. A two-time NSPRA Gold Medallion winner and past chapter president, Jessica brings a practitioner-focused, data-driven lens to every engagement.

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



Melissa Braham, APR, CAE

NSPRA Associate Director

Melissa oversees NSPRA's research services and leads the team responsible for delivering high-quality communication audits, stakeholder surveys and data reports for school systems across the U.S. and Canada. With more than 25 years of experience in strategic communication across education and healthcare, she guides core association functions—staff management, National Seminar programming, chapter relations and member resource development. Her leadership ensures every audit reflects strong methodology, thoughtful analysis and a deep understanding of how districts build trust, strengthen engagement and communicate with purpose.

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



Alyssa Teribury

NSPRA Communication Research Manager

Alyssa develops and manages NSPRA's communication audits, stakeholder surveys, data reports and white papers, helping districts turn complex information into clear, actionable insights. With more than a decade of school PR experience, she brings both research expertise and a practitioner's understanding of district needs. Alyssa specializes in analyzing stakeholder perceptions, assessing communication systems and presenting findings in ways that support strategic decision-making. Her work blends data literacy, storytelling and practical recommendations that school teams can confidently put into action.

Learn more about Alyssa at <https://www.nspraprogram.org/About-Us/Contact-and-Staff/Communication-Research-Manager>.



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