



Communication Audit Report:

Pelham Union Free School District

National School Public Relations Association

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Introduction

The Environmental Setting for School District Communications

The Pelham Union Free School District (Pelham Public Schools) is located in the southernmost tip of Westchester County, 30 minutes north of New York City. It is a relatively small district with just over 400 employees serving approximately 2,800 students in four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school.

According to the most recent [New York State Education Department Report Card data](#), the majority of the student population is white (63%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (17%), multiracial (9%), Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (6%) and Black or African American (5%). Thirteen percent of students are reported as economically disadvantaged and 11 percent have been identified as students with disabilities.

The district boasts a 100 percent graduation rate, robust K-12 programming, nationally recognized programs, an International Baccalaureate World School-Middle Years Programme and state athletic championships, among other achievements.

Strong family, school and community partnerships have resulted in a 20-year history of budget support. Currently, the district is concluding a \$57 million bond project focused on aging infrastructure. The project passed by a 70-30 percent margin in 2018. Today, students are learning in a new state-of-the-art elementary school building, and staff are working in new administrative offices.

The past few years have been marked by many challenges, including an increasingly divided community due to the political landscape, social unrest and safety concerns felt nationally. Steps to foster a sense of belonging for all students through the form of a voluntary equity audit drew considerable criticism upon release

in 2020. Additionally, a series of both high-profile and smaller-scale crises have caused reputational damage that has been difficult to overcome.

Plans are beginning to take shape for the development of a new five-year strategic plan. The timing of this communication audit report presents an opportunity to align communication goals with the district's renewed vision.

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

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

In serving Pelham Public Schools, the goals of the communication audit process were to:

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

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the Pelham Public Schools Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Cheryl H. Champ, to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work

of the Public Information Office or any other department or individual school, they are intended to help the district improve the effectiveness of current communications, engagement and marketing efforts and to support its commitment to continuous improvement.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall, but individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met for example. The real measure of success, though, is whether the communication program is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing [recommendations](#), the auditor reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of the [district's mission, vision and goals](#).

Guiding Definition

NSPRA works to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication engagement and marketing practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

Opinion Research as a Foundation

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

Nature of the Audit

A communication audit of Pelham Public Schools enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit was Audrey Brahler, APR. Her vita is included in the [Appendix](#) of this report.

Materials Review

The first step in the communication audit involved the Public Information Officer submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *The Week Ahead*, *Board of Education Wrapup*, *Pelham Focus*). 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 effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor's review of websites, social media and other digital platforms also focused on stakeholders' use of and engagement with online content. In addition, the auditor reviewed the district's demographic data, [current strategic plan](#), news clips and digital communication analytics.

SCoPE Survey

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted online School Communications Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to

collect feedback from four stakeholder groups: parents and families, students (high school only), employees (both instructional staff and support staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCoPE Survey was conducted for Pelham Public Schools from Feb. 14 to March 13, 2023. It included questions regarding the following:

- How people are currently getting information and how they prefer to receive it.
- Whether they are getting the information they need.
- Perceptions around their opportunities to seek information, provide input and become involved.
- Whether they perceive the communications to be understandable, timely, accurate, transparent and trustworthy.

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

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

- Parent/Guardian Survey:
 - 542 surveys completed
 - ± 3.8 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Faculty/Staff Survey:
 - 211 surveys completed
 - ± 4.6 percent confidence interval (± 5 percent target exceeded)
- Community survey:
 - 60 surveys completed
 - ± 12.62 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target not met)

- Student survey:
 - 158 surveys completed
 - ± 7 percent confidence interval (± 10 percent target exceeded)

This same survey has been administered to school districts across the United States, and the Pelham Public Schools final survey report compares the local responses to national benchmark averages (see [SCoPE Scorecard](#)). The auditor reviewed the data and open-ended comment results for each survey group in detail and in collaboration with [NSPRA Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR](#).

Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit is the on-site focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district’s internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 13 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent and public information officer from March 21-23, 2023. For the focus groups, district officials identified and invited participants 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:

- High school students
- Clerical staff (building and central office)
- Counselors and social workers
- Elementary instructional staff
- Middle school/high school instructional staff
- Elementary parents/guardians
- Middle School parents/guardians

- High School parents/guardians
- Spanish-speaking parents/guardians
- Principals
- Assistant superintendents
- Directors and supervisors
- Public Information Office staff
- Superintendent
- Board of Education members

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

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by [Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR](#), and [Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR](#).

Assumptions

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

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

there is information on what may need to be changed.

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group and SCoPE Survey participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Public Information Office by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program. Recommendations are designed to address gaps and assist district and school leaders' efforts to communicate consistently and effectively. Keep in mind that 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.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs and those that are ongoing or should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication tasks, and others may apply to additional departments or all staff. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake while maintaining existing programs. This is a long-term effort for which this report should serve as a road map.

Some recommendations in this report may take months, if not years, to fully implement. However, there are some action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the district or Public Information Office and still pay quick dividends. Action steps that

can be taken immediately with minimal effort 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



QUICK WIN



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

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

Transparency with Focus Group Participants and Other Stakeholders

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

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

Key Findings

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

SCoPE Scorecard

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted online School Communication Performance Evaluations (SCoPE) surveys to collect feedback from four stakeholder groups: parents and families, employees (both instructional staff and support staff), students and community members.

The SCoPE Scorecard on the following page provides a summary of scores for the school district on nationally benchmarked questions that measure issues that matter most in school communications. (Student results are not yet nationally benchmarked.) The district's scores are listed in comparison to the scores for all school districts—nearly 90 nationally—that have participated in the SCoPE Survey since 2013.

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

1. When participants were asked to rate *how informed they feel* on specific topics, they responded using the following scale:
 - 5 = Highly informed
 - 4 = Very informed
 - 3 = Informed
 - 2 = Somewhat informed
 - 1 = Not 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 = Neutral
 - 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 = Very Good
 - 3 = Average
 - 2 = Below Average
 - 1 = Poor

For more details on methodology, participation rates and complete SCoPE results, refer to the survey summary and detailed data reports.

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

District Image/Strengths

Key findings regarding stakeholder perceptions of the district’s image are important because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders, while the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals.

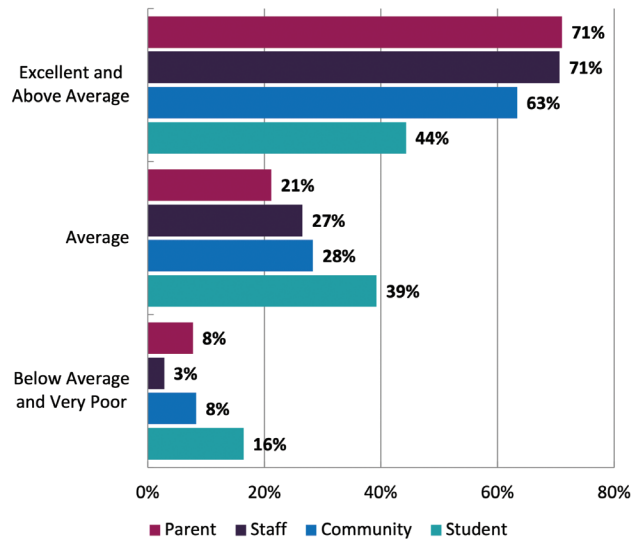
The auditor’s thoughts on what the key findings suggest are summarized later in the section on [Observations](#).

- Focus group participants described the district as having a rich partnership with community organizations and the support of its residents. They describe a small-knit community with high expectations and a high level of ownership, and they view the district as “the heartbeat of the town” with a lot of overlap between the schools and the community. Town recreational activities are held in school facilities during the week and on the weekends.
- High-quality academics, a variety of extracurricular activities, caring and dedicated teachers and strong student support structures were readily cited as district strengths across all focus groups. Specifically mentioned were an award-winning theater program and athletic teams with multiple state championship titles. They also remarked about there being a great deal of “Pelham pride” in the community and in the schools.
- Staff, parents and community members noted the wide variety of opportunities for all stakeholders to get involved in the school system. Specifically mentioned were school events (such as concerts, plays and sporting contests), committee participation, providing feedback in surveys and focus groups, and being able to view live-streamed board meetings.
- When thinking about the district, the words that most frequently come to mind for all stakeholder groups include

“community,” “good,” “caring” and “excellence,” according to the SCoPE Survey (see charts on [pages 21-22](#)).

- On the SCoPE Survey, a strong majority of participants gave a rating of “excellent” or “above average” when asked to rate their overall perception of the district. Positive perception ratings were highest among parents and staff but lowest among students. **SCoPE Scorecard data indicate that staff, parent/families and community perceptions also all scored above the national averages.**

Overall Perception of District



District Image/Challenges

- Opinions vary widely amongst stakeholders on the district’s image. In the focus groups, some expressed that they feel the district is highly-regarded, while others commented that it’s “questionable” or “not what it used to be.”
- Focus group participants from all groups noted a palpable divide within the larger Pelham community, reflective of the political and social divides seen on a statewide and national scale. They perceive this divide as impacting school operations, decision-making and the overall perception and direction of the school district. Some focus group and survey comments

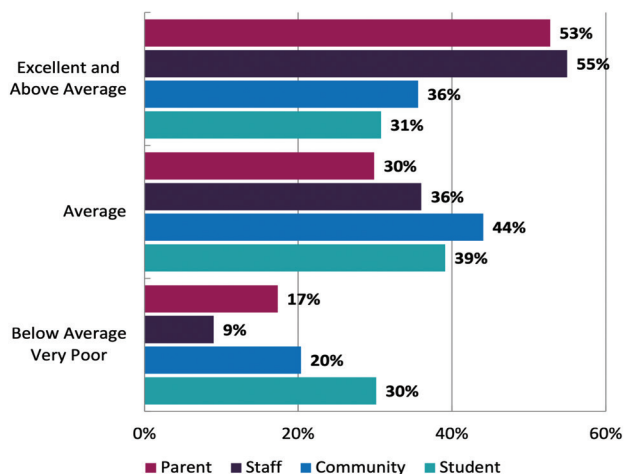
indicated a feeling of not being welcome, though this feeling was not universal.

- External information sources provide negative publicity. Focus group participants said that the information from social media sources not affiliated with the district often contain misleading or erroneous information. In reviewing media coverage of Pelham Public Schools, the auditor notes that the district is often portrayed in a negative light and key details of situations are missing. As a result, individuals who only get their information from these sources may have a negative perception of the school district.

Communication Strengths

- In the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with communication from Pelham Public Schools, including at the district, school and individual teacher levels. Among all four broad stakeholder groups, parents/families and staff had the highest percentages of “excellent” and “above average” ratings, while students and the community had the highest percentages of “below average” and “very poor” ratings. As shown on the [SCoPE Scorecard](#), Pelham Public Schools results track closely with national averages.

Overall Satisfaction With Communication



- In the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate the quality of various facets of communications. Ratings were highest in the following areas, particularly for staff and parent/family participants. (Percentages shown below are for those who responded “strongly agree” or “agree” to the statements listed.)

Quality of Communications	Parents	Staff	Community	Student
I know where I can direct a question, complaint or concern.	70%	78%	58%	51%
Communications are easy for me to understand.	75%	82%	69%	59%
Information is accurate.	66%	71%	53%	47%
Communications are timely.	66%	62%	44%	44%
I trust the communication I receive.	68%	63%	53%	46%

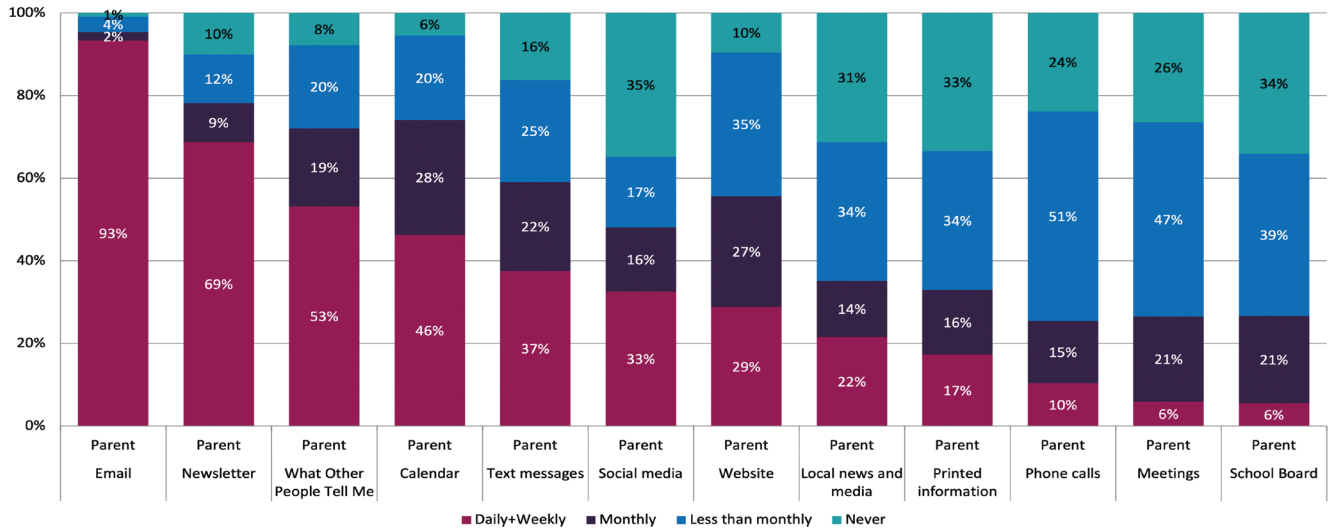
- The district’s regularly scheduled *The Week Ahead* emails, *Board of Education Wrap-Ups*, and weekly school/PTA newsletters were cited by parents in focus groups as reliable information sources. Parents also noted a variety of other valuable information sources such as the school calendar, colleagues and emails.
- In the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to rate how often they use various forms of communication to find or learn information about the school district. The results for parents/families, staff, students and community members are displayed on the following page.

Communication Challenges

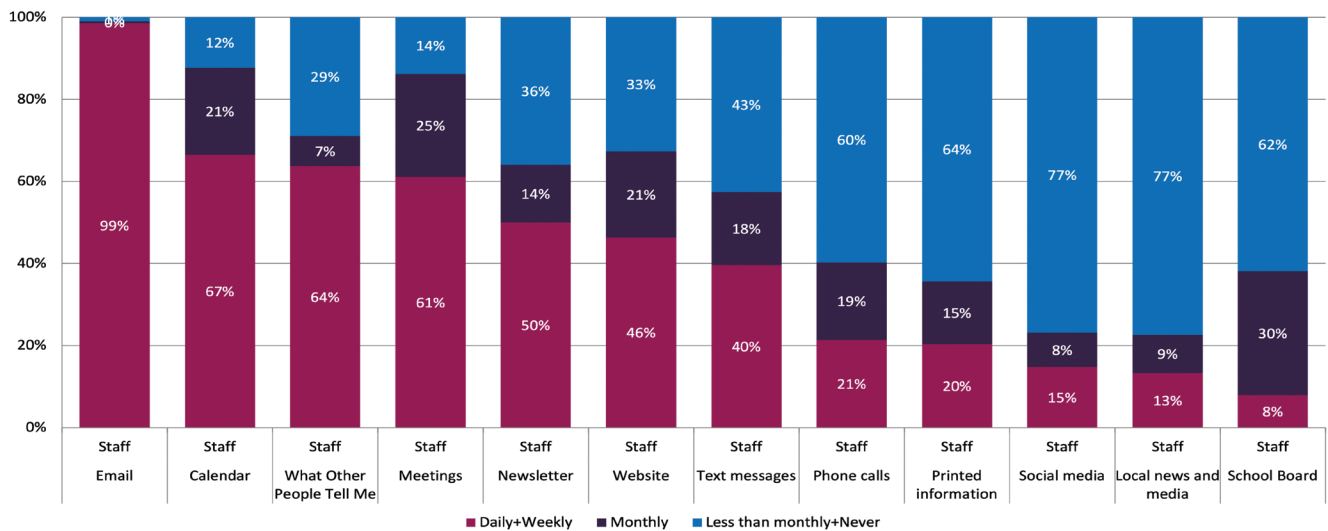
- The Public Information Office makes lists of its monthly tasks and special activities, but it does not have established

How Often Stakeholders Use Various Forms of Communication to Find District Information

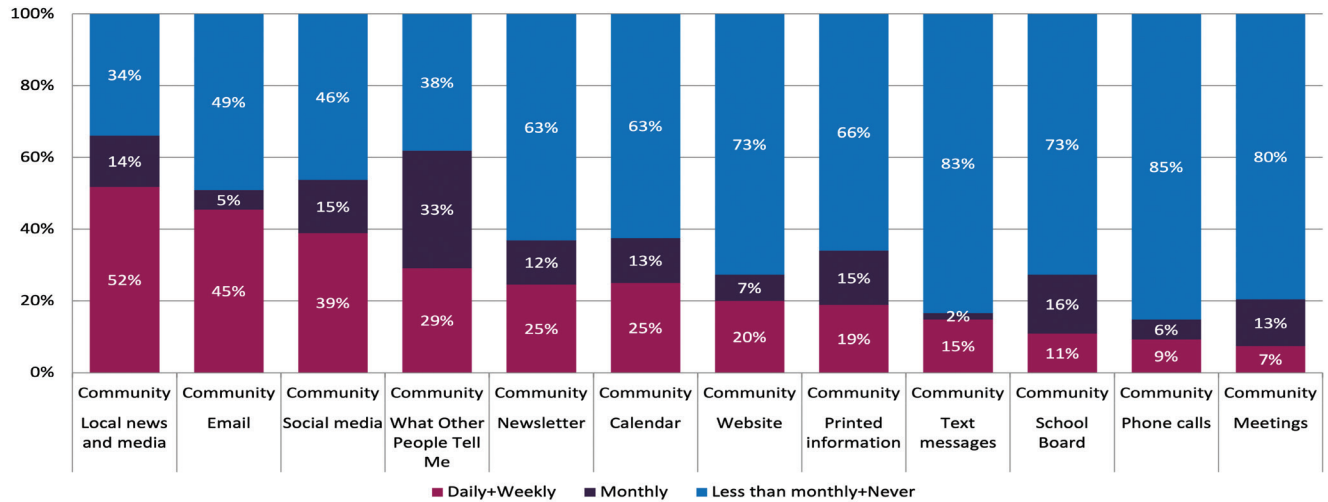
Parents/Families



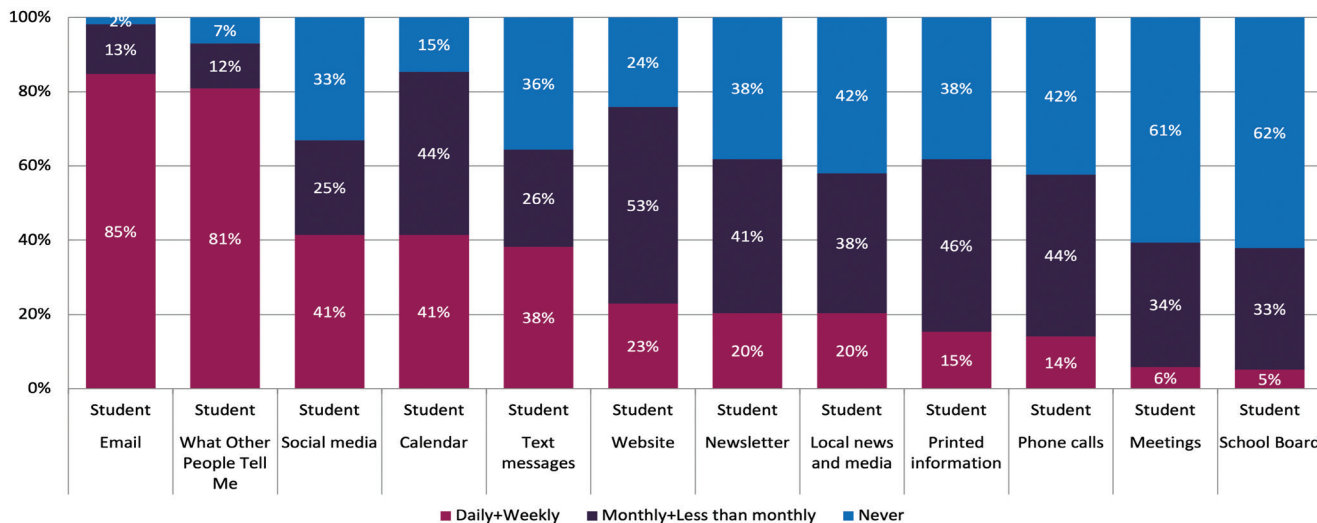
Staff



Community



Students



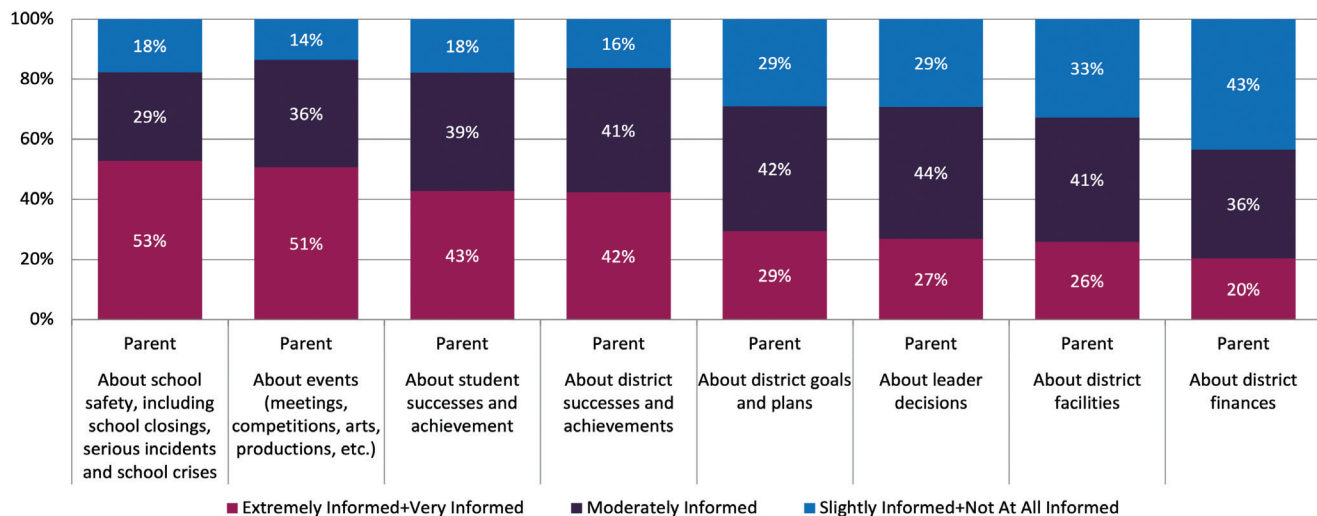
communication goals or a formal communication plan to guide its work.

- Email was cited as a source of frustration across every focus group except students. It was also a primary theme in the survey comments. Concerns raised include: the volume and frequency of messages, the appropriateness of content for the selected medium, message length, readability, usefulness, the potential for unintentional disclosure of confidential student information in internal communications and contact list management.

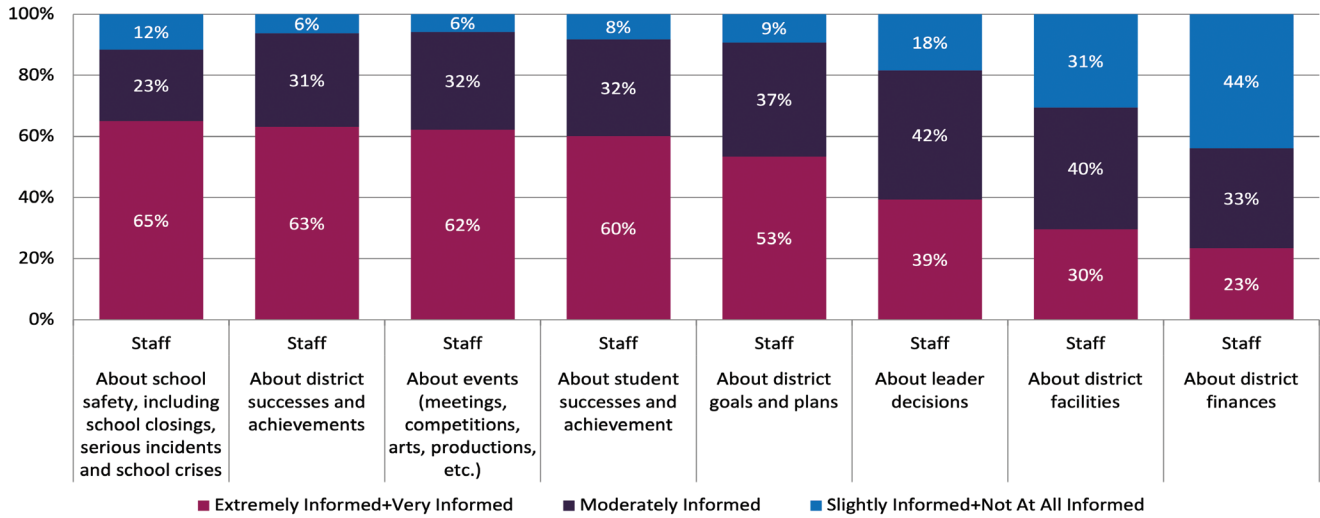
- Participants on the SCoPE Survey were asked to rate how informed they feel on a variety of district key issues. Those results are shown below and on the following page.
- It is typical for stakeholders to feel less informed about district goals and plans, leader decisions, district facilities and district finances. When those who feel *moderately informed* are added to those who are extremely or very informed in these areas, the percentages increase significantly, as shown at the top of [page 16](#).

How Informed Stakeholders Feel in Key Areas

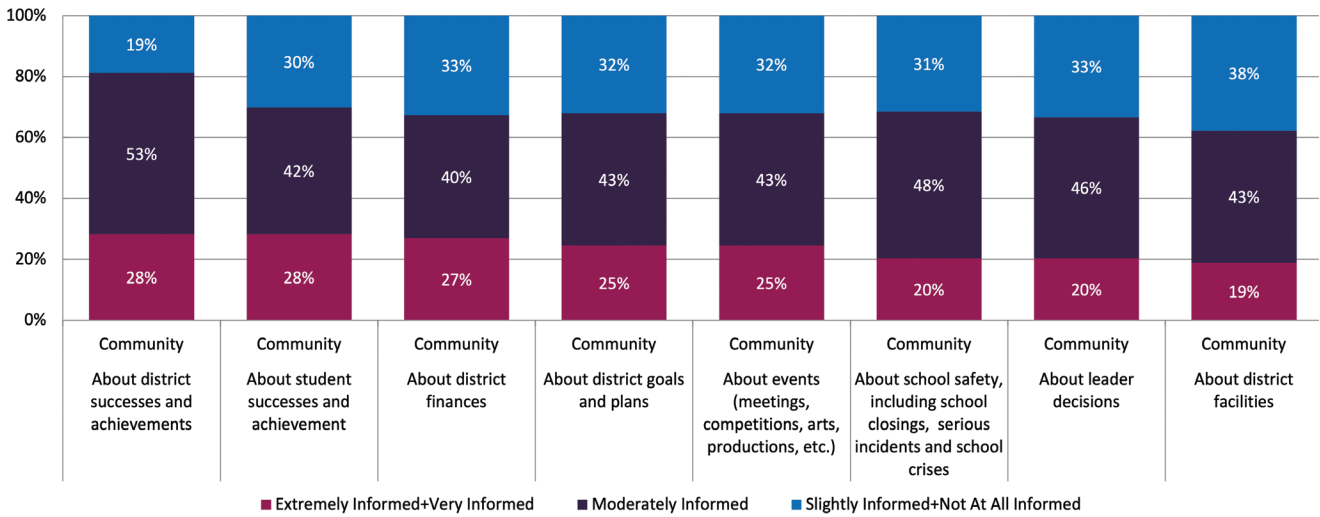
Parents/Families



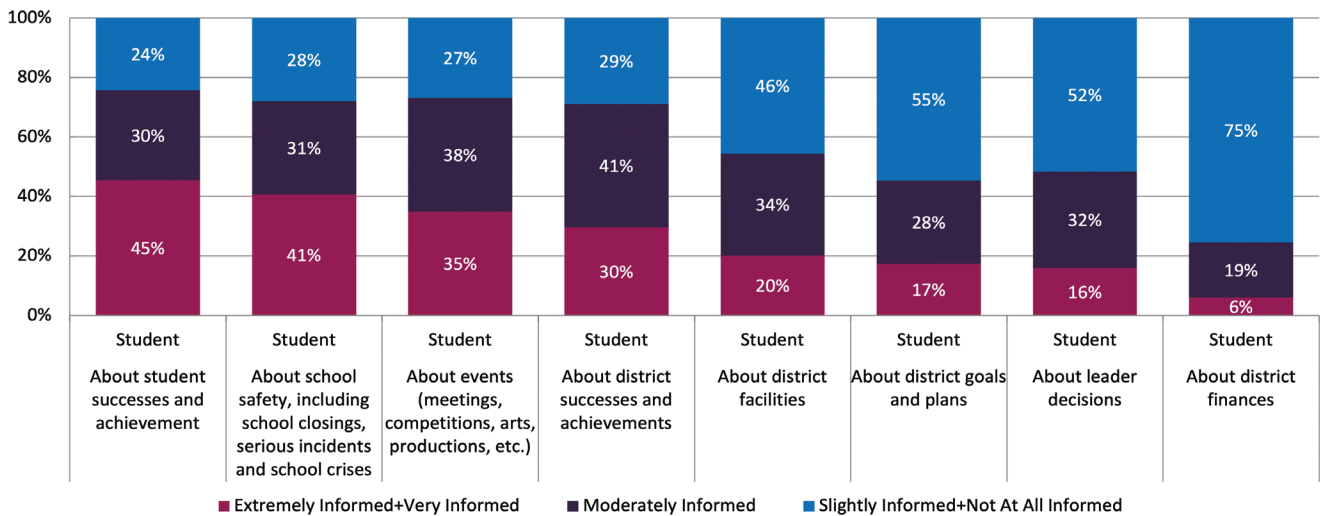
Staff



Community



Students



How Informed in Key Areas (Extremely, Very and Moderately Informed)	Parents	Staff	Community	Student
About district goals and plans	71%	91%	68%	45%
About leader decisions	71%	82%	67%	48%
About district finances	57%	56%	67%	25%
About district facilities	67%	69%	62%	54%

- Improvements in the timeliness and transparency of crisis communications have been noted but concerns remain. While some survey comments and focus group participants praised the district and/or individual schools for an improvement in communications during recent incidents and crises, the general feeling expressed by staff, parents/guardians, students and the community was that they should be better informed during all major incidents, regardless of which building it occurred in. In nearly every focus group, as well in survey comments, references were made to how past crises were handled and how they impacted the community.
- Student journalists serving an online non-school news outlet post stories about the school and staff members. Staff members universally recognize the value of students having the opportunity to participate in an authentic news reporting environment. However, they also cite the negative impact these news stories can have on the school climate for staff, particularly when students report on situations in real time before the district has an opportunity to share information with staff and parents. Administrators also shared that, during a developing situation, they find it difficult to meet the expectations students have for access to sensitive information.

- There is an inconsistency in communications across the district, school buildings and departments. The auditor notes that communications appear to vary widely from one site to another. Staff and parents/guardians report widely different systems for how building leaders communicate with them. Some staff members described significant voids and delays in receiving important information that impacts their jobs and roles as ambassadors.
- Concerns exist about missed promotional opportunities for positive school news. Multiple focus group participants shared their belief that, while many great things are happening in the schools, the district is missing the opportunity to spread the word. Their perception is that achievements are not shared regularly and widely, compromising the district’s image. They view the local news as focusing more on the bad news and controversial stories and less on the district’s many successes.

Internal Communications

- Email is a primary source of information to find out what’s happening in the district for nearly all staff surveyed, as shown on [page 13](#). This is consistent with national trends observed by NSPRA auditors.
- When staff participants in the SCoPE Survey were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement “I receive communication that makes me feel valued as an employee,” 62 percent responded “strongly agree” or “agree.”

This is a nationally benchmarked survey question, and the [SCoPE Scorecard](#) reflects that Pelham Public School’s score (3.7) exceeds the national average (3.1).

- In both the survey and focus groups, employees made comments indicative of low morale and a lack of trust, a finding that has become more typical in NSPRA’s recent communication audits.

In staff focus groups, multiple employees expressed fear of identification in relation to their feedback despite the auditor’s assurances that NSPRA maintains their anonymity in its reporting. Others expressed skepticism that anything would change due to the audit process and inquired whether their honest feedback mattered. Staff acknowledged efforts to involve employees in the decision-making process, but they see the action as cursory and do not feel their input is valued or considered. There’s an overall sentiment that parent and board input is seen as more valuable than employee input.

- In the survey comments and focus group discussions, constituents shared sentiments reflective of their sense of not feeling valued. An illustrative example includes: “As an employee I don’t feel like the district values our input and opinions. They ask for it. We provide meaningful feedback, but it is often ignored.”
- Communication breakdowns have created confusion and misunderstandings.
 - Administrators at all levels cited communication breakdowns in keeping them consistently and promptly informed, particularly regarding crises and school operations.
 - Middle-level managers recount being caught off guard when staff and parents/guardians ask questions about information that senior leaders haven’t yet shared with them. They also noted that incomplete or last-minute communication can make it difficult to respond to urgent situations.
 - All staff focus group participants reported that they seek outside sources of information (e.g., the *Pelham Examiner*, colleagues, the “Mops and Pops” Facebook group) rather than rely on regular internal channels for information.
- Staff who work in multiple buildings said they often miss important information.
- Some staff noted that broken speakers in some areas make it difficult to hear morning announcements, causing them to miss important information.
- “Reactive” is a keyword that came up repeatedly across focus groups, particularly among employees. Overall, staff members are seeking more consistency and proactive planning with regard to communications. Following are specific examples provided by employees:
 - Individuals expressed frustration about incomplete or last-minute communication about budget development, calendar planning and facility needs.
 - Instructional staff would appreciate more advanced notice of assemblies and more thought given to when they are scheduled so that safety drills and assemblies are not held on consecutive days.
 - The morning announcements at the secondary level are not always read on schedule, which causes unnecessary classroom interruptions.

External Communications

- Parents are feeling overloaded by emails, and that feeling is exacerbated by additional automated messages. In parent focus groups, participants noted that they receive automated Infinite Campus and Google Classroom messages in addition to email messages from individual schools, the district and teachers. They indicated that these messages are not always accurate or easy to follow, especially when they have multiple children enrolled and it’s not clear from which school or for which child a message pertains. The use of email attachments generated a lot of passionate discussion and opposition

amongst middle school parents in focus groups and survey comments.

- Parent-administered Facebook groups were a popular topic among nearly all focus groups. Such channels are private groups open to and managed by parents/guardians of Pelham students; they are not officially sanctioned or overseen by the district. Staff and parents expressed concerns about the speculative content included on those platforms and the harm they believe it is doing to the reputation of employees, students and the district. One representative comment on the SCoPE Survey said, “The Facebook community groups are overwhelming us. They are private and not moderated. They are using names, descriptive information.”
- Parents/guardians report widely different experiences across buildings in terms of the ways they communicate.
- It can be hard to distinguish between official school/district communications and community-sponsored communications. Due to the close collaboration between the community and school district, parents say it can be unclear whether a message is an official school communication or a community-sponsored communication. They say that community messages are sometimes woven into official district communications or the combined PTA/school newsletters at the elementary level.
- Community members are interested in the district and want to be informed, but their experiences with Pelham Public Schools’ communications are inconsistent.
 - Some community members feel that there is little effort taken to provide them with information. As one survey comment explains, “I get no information at all about the school district despite paying large amounts of tax to support it. I never get emails and only rarely get printed material mailed to me.”

- Others feel differently, as noted in this survey comment: “I think the emails from the district are helpful and informative. There is also a wealth of information on the district website.”

Website

- The current Pelham Public Schools website was launched in December 2018 and utilizes the Finalsite platform.
- Using the [web accessibility evaluation tool, WebAIM](#), to assess the homepage of the district website, the auditor found that there are a number of accessibility issues to be addressed. The most predominant issue was 253 low contrast areas, meaning it can be difficult for some people with vision impairment to distinguish between text, graphics and backgrounds of similar color. There were also broken ARIA references and structural issues that would make it difficult for someone using an assistive device to properly read the page.
- Website analytics, focus group discussions and SCoPE Survey results confirm a low reliance on the district website as a source of information.
- The most sought-after content relates to the calendar, the athletics schedule, food services and contact information.

Beyond these pages, focus group participants seemed unaware of content that is readily accessible from the site such as live-streamed and archived board meeting recordings.

- The [search page](#) is one of the 10 pages most often accessed by visitors to the website, which could be an indicator that information is not intuitively organized. In addition, the search feature does not appear to consistently identify posted content. For example, a search for “graduation in June 2023” yielded 11 results, but none about the upcoming graduation.

- The auditor found some website content to be out of date. There are time-specific posts related to COVID-19 protocols, weather-related closings and an assistant superintendent search. Some of the school homepages feature photos/captions from prior years. At the time of the audit, there was a news post on the district website homepage that was several years old.
- The auditor offers the following additional observations regarding the website:
 - There is so much information accessible from the homepage that it may be hard for users to determine how to approach finding what they need.
 - The school links are small and not immediately obvious to the user.
 - The main district navigation disappears completely once a user navigates to a school page.
 - Other content is not intuitively available. An example includes the Pelham Parent Technology Handbook, which is accessible from the Technology and Learning section, not Parents and Community.
 - The Contact Us page lacks an opportunity to lead visitors to the most sought-after contact information, such as the staff directory and the main building contacts (e.g., principal, attendance clerk and nurse) for each school.
 - Some content such as the high school curriculum guide is posted as PDFs that require users to open and then pinch and zoom to read on a mobile device. PDFs are typically not accessible for individuals with hearing or visual disabilities.
- The district's [Twitter](#) page has 829 followers.
 - Post frequency is generally 1-3 times per week.
 - Posts typically feature one or more photos or a graphic along with the text.
 - The level of engagement on posts featuring student photos highlighting student achievements is much higher than posts with graphics intended to inform users about an upcoming event.
 - During a one-week evaluation period as part of this audit, the average engagement rate was 6.88 percent. This is well above the average engagement rate of 0.27 percent per post cited for brands in 2020.
 - Twitter usage is minimal. At the time of this audit, the last post was from nearly three months ago in February 2023 for a weather-related notice. Prior to that, the district account retweeted a number of tweets from several school-affiliated groups and staff at the start of the 2022-23 school year
 - To evaluate the engagement rate for a one week period, the auditor had to go back to January 2021 to find a series of district-generated posts—one was regarding vaccinations, another was a plug for an upcoming event and the last was a weather-related closing. The average engagement rate for the series of posts was 0.16 percent. A good engagement rate on Twitter is cited as 0.5 to 1 percent or higher.
- The district's YouTube account has 716 subscribers and 158 videos with 83,058 views since the account was established in June 2015. Comments are turned off.
 - A link labeled "Live Meetings" on the Meetings and Coffees page of the Board of Education section of the district website leads to a YouTube page in a staff member's name in affiliation with achievements and some informational items.

Social Media

- The district's [Facebook](#) page has 2,000 followers.
 - Content is geared towards parents/guardians and features student

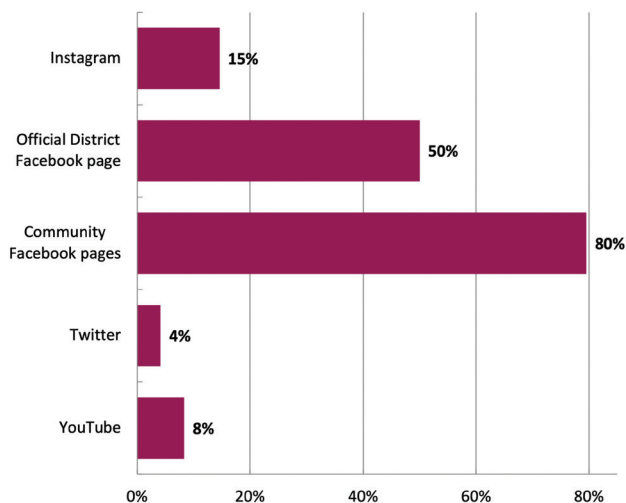
the PMHS Media Center. (Past meetings are available through the “Archived Meetings” link on the same page and hosted on the Swagit platform.)

- The YouTube channel also features special event videos, such as graduation, awards ceremonies and moving up days—most of which were recorded when public participation may have been limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago.

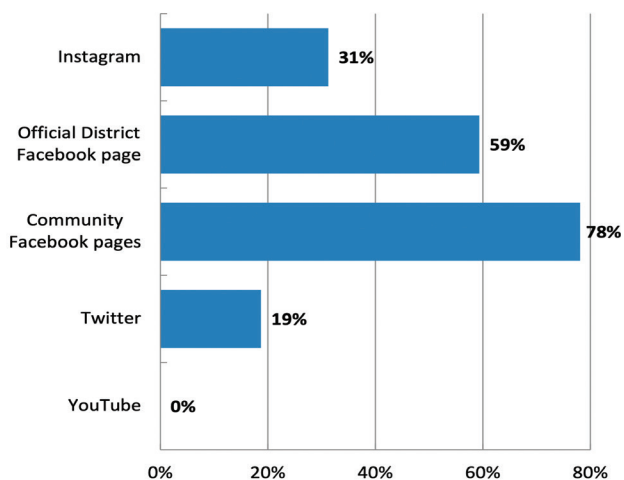
- Staff, parents and community members were asked in the SCoPE Survey which social media platforms they use regularly for information about Pelham Public Schools. Results are shown in the charts on page 18. Of note is that parents and community members use the community Facebook page more than the school’s official Facebook page.

Stakeholders’ Use of Social Media to Find School-related Information

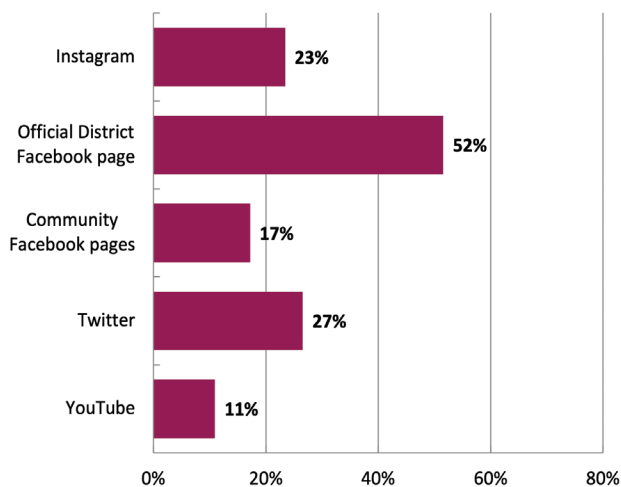
Parents/Families



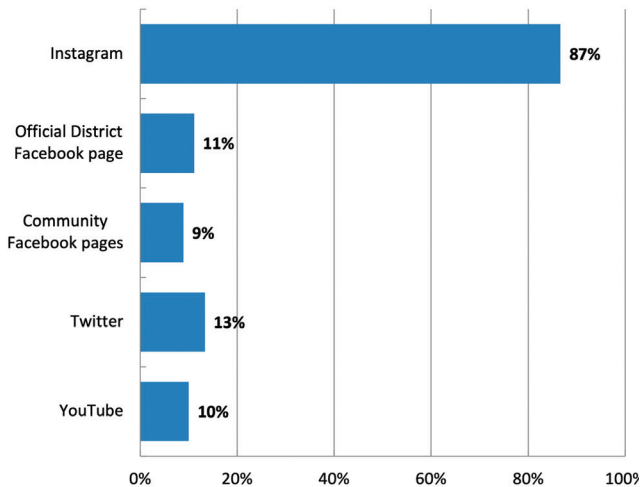
Community



Staff



Students



Words that Best Describe Pelham Public Schools

On the SCoPE Survey, participants were asked to provide two words that they felt best describe

Pelham Public Schools. The results are shown separately for faculty/staff, parents/families, students and community members in the following word graphics.

Faculty/Staff



Parents/Families



Community Members



Students



Observations and SWOT Analysis

Following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process, the auditor offers the following general observations.

- **A strategic communication plan is needed to provide a roadmap for managing, organizing and supporting activities that support the district's strategic plan.** The first recommendation of this report is to develop such a plan and to include components for increasing engagement and developing tactics for proactive issues management. The remaining recommendations in this report can be incorporated as strategies in the plan, creating a guide for how and when each will be accomplished.
- **Nearly all stakeholders selected email as the most preferred communication method, but a lack of guidelines, protocols and procedures is creating challenges.** Email communication elicited a strong response in survey comments and focus group conversations. Stakeholders cited various issues related to the volume of messages, choice of medium, usefulness of the content, timeliness, frequency and redundancy. It is a source of contention and frustration among nearly all stakeholders, making it a serious communication challenge that should be given top priority. Several of the recommendations in this report include tactics that will help everyone with communication responsibilities work more effectively, efficiently and consistently.
- **Crisis communication is a concern of all stakeholder groups.** Today's families have extremely high expectations of how educational institutions respond to and communicate during crises. This was a topic of great interest to all focus groups and discussions centered around the following themes:

 - **Stakeholders believe they do not have all the information they need from the district to navigate a crisis.** When communication from the district is lacking or perceived to be insufficient, stakeholders described turning to external sources, such as parent-administered Facebook groups and online news media, which are not always acting in the school district's best interest and may not be accurate. In today's 24/7 digital environment, the district must position itself as the most trusted and accurate source of information by communicating with transparency, clarity and efficiency.
 - **Concerns were expressed about the timeliness, transparency and consistency of crisis communications** as well as the channels selected for sending messages, specifically email and text. Employees indicated they do not have enough information about the situation in advance of the larger community to do their jobs effectively. Meanwhile, parents/guardians expressed that a lack of clarity and information left them fearful for their child's safety. High school students also expressed the significance of being informed, as expressed in the following survey comment: "I have been in PMHS where rumors get extremely out of hand because no one knows the true story. This results in havoc and ultimately, the student body gets punished for letting rumors start."

Given the speed of today's information dissemination with mobile technology, ensuring all stakeholders are informed with accurate updates will help allay fears arising from the unknown and dispel rumors and innuendo.

- **The reputational damage from past crises continues to impact the district.** The district has struggled to rebuild trust following a series of crisis events. Crises are more difficult to navigate when there is no plan to ensure appropriate, timely and consistent communications occur.

Pelham Public Schools is already taking steps to better prepare for the unexpected. The auditor was provided with a draft crisis communication plan as part of this review, and strategies and tactics for enhancing the plan are included in this report. While every crisis is unique, establishing a consistent process will strengthen the district's credibility as stakeholders come to trust in transparent, honest and accurate communication.

- **More structure and intentionality is needed for internal communication and employee engagement.** Based on the auditor's observations and feedback from multiple focus groups, one clear opportunity for systemic improvement rests in ensuring fidelity and consistency in how news and information flow throughout the district. Without a clearly defined process for message dissemination, school administrators, building principals and department leaders don't know when, how and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. To ensure all school leaders clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner, expectations should be established for how the district will communicate with staff.
- **There is not a clear understanding internally of the public information officer's role.** The PIO's role has evolved, positively, from being a technician focused on communication tactics such as taking pictures at events to being a strategic communications advisor who works closely with the superintendent

to identify problems and solutions. However, the PIO is not an official part of the senior cabinet, which sometimes puts him in the position of learning about issues and initiatives later than would be ideal to provide proactive strategic communication guidance. Having the PIO attend senior cabinet meetings on an as-needed basis would allow him to get ahead of issues, while also allowing him to build relationships and greater trust with other senior leaders.

- **There is a desire for more opportunities to gather in-person.** It was clear to the auditor that focus group participants were happy to see one another in person, especially the Spanish-language group, who particularly craved the chance to connect and engage with other parents/guardians. Focus group participants suggested the district offer more in-person events such as opportunities for new students to meet current students and providing in-person tutorials on using Google Classroom and Infinite Campus.

SWOT Analysis

The auditor has identified the following items as specific internal strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) and external opportunities (O) and threats (T)—known as a SWOT analysis—affecting the

ability of the Pelham Public Schools 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"> Leadership is committed to improving communications and to identifying the additional resources needed to make these improvements. District leadership is actively engaged in community partnership activities. Various communication tools are readily available, including a new mobile-friendly website, a mass notification system, and live and archived board meeting videos. The district’s and schools’ regularly scheduled emails and newsletters are trusted information sources relied upon by parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of a strategic communication plan, a crisis communication plan and an email marketing strategy makes the district reactionary to day-to-day needs and vulnerable in the event of crises. There is no one-stop hub for employee information. Internal communication is siloed with inconsistent messages across buildings. Staff morale and trust are low.
External	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is strong community and parent/family engagement and support. There are notable achievements districtwide to celebrate and promote with the public. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The perceived “overload” of emails to parents results in important messages being missed or ignored by families. When there is a communications void from the district, stakeholders turn to parent-administered Facebook groups and online news media for unofficial, unverified information that can raise concerns and contribute to confusion, misinformation and community divide.

Recommendations

The Pelham Public Schools superintendent, Board of Education and public information officer have demonstrated a commitment to strengthening communications, both internally and externally, by inviting an audit of the district's communication program. Beyond helping the district identify its communication needs and how to address them, the audit process has also identified resources needed to increase overall communication effectiveness. The resulting recommendations, provided here, create a roadmap to follow for more highly effective communications in the years to come.

At the heart of the district's communications program is its one-person Public Information Office. The public information officer is largely responsible for the district's website and social media presence, production of a print newsletter and district calendar, budget communications, promotional activities, event planning, photography, and board meeting notices and updates. The PIO also plays a key role in the district's crisis communications response. While the PIO is well-regarded, the auditor observed some confusion about the role and its responsibilities, with some staff members viewing the PIO position as more tactical and others seeing value in the PIO working strategically with the superintendent and administrative team.

While the PIO shoulders much of the responsibility for district communications, many of the recommendations in this report will require commitment and participation from the entire administrative team to realize meaningful improvements in the Pelham Public Schools communication program. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the overall communication program system-wide, to complement the many positive efforts already coming out of the Public Information Office.

The following recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority and are accompanied

by action steps that provide tactical ideas for how the recommendations might be accomplished. However, the action steps in this report are not exclusive, and **the district may choose to address the recommendations through tactics other than those outlined here**, particularly as new tools and tactics emerge over time.

Some 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 a year while continuing to deliver existing programs and services.** The district will need to determine the most appropriate timeline for implementation based on its available budget, resources and staff capacity for communications.

Summary of Recommendations

1. [Develop a strategic communication plan.](#)
2. [Finalize and implement a crisis communication plan.](#)
3. [Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.](#)
4. [Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district's decision-making process.](#)
5. [Develop and implement protocols, structures and training for those responsible for communicating.](#)
6. [Enhance the effectiveness of external communications.](#)
7. [Expand the capacity of the Public Information Office to focus on strategic communication needs.](#)
8. [Develop and implement digital marketing strategies to improve message delivery.](#)

Recommendation 1:

Develop a strategic communication plan.

In a 2022 survey of NSPRA members, nearly a third reported that strategic communication planning is among their top five responsibilities. These school communication professionals know that communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision and measurable objectives, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. Without a plan, communication departments end up generating a great deal of general and reactive communications rather than proactive communications that strategically deliver a district's key messages, expand its reach, build brand awareness and support its overall goals.

The day-to-day demands of any school system can easily consume most of a communication department's time, putting communication planning and evaluation last on the to-do list. This scenario, however, is often what causes stakeholders to feel uninformed on key issues such as district goals and plans, leadership decisions, facilities and finances. In Pelham, focus group feedback and SCoPE Survey results suggest there are unmet communication needs in these areas for staff, parents/families, students and the community, even though they are generally satisfied with district communications.

The primary functions of a strategic communication plan are:

- To articulate and formalize communication goals, objectives and strategies as well as the tactics that will be used to fulfill them and the tools that will be used to evaluate their success.
- To provide a means for communications staff to report on progress and demonstrate accountability.

- To ensure key communication priorities are not lost in day-to-day communication tasks.

Now that research-gathering is well underway with this communication audit report, the Public Information Office can begin to build a strategic communication plan by setting communication goals that align with the district's mission and goals, and that address the issues identified in the [Key Findings](#).

Identifying measurable objectives to achieve those goals, along with tightly aligned strategies and tactics, will further protect the district from making routine or reactive communications its primary focus. The plan should be constructed so that progress can be measured and evaluated. The quantitative data from the SCoPE Survey provides an excellent baseline against which achievement of objectives could be measured in the future.

Action Step 1.1

Use the RPIE method to design the strategic communication plan.

There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan, but following the four-step process known by the acronym RPIE (research, plan, implement, evaluate) has proven successful for many school districts and is a best practice of accredited public relations practitioners. Good communication planning is time-consuming, but making time to create such a plan will provide a road map ([see page 30](#)) to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of all district communications.

Research

Research (R) and analyze the situations facing the district, including stakeholders' needs and wants as identified through this report. When writing the plan, summarize relevant, top-line research findings 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 deeper understanding of communication sources, preferences and

perceptions than the district had prior to conducting the audit.

Following are some additional data sources you may consider tapping 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/cedsci/>) and local county/city/town websites
- National public opinion on schools: PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools (<https://pdkpoll.org/>), Gallup polls on education (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx>) and EdChoice Schooling in America Poll (<https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/schooling-in-america-polling-dashboard-2/>)
- Global communication trends: Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>) and Gallup Workplace Insights (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/insights.aspx>)

Also as part of the research phase, identify all communication, public relations, marketing and engagement activities currently happening in the district. Include ongoing communication tactics such as managing website content, creating print and e-newsletters, email outreach, social media postings, emergency notifications, news releases, budget communications, crisis communication, etc. Identify any formal efforts to engage and build relationships with internal and external stakeholders such as parent/guardian conferences, open house programs, advisory groups, business partnerships, news media relations and participation in community events. When making a strategic

#1

Develop a strategic communication plan.

communication plan, it is important to research all existing and regular communication and engagement efforts so that it can be determined where (and if) they fit into the overall plan.

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

Research should be an ongoing tactic in a school district's communication strategies. When changing curriculum and instructional strategies, education leaders typically turn to research in best practices. It is recommended that district leaders do the same when developing and updating the communication plan to ensure it remains dynamic and timely.

Plan

Planning (P) is at the heart of the RPIE process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications roadmap begins to come to life. This is the heavy-lifting phase of creating the communication plan, but completing the following steps will pay big dividends for the district.

- **Develop Goals and Measurable Objectives.** In the planning phase, begin by articulating clear long-term goals and shorter-term measurable objectives for communication, based on desired changes in awareness/knowledge levels, opinions/perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Think of your objectives as the outcomes you desire, stated in a way that can be measured later, which builds trust by establishing accountability.

When developing objectives, ensure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). Here is an example of a measurable objective:

- Objective: “By the end of the 2023-24 school year, the percentage of employees who agree that they receive the information they need to represent the district as an ambassador will increase from 53 percent to 70 percent.”

- **Determine Strategies.** Strategies are the approaches used to achieve objectives; they are broader in scope than tactics. A strategy states what is going to be done to achieve a desired outcome, while tactics describe how that strategy will be done. Carefully sorting the strategies from the tactics and organizing them under the measurable objectives will make the plan easier to understand, particularly for district and department leaders in other functional areas, and easier for communications staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. For example, if the measurable objective is for staff members to have opportunities to be more involved in the district’s decision-making processes, a strategy and its related tactics might include:

- Strategy: Develop resources for employees to learn about the district and current initiatives.
- Tactics:
 - Launch a weekly or bi-weekly employee-only newsletter to share updates on district initiatives and recent district recognitions as well as to provide information on employment-related topics.
 - Create an employee-only webpage that contains up-to-date talking points on current issues and projects with the ability for employees to provide input and ask questions.

- Distribute easy reference “pocket guides” with district facts about enrollment, the budget, graduation rates, student demographics, teacher to student ratios, etc.

- **Create Key Messages.** For each target audience, determine what that stakeholder group should come away knowing, doing or believing because of the communications and use that information to build targeted key messages. People’s attention span and time is limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategy in the prior bullet, following is an example key message:

- Key Message: Our employees can be trustworthy sources of accurate and timely information about our district, and district leaders are committed to making sure employees have the resources needed to fulfill that role.

- **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. Following are some common stakeholders for schools:
 - Parents broken down by school building, home language, level of active involvement, etc.
 - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals
 - Business and community partners such as civic and faith-based community leaders, vendors/boosters, scholarship providers, real estate agents
 - Elected officials, including local and county officials and state and federal legislators

- Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children
 - Students such as those participating in student government
 - Media representatives from radio and television stations and local newspapers and magazines
- **Establish Tools and Tactics.** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. Consider also any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned to implement planned tactics. Areas to be considered for expenditures could include:
 - Equipment, software and subscriptions
 - Materials and supplies
 - Printing and duplicating
 - Print and digital advertising
 - Professional development
 - **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient delivery of information, create timelines that include starting dates for actions to be taken, dates for objectives to be reached and dates for evaluation to be carried out. While formal evaluation will come at the end of implementation (i.e., summative evaluation), the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to see if it needs modification (i.e., formative evaluation).
- **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purvey of the Public Information Office; with a small staff dedicated solely to communications, other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals. It is vital to ensure each Pelham Public Schools team member understands their roles and responsibilities for meeting the district’s communication objectives. (Communication capacity is further addressed in [Recommendation 7.](#))

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

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

Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

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

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

- **Measurable objectives** are stops along the way to reaching that destination. They might outline how many miles to be covered each day, where the driver will stop each night and by what time the driver plans to arrive at each pit stop.
- **Strategies and tactics** get into the nitty-gritty details: Will the driver take the scenic route or highways? If the chosen strategy is to take the scenic route, which songs should be put on the playlist to keep the driver awake?

Implement

Implementation (I) is often the easiest part of the RPIE process because the research and planning phases will have helped to identify what needs to be done, when, by whom and with what tools and resources, along with a timeline.

Evaluate

When creating the strategic communication plan, identify evaluative (E) measures to be used later to determine the 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 be the basis of research findings to inform future updates to the strategic communication plan.

NSPRA offers a number of resources that will help Pelham Public Schools develop a strategic communication plan. First, watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on “Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan” available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans>. The webpage also contains communication plan templates, including one for use with a communication audit report.

Then review these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:

- Pattonville (Mo.) Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program—<https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/Awards%20Section/Award%20Winners/School%20Comms%20Awards/Gold%20Medallion/gm-low-pattonville-sd-year-round-communication.pdf?ver=HEgwT3my8cFJJ0vUwHOAIA%3d%3d>

- Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan—<https://alexandriapublicic-board.com/attachments/dce41d87-af3a-4c04-8e3a-5a7b8d27d556.pdf>

Action Step 1.2

Focus communication strategies on achieving desired outcomes.



During focus group discussions, stakeholders noted feeling overwhelmed by the volume of emails they sift through daily, including those coming from district administrators, schools and teachers. For many, this led to them missing important messages. At the same time, local feedback and national trends suggest education stakeholders want more information customized to them: when and where they want it on whichever platform(s) they prefer.

In the development of the strategic communication plan, be sure to focus strategies and tactics on achieving desired stakeholder outcomes (e.g., changes in awareness, attitudes, behaviors), not just on generating more communications output (e.g., social media posts, newsletters, videos). Look for opportunities to strategically abandon existing tactics that the audit data has shown are less effective with or less of a priority for different stakeholders. Explore ways to consolidate messages into fewer but more streamlined communications (think, bullet points over paragraphs or weekly emails instead of daily emails for example).

While people often need to see a message multiple times before they act on it, a greater volume of communication does not necessarily translate to action when that volume is seen as overwhelming, distracting or unfocused. A tactic should not be used just because it is there and available; it should be used because it is the best tool for the job. With the variety of communication tactics available, prioritize those platforms by audience based on which ones have been shown to secure the greatest level of stakeholder engagement. This will allow

public information staff to use their time as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Action Step 1.3

Include proactive issues management as a component of communication planning.

The focus group discussions identified several communication challenges facing the district. Examples include perceptions about transparency, decision-making and a lack of consistent messaging from the administration and the schools. If left unaddressed, these perceptions could grow into true crises that could significantly hurt the district's operations while undermining its credibility and ability to educate students.

Issues management is the ability to anticipate and prepare for a potential crisis before it occurs by monitoring trends. It is a proactive exercise in which communicators help shape the outcomes instead of waiting to react after an issue has erupted into a crisis. 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.

Consider adding a goal and/or objectives related to issues management to the strategic communication plan. By proactively addressing issues on the horizon and by equipping district and school leaders with talking points to start the conversation, the district can frame the conversation on its own terms rather than allowing others to do so first.

Recommendation 2:

Finalize and implement a crisis communication plan.

In today's world, school districts must be prepared to deal with the unexpected—from terrorist threats to weather events to major health epidemics. The speed of today's communication technology adds another layer of challenge. The ability of students and staff to call or text as an incident is taking place can quickly relegate schools to the role of a communication observer rather than a valued information provider. In addition, there is heightened public awareness and concern about school safety today.

During the communication audit for Pelham Public Schools, every focus group shared some of these same concerns regarding crisis communications in the district. An example comment was, "When we hear too little or no information from the school, it causes everyone's anxiety to increase and time for further wrong information to circulate." In the SCoPE Survey, just over half of all respondents (52 percent) felt they were very or extremely informed about school safety, including school closings, serious incidents and school crises. Given these factors, it is imperative for the district to have a comprehensive crisis communication plan in place, as a companion piece to the district's safety plan.

The auditor was given a draft of a crisis communication plan currently in development that outlines the basic management and communication responsibilities during a crisis. Such a plan should take into account the varied communication needs of stakeholders during different types of crises, from urgent but time-limited events (e.g., school shootings, bomb threats) to ongoing crises with lengthier impacts (e.g., natural disasters, weather events, pandemics). The following action steps are offered as a guide for further development of the draft plan to make it a more comprehensive crisis communications management tool.

Finalizing the plan will help to address the challenges noted above as well as ensure that administrators and educators can focus on managing the crisis while the public information officer focuses on keeping internal and external stakeholders informed in a timely and accurate manner.

In addition to the following action steps, NSPRA offers a wealth of resources for districts developing their crisis communication plans, including a Crisis, Health and Safety Communications section of the Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) area of the NSPRA website at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Crisis-and-Safety-Communications>. Following are a few of the resources available on the webpage:

- A 2022 Golden Achievement Award-winning crisis communication plan
- Samples and templates to use during crisis events
- Conference presentations and webinars on crisis communications
- Examples of how safety information can be shared on websites

Action Step 2.1

Assign specific crisis communication responsibilities.



QUICK WIN

Clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district office and building levels, both for the public information officer and for other department/building administrators. The organizational structure of an emergency response team may vary depending on the type of crisis, but team members should be designated to take charge of specific communication responsibilities, including:

- Leadership advisement
- Internal communication

- External communication
- News media relations
- Command center operations
- Mass notification system notifications via Infinite Campus (voice, text and email)
- Digital communications (website and social media posts and monitoring)
- Research and media monitoring
- Special events, donations and volunteer management (e.g., memorial services, clothing drives)

With a one-person communications office, responsibility for gathering and disseminating critical news during a crisis may need to be shared with other administrators and departments. It will also be important to assign a backup who is trained and ready to handle outreach in the event the public information officer is unavailable.

Action Step 2.2

Emphasize preparation and training.

Being truly prepared to communicate effectively during a crisis requires preparation, planning and training. Knowing who is supposed to communicate what and how in various types of crises can help the district provide a calm and timely communications response. Schools around the country have stepped-up crisis response training, from table-top scenario discussions to active shooter drills with local law enforcement and fire-safety partners. Since communication is a vital component in managing any crisis, the public information officer should be included in these training exercises.

Prior to these drills, the public information officer and administrators with crisis communication responsibilities should review the likely media holding/press briefing areas for different types of crises and assess their crisis communication go-bags. This go-bag might include portable chargers; Wi-

#2

Finalize and implement a crisis communication plan.

Fi hotspots/hotspot enabled smartphone; a list of administrators' mobile numbers, local media's contact information and the contact information for public information officers of local emergency responders; a printout of login information for all communication platforms; a backup hard drive of key files in case of a server outage; and a change of clothes for on-camera interviews.

Crises have no time or structure limits, so encourage flexibility with the pre-established procedures when responding to an incident.

Crisis management experts recommend that school leaders periodically reevaluate their security measures. Crisis communication plans should be similarly dynamic documents. They are not meant to gather dust on a shelf or be opened only when an incident occurs. Evaluate plans for improvement annually (at a minimum) and following each crisis.

Action Step 2.3

Provide crisis communications training sessions for all administrators.

Those who hold responsibility for handling various components of crisis management, at the school or district level, should be knowledgeable about the overall crisis communication plan and how their supervisory areas are affected by it during crises. At any given time, those responsible for various components may not be immediately available and others may need to take the lead.

Components of crisis communications information and training provided to all administrators should include the following:

- **A first-response checklist.** The first hour of a crisis is when the public will form its perception of an organization's ability to respond effectively. To manage that first critical hour, the first-response checklist should include:
 - A reminder to assess the basic facts of a situation: who, what, when, where, why and how;
 - An outline of who is responsible for doing what;
 - Who should be contacted first; and
 - A basic outline for providing responses in terms of actions and statements.
- **A list of key stakeholders/target audiences and the best way to communicate with each group.** Having a list of audiences and the most effective channels to reach them means not having to brainstorm when a crisis occurs. Remind administrators that those who are most impacted must be contacted first, followed by those who are less involved.
- **Templates for creating initial public statements.** The Public Information Office should provide templates for various school crises that include prompts for communicating the following:
 - What can be confirmed;
 - What the district and/or school is/are doing to respond to the situation;
 - How and when updates will be provided; and
 - Messages of concern and sympathy for anyone directly and negatively impacted by the crisis.
- **News media protocols.** With today's smart devices and social sharing, the news media often hear of trouble as fast as—or even before—district communicators. If reporters can't get information from the district, they may (and likely will) report information from whatever sources they can find. Those sources might be students, parents and teachers who post on social media; relatives sharing students' text messages; or the random passerby on the street. Administrators must understand their role is to respond responsibly and in a timely manner to media requests so that accurate information can be provided. News media protocols should include the following:
 - When interviews will be given.
 - Who is authorized to give the interviews.
 - Who is authorized to approve the release of information.
 - Where the interviews will be held.
 - Whether photographers will be allowed on school grounds.
 - Under what circumstances students can be photographed.
- **Statements for receptionists and secretaries.** Parents/guardians will be concerned about their children, even if the crisis occurs in another school. Building staff should be aware of their responsibility to respond to these inquiries and should have a statement available that has been approved by the applicable school building principal and public information officer.
- **Expectations for staff communication during and after a crisis.** Staff members are important information ambassadors during a crisis. Employees should be updated and, if possible, should hear what is happening before messages are sent to parents/guardians and the community. Community members expect staff to know what is happening, so uninformed employees can eat away at their confidence and trust in the district.
- **Expectations for crisis communications with parents/guardians and students.** The best time to let students and families know what to do in an emergency is before it happens. Include information in student and staff handbooks and on the website explaining

what parents and staff can expect if a crisis situation occurs. Include the most likely communication methods the district will use in a crisis: automated calls/texts, email, website, Facebook, Twitter, etc. A [recent conversation in the NSPRA Connect online community](#) addressed how to communicate emergency protocols to parents and contains some excellent examples.

Action Step 2.4

Determine protocols for how information about crises will be disseminated.

The district uses Infinite Campus as its mass notification system to email, text and call staff, parents/guardians and some high school students when a serious incident or crisis occurs in their building. The district could benefit from clear guidelines on how and when the automated system is used. Staff and parents in focus groups noted that the timeliness of messages is a problem, while others commented that the information was too vague and caused more concern. As one survey comment said, “Giving staff information right before it is sent to the community doesn’t really suffice as communication.”

- **Define and share how the mass notification system is to be used** in response to a major incident or crisis and adhere to those protocols. During a serious incident, both speed and accuracy are paramount and having consistent, prescribed methods will assist those sending the messages as well as those expecting to receive them.
- **Consider developing more go-to template messages that buildings can use** during unexpected, but not atypical, crises (e.g., weather closures, bomb threats, neighborhood incidents that trigger a lockdown, and social media threats). The district also should implement a clear process for developing urgent messages

quickly so they can be sent to staff, parents/guardians, community members and high school students efficiently.

- **Expand the definition of affected stakeholders beyond those who are enrolled in or work at a specific location.** When a crisis happens at a school, the impact goes beyond that one location. In the focus groups, participants shared that they heard about incidents at other schools through the grapevine, as opposed to directly from the district. Keep in mind that a number of situations exist that make the incident in 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 and students may be traveling from one school to another (for example, at the combined middle/high school).

Early, proactive and broad communication to staff, parents/guardians, high school students (as appropriate) and community members during a crisis will reduce the void others may use to share erroneous information.

Action Step 2.5

Involve community agencies and identify available resources.

To be as well-prepared as possible to face a crisis or emergency, school districts work closely with representatives from local or county emergency response agencies (police, fire, behavioral health services, etc.) during a crisis.

The same should be true of the district’s public information officer. Build a rapport with the public information officers from police, fire and county agencies that might be responding to a crisis. Set up an annual meeting to discuss the respective groups’ protocols for communications during a crisis located at or near a school building and for off-campus incidents involving students or school personnel. Add emergency response PIOs to

the district PIO's contact list and prepare an emergency group text thread before a crisis. Share access to an annual photo directory of district and school administrators, so emergency responders can more easily identify them upon arrival at a school emergency site.

In addition to local resources, there are state and federal resources for developing a crisis communications plan. The New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services offers emergency management courses relevant to public information, including ones on "Social Media Engagement Strategies" and "Leveraging Tools for coordinated Community Disaster Communications" at <https://www.dhSES.ny.gov/oem-training-calendar>. The Centers for Disease Control and prevention also offer a series of on-demand webinars for crisis and emergency risk communication at <https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/training/archives.asp>.

Recommendation 3:

Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.

To be effective, a school district needs the support and trust of its employees. Gaining that support and trust is difficult, but keeping staff informed of changes and issues while encouraging staff engagement in decision-making shows transparency and good faith.

In a comprehensive, research-based approach to school leadership from the [Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning](#) (McREL), the case is made for how leaders effectively implement change, communicate and elicit input. The nonprofit organization's data demonstrates that there is a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement, and that among [21 leadership responsibilities](#), establishing strong lines of communication with teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement. While these responsibilities are presented as characteristics of a principal, they apply at all levels of educational leadership.

The importance of internal audiences cannot be overlooked when building a successful communications and public relations program. Employees must feel they are an integral part of the organization and understand the school district's mission and vision as well as be aware of current district initiatives and issues. Moreover, they need to be able to share that information when the need or opportunity arises. A well-informed and supportive staff will have a positive influence on external communication efforts as well as the overall environment of the school district.

The opportunities for staff to influence each other and the community in a positive way is significant. In the SCoPE Survey for Pelham Public Schools, employees were asked to estimate the typical number of interactions they have with parents or community members

weekly. Nearly 70 percent indicated they have 1-15 interactions a week while 25 percent have 16 or more interactions a week. For this survey sample of 238 employees, that represents nearly 3,000 interactions/week—providing ample opportunities for staff to share what's happening in the district.

For these person-to-person interactions to be meaningful and positive for the district, employees must first see themselves as district ambassadors. The following action steps are meant to help with that by enhancing internal communication and enabling leadership to more proactively keep staff well-informed. The action steps also can help staff members feel more valued and engaged in school district operations. (Another important component—how staff participates in the decision-making processes of the district—is specifically addressed in [Recommendation 4](#).)

Action Step 3.1

Take an employees-first approach to disseminating information.



QUICK WIN

Timeliness, context and message consistency are critical to developing an effective internal communication program. When employees feel they are “the last to know” and that information comes to them first through non-district channels (e.g, social media, parent conversations), they do not feel valued and instead experience barriers to serving as district/school ambassadors. Their reliance on parent-administered Facebook groups or other second-hand sources of information can hamper a district's ability to disseminate accurate, credible information, especially because employees are among the most frequent and trusted sources of information for families.

In contrast, highly effective communication programs prioritize ensuring that their staff get timely, accurate information. By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages

and training, the district can exponentially expand its communication outreach while also building trust and credibility both internally and externally.

Following are specific suggestions for developing an employees-first communication process:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** Make the timeliness of 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. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to address an initiative or concern, it is essential that senior leaders and school administrators include in their planning how employees will be incorporated into their communication and response efforts.
- **Use the most effective vehicles to communicate.** Consider the best vehicles for communications based on the urgency of the message, timing considerations and audit data on employees' communication preferences for different situations. If the communication is about an upcoming or ongoing issue, information can be shared with staff via regularly scheduled or as-needed meetings and email. Automated voice and text notifications may be more appropriate for more urgent or unexpected announcements.
- **When possible, share information in settings that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the topic.** A potential major change in policy or course offerings might be better shared in a staff meeting setting where questions can be asked and answered for an entire group rather than in one-off emails for example. Unless employees understand the rationale and the process used to address an issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.

#3

Focus on improving internal communications and engagement.

- **Evaluate internal tools.** A wide array of communication tools are available to keep employees informed and engaged. This includes regularly scheduled faculty meetings, department meetings, ad hoc meetings, informal colleague interactions, emails, texts, and phone calls.

Employee focus group participants at the elementary level expressed satisfaction with internal building-level communications via Google Classrooms. However, there is not a designated information hub for secondary staff, who tend to rely on email communication and information provided by colleagues.

Creating centralized locations for building- and district-level communications should be considered and might include districtwide staff intranet pages and/or weekly or bi-weekly e-newsletters.

Action Step 3.2

Increase opportunities for face-to-face communication and engagement.



A common theme among the staff focus groups was a desire to see the district leadership team at their work sites. These visits are opportunities for conversation about issues and to make human connections. There are many ways to simply deliver information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication.

When Pelham staff were asked to rate how often they use various sources of information, “what other people tell me” (64 percent) and “staff meetings” (61 percent) were the third and fourth highest scoring areas among daily and weekly information sources, behind only email and calendars. Then when employees were asked how they prefer to receive information to help them perform their duties and support student learning, “faculty, department, committee or districtwide meetings” (38 percent) and “individual meetings with your supervisor” (29 percent) were the second and third highest scoring areas, behind only email.

While clearly there is a logical use for sharing more routine information via email, this data reflects that there is value placed on face-to-face communications.

Administrators and supervisors who plan and run meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. This can be especially important when staff changes take place and/or when there are new relationships that need to be established. Providing a space for open dialogue and Q&A promotes a better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the system and schools.

The following are suggestions for enhancing face-to-face communication.

- **Include all employees assigned to a school in faculty meetings.** Consider expanding the traditional faculty meeting to an all-staff meeting at least once a month and invite non-instructional support staff to attend. Share information relevant to them at the top of the meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related to instruction are discussed, and provide meeting notes to those who cannot attend. Along with school-specific topics, principals should share important district updates and key messages at these meetings.
- **Hold breakfast or lunch meetings with staff.** Once a month, have an administrator (e.g., superintendent, cabinet member, principals, department leaders) host an informal breakfast or lunch meeting with a different group of 10-15 staff members. During the meeting, solicit feedback from staff on what is going well in their schools/ departments and what areas may need to be improved. Keep the group relatively small to ensure everyone has a chance to comment. Leaders should consider this an opportunity to build relationships with employees in a casual setting while gaining valuable insight into challenges and successes around the district.
- **Create opportunities for district staff to interact with one another.** Consider holding regular meetings of district office staff. Share important district updates and key messages, but also allow time for employees who may have limited interactions otherwise to become better acquainted with one another. Increasing interactions between employees in different departments can help avoid conflicting communications, overlapping deadlines and other operational disconnects that ultimately create issues. Improved collegiality between departments can also positively impact message consistency and improve customer service.
- **Cultivate internal key communicators across the system to help disseminate information.** Every school and department has team members that colleagues consider to be “in the know” and who are trusted sources of information (accurate or not). Put this system to work by identifying these individuals and engaging them in helping to share key messages. Provide these staff members, advisory committees, union/association leaders and other key influencers with regular news updates and key messages and ask for their support in disseminating information.

- **Create an operational department-level advisory council.** This group would differ from the existing teacher’s advisory council in that it would be composed of an employee representative from each operational department (not the supervisory administrator). Have the group meet regularly with the superintendent and other cabinet members to provide input on topics or new resources under consideration. This would allow each department to evaluate how decisions made in other departments will affect them, allow employees to offer solutions or alternatives based on their frontline experiences, promote greater understanding of job responsibilities across employee groups, and build a stronger team sensibility.

Action Step 3.3

Build up the ability of employees to serve as ambassadors.

All employees must share the role of representing the district to the community and serve as ambassadors for the schools. Communication is not just the responsibility of the superintendent, public information officer, district administrators or principals. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with internal colleagues and external stakeholders. The staff focus groups did not feel adequately prepared to fulfill this role and the SCoPE Survey reflects that only 53 percent of employees strongly agreed or agreed that they feel informed about how they can best represent the district as an ambassador.

Highly effective organizations empower their employees through effective communications to serve as ambassadors for the organization during work hours and after hours in their real and virtual communities.

To begin, develop an ambassador tool kit for school system employees. An ambassador tool kit is designed to help employees see themselves as representatives for their school system when out in the community. It gives

them the information they need to understand how the school system operates and how their work supports the organizational mission. The tool kit should be part of the orientation process for new employees and revisited at least annually with existing employees. It can be delivered in a print, virtual or video format.

Employee ambassador tool kits should contain basic facts and information such as:

- The information included in the About Us section of the district website
- Strategic goals and highlights on the district’s progress in achieving them
- Student enrollment and demographics
- Number of staff employed
- Revenue sources
- Brief summaries of special initiatives and programs
- Branding elements for employee use (e.g., logos, taglines)
- Ways to engage with the school system online
- Any other noteworthy background information

The topics are similar to what might be presented in an annual report to the school community, but content should be written with an employee reader in mind. Think: “What would employees want to know if they were asked to talk about our school system?”

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

Once the ambassador program is established, recognize and reward outstanding employee ambassadors to keep employees motivated and engaged. Invite employees to anonymously recognize each other for representing and promoting the school system in an exceptional way. Highlight an ambassador of the month (or year) on social media, the website, in digital or print publications and at school board meetings.

As the ambassador effort grows, consider formalizing the strategy by designating official employee ambassadors. These should be carefully chosen thought leaders who are well-known and respected in the school community. Consider choosing those who don't already have an official leadership role with the school system. Empower them with timely and accurate information (such as the ambassador tool kit), and then have them represent the school at community festivals, during school tours for the public, on social media, etc.

To empower employees to serve as ambassadors, some school districts implement formal programs such as Santa Ana (Calif.) Unified School District's brand ambassadors program (featured in a recent [podcast](#)). Others develop helpful materials such as the award-winning [pocket guide](#) produced by Orange County Public Schools in Florida.

Action Step 3.4

Include a communication/ambassadorship element to existing orientation programs for new employees.

While onboarding programs do not fall directly under the auspices of the Public Information Office, the department can support internal communication efforts and should play a role in getting all new hires off to a great start.

Communications training for all employees should begin immediately upon hiring, to create a positive onboarding experience that goes beyond forms and documents and offers a solid grounding in the district's history, values and goals.

Beyond providing the ambassador toolkit outlined in the previous section, following are some additional suggestions for addressing new employees' communication needs:

- Create a guide to let new employees know where to find various types of district information and whom to contact if they have questions on a district-level issue or initiative.
- Emphasize their responsibility to read key communications sent out by the district and their school.
- Review guidelines and expectations for news media relations and social media so staff protocols are clearly understood.
- Encourage staff to inform the Public Information Office of newsworthy events and visually interesting lessons in their buildings or classrooms.
- Consider preparing a summary sheet of "communication responsibilities" to distribute to all employees so new hires know how to respond to parent/guardian and staff requests appropriately.

Action Step 3.5

Continue to celebrate employee contributions and successes.



QUICK WIN

A combination of formal and informal acknowledgments and expressions of appreciation for employee efforts is important to maintaining high morale and employee engagement. These should be integrated into daily operations in a mindful and authentic manner. Personal acknowledgments of successes—large and small—help to build a positive culture by adding a human touch.

A powerful way the district can expand employee recognition is to highlight how individual employees are supporting strategic goals and helping prepare students for the future. Acknowledging the daily work contributions of employees is often more

meaningful than reporting on awards received. Continue featuring success and recognition stories in short videos, publications, websites and social media. Provide commendations at staff meetings, send personal notes and make personal thank-you calls.

Acknowledging the role employees play in the day-to-day success of students, as well as in raising the district's image, is key to building morale and fostering ownership.

Recommendation 4:

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

Pelham Public Schools has a history of gathering staff input through surveys, focus groups, ThoughtExchanges and meetings. The communication audit process revealed, however, that some staff members have concerns with the quality of engagement opportunities provided and doubt that their input is used in the decision-making process. An effective communications program builds support and trust among employees, and in part, that can be accomplished by encouraging staff engagement in transparent decision-making processes.

While most participants in the staff focus groups believe there are adequate opportunities to provide input as part of the district's decision-making processes, they also report seeing the same people tapped for feedback and perceive their involvement as cursory. In focus groups, they expressed concerns that the input collected is not listened to or incorporated into decisions. In the SCoPE Survey, only 48 percent of staff participants strongly agreed or agreed that their "input and opinion are welcome and valued."

Effective engagement of staff members in decision-making processes will ultimately serve to strengthen trust, connection and transparency throughout the district. Focus group participants stated that, as staff members, they felt they could provide key information to help administrators understand important implications in purchasing new resources, rolling out new programs or making changes to existing operations.

When considering how best to engage staff, remember these tips:

- **Do not ask for input if a decision has already been made.** When districts decide on a general direction for a

particular issue and then seek input, staff and other stakeholders can easily feel that their input does not matter. It is important to seek input on major, key issues and to listen to that input as part of the decision-making process.

- **Give staff members' input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or directions for the district.** In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary but choose to seek employee input before finalizing it. When this is done and their input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders can choose to continue with the original plan or listen to the input and consider alternative options. Asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause staff and other stakeholders to disengage from the district. Give all input due consideration; if it is not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision.
- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** In most cases, the Board of Education or administrators seek input to gather information to make a better decision. Confusion and frustration may enter the process if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive they are making the decision. To avoid such a situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used and who will make the actual decision. If these positions are clearly defined on the front end of the process, those providing input will be less likely to misunderstand their role.

Many staff members in the focus groups commented that they do not always know how or if their input is used in the decision-making process. When approaching an important decision, be intentional about communicating how employee input will be considered as it is gathered and whether and how it is incorporated into the final decision.

Without this kind of approach, it will become increasingly difficult to get employees to participate in future engagement opportunities.

Effective staff engagement requires the district to conduct two-way communication with employees in meaningful ways that build trust. This recommendation offers a variety of action steps for the district to strengthen its commitment to transparency, authentically seek input from employees and engage them in the district's work.

Action Step 4.1

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



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

Action Step 4.2

Use rounding conversations to solicit input from staff.

Rounding is another method of gathering information in a structured way. In the case of Pelham Public Schools, it might involve administrators approaching employees in their

#4

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

departments or schools to obtain information for the purpose of decision making.

Here's how rounding conversations might work: The district's executive team is discussing an idea where staff input is needed to inform the decision.

- The executive team develops two or three questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue.
- The executive team asks principals and department supervisors to each find 10 staff members in their building or department to answer the questions. (If rounding conversations are used regularly, make sure that there is broad participation.)
- Principals and department supervisors share the responses with the executive team for consideration in the decision-making process.

While being an excellent method for gathering quick input, rounding also demonstrates that administrators care about staff members and the knowledge and perspectives they have that could help the district make more informed decisions.

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

Action Step 4.3

Seek input from a variety of staff voices and perspectives.



QUICK WIN

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

It is also important to engage all types of employees. In education, it is not uncommon for administrators to go to teachers and other professional staff while overlooking valuable input from classified support staff. While support staff may not have input to share on certain curricular topics, there are many other topics where they can participate and provide depth and breadth in the type of input collected.

Recommendation 5:

Develop and implement protocols, structures and training for those responsible for communicating.

School districts of all sizes face challenges in organizing communication programs, tasks and services, and in keeping communication simple and accessible to stakeholders. The auditor heard from nearly every focus group, internal and external, that information is released unevenly and, in some cases, inequitably. Parents/guardians, staff and community alike complained of getting too many emails and yet missing important news or not being able to find the information they need. School and department staff reported being unsure of what information should be released, when and to whom. Communications were characterized as having gaps in content and delays in transmission.

Because so many are responsible for various types of communications across the district, the problem cannot be solved by the public information officer alone. Empowering staff at all levels by developing protocols and providing training and support will strengthen the district's communication program as a whole.

Action Step 5.1

Clearly define the communication role of all departments to ensure a consistent, timely and equitable flow of information.



Ensuring all relevant information is disseminated in a timely manner requires teamwork and coordination. All Pelham Public Schools leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and, if they do not already, have collaborative relationships with the public information officer. Communication expectations should be developed, articulated in

writing and discussed at meetings so there is no question about the collaborative nature of communications.

Consider using a chart, such as the one on the following page, to clearly define communication roles and responsibilities for different administrators/departments. By clarifying their responsibilities and ensuring messaging strategies and activities are aligned with the strategic plan and integrated at all levels, the district can connect more directly with parents and community members and strengthen internal trust and engagement among employees. This effort should also help provide the public information officer with more time to focus on developing strategic communication initiatives for the district.

Action Step 5.2

Develop a consistent process for how key information is communicated internally.

Throughout the focus groups, staff reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and their supervisor, and this, in turn, affects the flow of information to the community.

The public information officer should work closely with the cabinet to clarify the internal communications processes and develop a list of preferred channels for communication. The process and list should be shared and reviewed with district administrators and school principals at least annually.

The internal communication process document might include:

- **Guidelines for who will distribute various types of information and what channels are to be used**, as described in the previous action step. [Action Step 6.1](#) provides tips on how to identify the most appropriate channels for various communications.

Example: Communication Roles

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Superintendent's Executive Assistant	Board meeting agendas	Website Superintendent newsletter
Public Information Officer	District updates (routine and urgent) District newsletter Annual Report Positive articles Video stories	Superintendent emails Website Social media Parent and staff email Text messages
Assistant Superintendent for Business	Budget updates	Email Annual Report Website
Superintendent and Executive Assistant	District policy changes	Email Community meetings Website Mailed letters Local media
School Board President and Superintendent	Fielding questions regarding policy changes Board decisions	Community meetings Email Phone calls Informal settings in the community
Principals	School site updates School site emergency information	School newsletter Text messages Phone calls
Teachers	Classroom information	Emails Classroom web pages

- Plans for issuing talking points for department and building staff meetings for all major initiatives.** To ensure all staff receive the same information simultaneously, the district should utilize a consistent system of developing talking points around key issues, including what decision-making processes are being used and how decisions will impact employees, students and families. The points can be drafted by those responsible for the issues, but they should then be vetted through the public information officer for consistency of message, ease of understanding and coordinated distribution.
- Expectations regarding the timing of communications.** Setting expectations for the timing of communications will create consistencies that will help

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/guardians and the community so that they can serve as front-line communicators and ambassadors for the schools.
- Information employees need to know is delivered at least 48 hours before they need to act on it.
- The central office will respond to staff inquiries within 48 hours.
- Teachers will respond to parents within 24 hours.

#5

Develop and implement protocols, structures and training for those responsible for communicating.

- **Dedication of time for key announcements during leadership/faculty meetings.** These meetings should always include an agenda item for sharing updates on and answering questions about current key initiatives and issues. As critical information sources for the rest of the staff, leaders also must be informed in a reliable, timely and thorough way.
- **A communication responsibility grid template.** One way to address inconsistencies and improve communication follow-through after meetings is using a responsibility management grid. The ambiguity of “who does what” for each agenda item can be resolved by creating a grid that carries the discussion item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. This type of grid can also be used with councils and committees to ensure information is disseminated.

Example: Communication Responsibility Grid

Agenda Item	Action Take	Person Responsible for Next Step	Deadline

Another simple way to incorporate communication planning is to add checkboxes for “FYI,” “to be shared” and “confidential” to each agenda item. The person facilitating each topic should clarify what others in the meeting are

to do with the information. If an item is marked “to be shared,” then a discussion will be needed to decide to whom, when and how the information is to be distributed.

Example: Communication Planning Check Boxes

FYI	<input type="checkbox"/>
To be shared	<input type="checkbox"/>
Confidential	<input type="checkbox"/>

Following are two examples of guides for district and school administrators that set clear communication expectations:

- Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations, Brenham (Texas) Independent School District—https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/administrators-guide-communications-pr_brenham-isd.pdf?ver=rhT4CrnYqy2YO6cTspBedw%3d%3d
- Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators, Collier County (Fla.) Public Schools—https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/ccps-communications-guide-2019_redacted.pdf?ver=gzzJld6O1RNkHMBFgR-9Bw%3d%3d

Action Step 5.3

Develop a training program for all staff who have significant, if informal, communication responsibilities.

School and department staff at all levels affirmed the need for strong communication, but none mentioned a formal, regular training program to build their skills as communicators and ambassadors for the district and its schools. The district should consider providing regular communication skills training and an annual communications boot camp to all staff responsible for conveying information—both veterans and new hires.

Quarterly mini-trainings, or alternatively, an annual communication boot camp for district

level leadership and school administrators (and possibly a version for front-line office staff) could provide strategies, practical tips and hands-on learning experiences to help them in their leadership roles and in their communications with stakeholders. (Such training might need to be provided with the help of a communication consultant until internal staff capacity is available to offer it.) This training would also strengthen their partnerships with the public information officer, who can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of schools and departments and support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators.

Following are some recommendations for how to structure quarterly trainings or a communication boot camp:

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build the agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review the SCoPE Survey data, as well as local and national research, to determine what families and community members want to know from their schools and school districts as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as holding a Facebook live event or doing mock on-camera media interviews.
- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication from one of the district's schools or a department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices, challenges they have encountered and ways they might overcome them.
- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review the goals of the district's strategic plan and lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.

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

Similar training for school board members also should be considered and is often offered by state school boards associations. For example, the New York State School Boards Association offers an online microlearning course in social media.

Recommendation 6:

Enhance the effectiveness of external communications.

One of the most frustrating aspects of communications for parents/guardians is the inconsistency around communications from their children's schools and teachers. In the focus groups, parents recited long lists of emails and notification systems used (Google Classroom, Infinite Campus, school/district/teacher emails, etc.). They explained how unwieldy it becomes when a parent/guardian has more than one child enrolled in different classes and schools. The PTAs also contribute to the volume of communications that parents receive.

In focus groups, teachers and principals said they were unclear about their roles as communicators. They described being uncertain about what expectations existed and about how and when they were to communicate with parents. Building leaders also expressed interest in training and a move toward consistent communication platforms among teachers and schools.

Establishing districtwide guidelines for parent communications and offering staff professional development in this area would help reduce parents' frustrations and increase consistency in their communication experiences as they move through the school system.

Action Step 6.1

Streamline and standardize the tools used for parent/guardian communications.

Begin to streamline and standardize parent/guardian communications by taking an inventory of all communication tools currently in use. Ask principals to compile a list of the communication tools used in their buildings— websites, apps, text messaging systems, emails, print newsletters, paper flyers, virtual

backpacks, parent portals, social media, etc.— along with their recommendations to retain or replace each tool. Share those building-level lists with the public information officer.

Then convene a small review committee— with sample representatives of teachers, parents/guardians, school-level administrators, technology staff and the public information officer—to review the lists and recommendations. The committee should be briefed on what each tool is used for, who uses it, who receives it, how often it is used, how easy it is to use, whether training is provided on its use and any available data on readership, open rates, distribution schedules, etc. Committee members should also use the [Key Findings](#) in this audit report to inform the group's discussion.

Have the committee develop a set of recommended communication tools for use by all teachers and schools as appropriate for student age groups. The recommendations should take into consideration which tools offer the best features, are easiest to navigate and can take the place of other tools, with the goal of standardizing and/or reducing the total number of communication tools in use. The list of recommendations should be shared with leadership to make the final determination of which tools to keep and which to eliminate.

Action Step 6.2

Establish communication expectations for teachers on posting information in Infinite Campus.

Portals such as Infinite Campus are a popular and valuable communication tool if used regularly and consistently by teachers. Nationwide, as in Pelham, a common parent/guardian complaint involves teachers not keeping student information current on these systems. These days, almost all teachers communicate in some way with parents/guardians, but there can be significant inconsistencies among teachers, grade levels and schools, which often confuses and frustrates parents.

Most often, the frequency of communication is the issue. Some teachers send a daily message to parents/guardians while others communicate weekly or less often. In one focus group, a parent did not recall their child's teacher ever sending a message through Infinite Campus.

If formal expectations exist for how often teachers communicate with parents/guardians and/or post information on the portal, review and reinforce those expectations at least annually. If formal expectations do not exist, consider convening a small committee of teachers, parents/guardians and administrators to identify and recommend expectations for communication. Those expectations should balance meeting the needs of most parents/guardians with maintaining a reasonable workload for teachers and staff. The committee's recommendations should be shared with district leadership to make the final determination of official expectations.

Action Step 6.3

Make information easier to consume and recognize.



QUICK WIN

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

This is a challenge for school districts trying to communicate complex issues, but there are a number of things the district can do to improve the reader experience and get its messages across.

#6

Enhance the effectiveness of external communications.

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

As an example, the *Board of Education Wrap-Ups* could be repackaged to focus on the subject of the meeting vs. the type of meeting held. Instead of using the headline "*Board of Education Wrapup: April 18,*" the headline might be: "*Board of Education Adopts 2023-2024 Proposed Budget.*" This could be accompanied by a quick overview and a link to more information, including an invitation to watch a video of the meeting.

- **Establish and adhere to Pelham Public Schools' brand standards** so district communications are easily recognizable.
- **Provide a list of the articles or topics at the top of newsletters and link them to the accompanying story.** In this way, readers can skim the list and click on only what is of interest or importance to them.
- **Consider creating an infographic when there is a lot of data to be shared.** An engaging infographic can quickly deliver key information, can be repurposed for use on the website and social media, and shared with the local news media. Easy-to-use infographic platforms include Canva and Piktochart. For inspiration, check out the Infographic category of the members-only Samples and Resources (Gold Mine)

section of the NSPRA website at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Infographics>.

- **Designate separate space for community-related notices.** Given that the district is a central hub of activity, it's not surprising that these notices make their way into school and district materials. However, incorporating such information distracts readers from the district's key messages and already plentiful information. For example, the March 6, 2023, edition of the *The Week Ahead* e-newsletter featured information about Pelham Girl Scouts Community Day between school-related notices. Moving community notices beneath official school communications, adding a clear headline such as "Community Notices" and incorporating a disclaimer will help better manage expectations and the distinction between the two entities.

A potential disclaimer may be, "The following information is distributed on behalf of Pelham organizations as a courtesy to the community, but Pelham Public Schools reserves the right to deny any community posting request. All community information must adhere to our guidelines." (Be sure to develop and share guidelines for the approval of community notices.)

Action Step 6.4

Treat students as a key audience and consider their communication needs.

Although their specific school building is the main focus of most students, they can also help keep their families informed about district decisions. In the SCoPE Survey, when parents/guardians were asked whom they get information from about the district, "my student who is enrolled in a district school" received the second highest rating behind "friend or family member." Given this, ensuring students are well-informed should

be considered as a strategy for any major communication initiative.

Following are suggestions for communicating with students:

- **Students often rely on their teachers for information, so provide key messages/talking points to teachers,** especially at middle and high school levels.
- **In-school announcements and assemblies can be an effective way to reach students.**
 - Provide schools with scripts for public address announcements.
 - Create PowerPoint slides for schools whose announcements are presented on television monitors.
 - Leverage the student announcements by posting them on the high school webpage for parents/guardians to access.
- **Instagram is proving to be one of the best ways to communicate with students.** Consider opening an account and posting messages designed to appeal to younger audiences.
- **Ask student councils to distribute information relevant to students.** This will be particularly effective for those councils using social media.
- **Communicate the district's mission, vision, and strategic initiatives** to students in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. Help students understand how the initiatives relate to them and impact their education.

Recommendation 7:

Expand the capacity of the Public Information Office to focus on strategic communication needs.

Stakeholders today demand transparency and two-way communications from their local schools, educators and district leaders. Many boards of education and superintendents have responded to that demand by making communication with parents/guardians, staff, students, taxpayers and the community at large a strategic priority. Their greater emphasis on offering a comprehensive public relations, communications, marketing and engagement program has supported achievement of district strategic goals while enhancing district brand awareness to attract new families and job applicants.

[Recommendation 1](#) provides guidance on how the Public Information Office can create structures that will allow communication activities to be proactive and focused on supporting the district's strategic plan. Many of the other recommendations in this report may become components of that plan. As noted, it is not realistic to think that all of these activities can be accomplished simultaneously. In fact, it could take years to address all of them and the district should first tackle those that can have the greatest impact. This will require focused work by the public information officer, but also others who carry communication responsibilities.

The district has only one employee solely dedicated to communications, and he is likely to be the one guiding this work. Day-to-day communication functions will obviously need to continue, so it may be necessary to create additional capacity so that there is also time for strategic communication planning to implement the recommendations in this report as well as for specific initiatives and issues the district is addressing now and will tackle in the future.

The following action steps are offered so that the district may consider whether and how to expand its capacity for strategic communications within the Public Information Office.

Action Step 7.1

Conduct a critical assessment of current activities conducted by the public information officer.



The public information officer should conduct a detailed review of all ongoing tasks and special programs and projects currently underway. Together with the superintendent, review the list and take a hard look at how these current projects and activities align with and support the district's strategic plan.

Some questions to ask include:

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

To ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, recording the actual time spent on each task may be helpful. This would allow the public information officer to evaluate efficiently how time is being spent and determine if there are tasks that take time away from communication priorities that could be shifted to other departments or that could be managed differently. As a one-person communication office, there will always be more to do than time to accomplish it, so eliminating a task or

function should allow for new, critical, strategic measures that support the district's goals.

Another way to evaluate and possibly realign some of the responsibilities of the public information officer is to determine which projects and activities are tactical and which are strategic. Tactical activities might include writing for social media, print and electronic graphic design, and basic photography. Strategic activities might include advising leadership on crafting key messages and responses, developing strategic communication plans and talking points for major initiatives, and overseeing the implementation of the overall communication effort. While the tactical aspects of communication will always be a component of the program, they must be managed thoughtfully so that valuable staff time can be spent on activities that will yield the greatest return in the long run.

Action Step 7.2

Develop a public information officer job description and evaluation system.

As noted in [Recommendation 1](#), key components to the success of a district's strategic communication plan are the designation of responsibilities and establishing a basis for measuring success. This includes formalizing the work of the public information officer.

- **Create a comprehensive job description for the public information officer.** Based on information provided to the auditor, there is currently no job description for the public information officer position. New York's civil service system offers an outline for PIO roles, but it is not necessarily reflective of best practices in school communications today or of Pelham's unique communication needs and priorities, as outlined in this report. Develop an accurate description of Pelham's PIO position today, one that specifically defines the responsibilities of the position as it currently stands.

#7

Expand the capacity of the Public Information Office to focus on strategic communication needs.

Then after the strategic communication plan has been developed, review the job description to determine whether there are responsibilities that need to be added, changed or eliminated in order for the plan to be successfully implemented.

- **Establish an evaluation system for the PIO position that aligns with district and department goals.** It was unclear to the auditor whether a formal evaluation process for the PIO position exists. The value of an annual evaluation for an employee is that it helps the employee understand the organization's benchmarks for success and set professional growth goals. (Keep in mind, though, that feedback should be an ongoing process throughout a year; there should be no surprises at an annual evaluation.) Establishing a consistent evaluation system also will allow periodic analysis of whether the current job responsibilities are effective in meeting the district's goals.

For sample job descriptions, evaluations and counsel on communications staffing models, visit the Staffing and Supporting Communications section of NSPRA's Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) website at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Staffing-and-Supporting-Communications>.

Action Step 7.3

Include the public information officer in the administrative cabinet.

Best practice is for the person in a district's lead communications role to serve on the district's leadership team and provide ongoing, high-level strategic communication counsel to the superintendent and administrative cabinet. Pelham Public Schools' public information officer is currently not officially part of the administrative cabinet, although he attends meetings as needed.

NSPRA defines educational public relations as a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. In Pelham, elevating the PIO position away from the support staff category to the administrative cabinet will accomplish several important goals:

- The public information officer will have the credibility and authority to manage communications districtwide and at the school level;
- The public information officer will be knowledgeable about district initiatives and ongoing programs/challenges that have communications implications and be better able respond proactively; and
- The public information officer will be better positioned to provide administrators with assistance, counsel and response in a media event or a crisis.

In a 2022 survey of NSPRA members, 67 percent of respondents reported that they are considered a member of the school district's cabinet and/or leadership team.

Action Step 7.4

Consider reallocating funding to add a part-time communications assistant position.



Based on the needs of the district and expectations of leadership, staff, parents/guardians and the community, consideration should be given to adding a communications assistant position to support the public information officer. With the addition of another position, some of the duties and responsibilities for each individual could be assigned as follows:

Public Information Officer

- Manages and directs department activities and budget
- Plans and executes the strategic communication plan
- Serves on the administrative cabinet and advises district leadership on communication ramifications of issues and decisions
- Provides communication-related training for administrators and staff
- Implements community engagement/outreach programs and activities
- Serves as primary media contact and district spokesperson/manage media relations
- Develops and directs editorial content for email communications, newsletters, websites and social media
- Ensures crisis response communications preparedness and management
- Oversees special event planning and coordination
- Directs production of video programming for various district platforms

Communications/Graphics Assistant

- Establishes a consistent look and feel for the district and schools
- Gathers news from schools and departments
- Prepares news releases and serves as back-up media contact for basic news items
- Provides campus and event photography for news and promotional purposes
- Designs and produces various templates for school and building use
- Assists in preparing stories and informational articles for publications
- Assists with website content development and management
- Facilitates social media posts and monitoring
- Manages production of district print materials
- Assists with special event promotion and coordination

Action Step 7.5

Designate a budget line for the Public Information Office.

For the public information officer to be successful and meet expectations, a budget line item for communications should be added in future budget cycles. This will allow the school district to better assess expenditures and determine appropriate resources needed to support routine communication activities (digital communication platforms, print publications, postage, A/V equipment, contract services, etc.) as well as special initiatives and planning for additional staff positions.

Recommendation 8:

Develop and implement digital marketing strategies to improve message delivery.

Pelham Public Schools is facing a challenge common to many school districts in this time of media saturation: information overload. Focus group participants and SCoPE Survey comments repeatedly referenced a desire for information perceived by them to be missing but already made available through school or district emails, newsletters, websites, official district social media or other tools. This perceived lack of communication is understandable given the amount of information today's families receive, not just from the school district but also from other sources.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal, [“Why Do Schools Send So Many Emails? They Don't Have To.”](#) focused on the topic, with the writer, Julie Jargon, opining, “My kids head back to the classroom in about two weeks. So far I've received nine emails, five text messages and two newsletters from their schools, some of which directed me to other sites to fill out forms. I've received notifications of numerous Facebook posts but haven't had the bandwidth to look at them. Schools deliver information in multiple ways in an effort to keep families informed...but do they need to do this much communication? For parents and guardians, already crazed at work, managing school chatter can feel like another full-time job.”

Complaints of information overload is a sign the district is providing a steady output of information. However, SCoPE Survey results, as shown on pages [14-15 of the Key Findings](#), indicate that some of these messages are not getting through.

Determining what information to send in which channels and how often to send it can be tricky, but the extensive data gathered in the SCoPE Survey can serve as a guide for developing a digital communication strategy.

The following section encompasses best practices for email communications; ways to establish a website that is easy to navigate, accurate and continually updated; and ways to connect and grow a sense of community through social media. Such efforts will make it easier for stakeholders to get the information they need and engage with the district on their own time when it's convenient for them.

Action Step 8.1

Develop an email marketing strategy to better engage stakeholders.

Email is an efficient, cost-effective and environmentally friendly way to communicate with large groups of people. However, the non-strategic use of email can reduce employee productivity and hinder the district's ability to deliver critical messages to external audiences. Recognizing these concerns, it will be important for the district to develop guidelines, expectations and best practices for email management, particularly at the building, department and district level, to ensure email remains an effective form of communication.

A good place to start would be an analysis of the communications tools referenced in [Recommendation 6](#). In addition, compile a list of all regular building, department and district-level email communications. This should include the source, frequency of delivery, delivery day/time, email author, name of the email platform and any available data such as open and click rates. It will also be important to review a sampling of messages to gather details regarding message content issues (e.g., missing brand elements).

After the review, develop a guidance document that pertains exclusively to email communications and mass messages, including:

- When it is (and is not) appropriate to communicate via email mass messaging and what other communication channels are available that may be more appropriate.

#8

Develop and implement digital marketing strategies to improve message delivery.

- Content requirements (branding components, disclosures, etc.) and links to related documents such as the district's style/brand guide.
- Relevant school board policies, state regulations or federal laws that govern the use of email (such as FERPA and Education Law Section 2-D).
- Information on any necessary approvals or pre-authorizations.
- Best practices to follow (see Action Step 8.2).
- Who to contact for support or further guidance.

Discuss this guidance with school principals and department chairs, and ask them to review it annually during back-to-school staff/department meetings.

Action Step 8.2

Encourage and follow best practices for email communications.



Regardless of the tool (Constant Contact, Infinite Campus, Gmail) used to send email messages, the following best practices should be considered when issuing formal email communications to a large group of recipients. Find ways to review these best practices with teachers, frontline office staff, and school and department administrators at least annually as part of back-to-school season. Demonstrate these best practices in all formal communications coming out of the Public Information Office, too.

- **Reflect on your goals for the email.** When crafting the email message, focus on what behavior or action is desired or required of the reader in addition to what information needs to be shared. Does your message support your goals?
- **Consider the look and feel.** Use consistent branding elements to make

official communications more easily recognizable. The Public Information Office should consider providing templates or examples to schools and operational departments for the most commonly occurring school-to-parent, teacher-to-parent or department-to-employee messages.

- **Write emails people will want to read.**
 - Use clear and compelling subject lines that convey the email's purpose.
 - Use identifiable "from" email addresses and signatures to identify the sender or building.
 - Be sure the content is skimmable with the use of headlines, subheadings, bullet points, imagery with captions and short paragraphs of text.
 - Include distinct calls to action to encourage response and/or the desired behavior.
 - Provide links to more information for those who want to learn more. If linking to a Google document, be sure view permissions are set appropriately for the audience.
 - Integrate photography, videos and other imagery to help drive key points. Share approved sources of royalty-free visual content that won't violate copyright.
 - Include content in the body of an email, not as a link or an attachment, as much as possible.

- Avoid the use of acronyms and education jargon.
- Provide a link or contact information about where people may ask questions or get more information.
- **Target the appropriate audience(s).**
Be as selective as possible to ensure the message is relevant to your audience. Having people receive messages that do not pertain to them is a quick way to build frustration and may eventually lead to them ignoring messages that might have been important to them.
- **Consolidate messages when possible.**
People generally do not like to receive multiple emails every day from the same sender. If there is a lot of information to be shared, try combining communications into a single, regularly scheduled email so that individuals become accustomed to receiving them at expected intervals.
- **Collaborate with others** to avoid redundancy and confusion as well as the number of messages sent.
- **Read carefully before sending.**
 - Check all links to verify they work and go where intended.
 - Run spell check.
 - Review dates and upcoming information.
 - Identify any missing facts or elements.
- **Time delivery for the greatest chance of having the message read.**
 - Avoid sending emails to staff at the end of the school day or on Friday afternoons when they might easily get overlooked until the next day or after the weekend.
 - Use the scheduling feature as necessary.
 - Cancel any scheduled non-urgent messages if a crisis arises.

Make sure content is mobile-responsive and can be easily read and responded to from various types of devices.

Action Step 8.3

Explore seamless integration of the student information and mass notification systems.



Currently, the district and elementary schools use Constant Contact for email distribution while the middle and high school use Infinite Campus Messenger. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

- Email addresses in Infinite Campus are updated on an ongoing basis because they are part of the district’s student data management system. However, Infinite Campus has limited design functionality for emails.
- Constant Contact offers greater versatility and ease of use. However, contact lists are only updated three times per year, so new families moving into the district often miss out on important information.

An ideal platform would provide seamless integration with the district’s student information system and allow for beautiful, branded messages to engage stakeholders and data reporting to understand audience engagement better.

Consideration should be given to exploring a tool that fully meets the district’s needs regarding contact list integration, design and data reporting functionality. It appears there may be enhanced capabilities through the district’s website vendor that the district could capitalize on, including a mass notification system that integrates with most student information systems, allows for personalization, provides detailed analytics and offers email newsletter templates. It may also offer the advantage of being able to populate email content from school and district webpages automatically.

Action Step 8.4

Institute processes to improve and maintain the district and school websites.

The district website is attractive and well-branded. However, the auditor found that the navigation is not as intuitive as it might be, some key information about the district is difficult to find, some information is out-of-date and not all content is mobile-friendly. These issues can be indicative of a website that has reached a point when a major overhaul or complete redesign is warranted.

It has been nearly five years since the Pelham Public Schools website was launched, and it may be time to begin that process. In the meantime, following are a few practices that can help to improve and maintain the site's functionality and ease of use.

- **Use research to identify areas for improvement.** This NSPRA Communication Audit Report and the SCoPE Survey results provide qualitative and quantitative data related to how stakeholders use the website, which features they find helpful or challenging, and how much they rely on it for communications. Consider adding to this research with user experience testing.
 - Conduct a short online survey or a user experience online activity (e.g., card sort, tree test). Allow a broad audience of Pelham Public Schools stakeholders to participate by sharing a link to the survey or activity with parents, staff, students and the community via email, social media and the website.
 - Use web analytics to track the number of visitors to each page, how long they spend on the page, which pages they visit most often, and how they move through the site. Consider deleting or re-organizing pages receiving few visits.

- **Implement processes to ensure web pages are routinely kept up to date.** Both district and school websites reviewed for this audit included some out-of-date information and broken links.
 - Perform an initial clean-up. Time-restricted posts should be removed from the news archives such as the assistant superintendent search dates, free rapid test distribution, mask updates and school closures from early in 2022.
 - Utilize the expiration feature so that time-related posts are removed or archived automatically.
 - Schedule regular website housekeeping efforts and provide webmasters with sufficient time to attend to routine maintenance and updates.
 - Audit the websites at least twice a year to ensure content is current, accurate and complete.
 - Investigate whether the responsibilities for stipend-funded school webmasters could be reallocated to assist in hiring a new part-time communication/graphics assistant, who could take on website responsibilities and provide more oversight or training to individuals as needed.

Action Step 8.5

Enhance the district's social media presence.

These days, an active presence on social media is a key component of a comprehensive communication plan for any organization, given that 72 percent of individuals engage on social media every day ([Pew Research Center](#)). However, many focus group participants said they were unaware of the district's official Facebook and Twitter social media channels, and only 44 percent of SCoPE Survey participants said that they regularly use the official district Facebook page as a source of

information about the district. More concerning is that 58 percent of these participants say they consult non-district Facebook pages for information about the district.

As part of the strategic communication plan, Pelham Public Schools should include strategies for improving its social media presence, including how social media will be used, in what instances it will be used, and how its effectiveness will be measured.

- **Consider social media when creating all communication plans.** Whether the public information officer is creating an overall communication plan (Recommendation 1) or creating a mini communication plan for an individual initiative, the role of social media should be considered. This does not mean social media communications should be a strategy for every campaign, only that its potential role should be considered.

Given that external groups are commenting on district issues and being followed by Pelham Public Schools stakeholders, the district may find social media to be a useful tactic for combating misinformation.

- **Tailor social media content and timing to appeal to the users on each platform.** The practice of many districts is to post relatively similar or identical content on their social media platform. However, to improve user engagement, the district should post content specifically tailored to the primary users of each platform.
 - [Pew Research Center provides national data](#) that presents a starting point for analyzing user trends for each platform,
 - Sprout Social has recently published its annual [Best Times to Post On Social Media](#).

This data will provide excellent starting points for Pelham Public Schools social media strategy, but the district's unique

analytics for each platform should be reviewed to identify local user trends as well. Quality, not quantity, should be the goal, especially as social platforms increasingly use engagement measures to determine who sees social content.

- **Ensure all social media accounts reflect information regarding how the district will handle inappropriate comments.** Pelham Public Schools is currently developing a social media policy. This policy should include what criteria will be used to determine if a comment is inappropriate and how the district will handle these posts. The district's social media accounts should also include this information.

If space does not permit the entire statement to appear, the guidelines can be provided via hyperlink to a webpage containing this information. As examples, NSPRA provides a link to its social media guidelines on the "Intro" section for its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/NSPRAAssociation/>), in the Linktree on its Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/natlschoolpr/>) and in the bio on its Twitter page (<https://twitter.com/NSPRA>).

- **Claim and verify social media accounts.** Try to have the district Facebook account verified, showing visitors that it is the official page for Pelham Public Schools. This step protects the district from potential imposter accounts used by outside groups in some communities to distract and confuse audiences.

Benchmarking Against NSPRA's 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. The work was organized into critical function areas, and to date, rubrics have been completed for the following:

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

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

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

The following pages reflect the auditors' assessment of where the Pelham Public Schools falls within these standards. The purpose of this section of the communication audit is to assess current communication efforts in terms of what is needed for the district to advance its program to the next level by moving from "emerging" or "established" to "exemplary," as outlined in NSPRA's benchmarking rubrics.

If the district would like to compare its program in greater detail, the complete [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023) for improving school communication is available as an electronic download in the NSPRA Online Store at <https://www.nspira.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023>.

Comprehensive Professional Communication Program – Established

At this point in time, the district's overall communication program falls in the established category.

The public information officer brings many skills and ideas to the table. Still, the volume of crises and the lack of articulated communication goals or measurable objectives contribute to staff feeling as if they are doing a lot of communicating with little sense of what is working and what's not. Many stakeholders, particularly parents/guardians, indicated they feel overwhelmed with the abundance of email communications and have begun ignoring communications that don't clearly and quickly demonstrate a personal relevance.

The development of a strategic communication plan (Recommendation 1) will help address this challenge and move the district closer to being "exemplary" in this critical function area.

Additional areas that could move the district's communication program from the established rubric to exemplary include:

- Implementing communications protocols and using email more strategically ([Recommendation 8](#)).
- Incorporating a series of approaches to embed communications across district and

building operations, for example, issuing talking points for department heads and principals to share information on important issues ([Action Step 5.2](#)).

- Provide support and training to staff at all levels who are responsible for communicating with students, parents/guardians and the public ([Recommendation 5](#)).
- Using social media more strategically to engage audiences ([Action Step 8.5](#)).
- Using a series of approaches to regularly evaluate communication program effectiveness such as reviewing email open and click rates, website data, attendance and participation rates at programs and events, surveys and other polls to determine satisfaction and effectiveness of district communication efforts.

Internal Communications – Emerging/Established

The district’s efforts in internal communications largely indicate an established program with some exceptions more typical of an emerging program.

Staff members generally feel overwhelmed by the abundance of email communication they receive. They largely attribute that to messages being sent too widely and for various purposes. Staff noted having missed important communications either because they can’t keep up with all of the emails or because important information was buried in the message. Although the auditor didn’t have access to Google Classrooms in use at the elementary level for staff communications, they appear to help streamline internal communication and minimize the volume of as-needed email communications. While this seems to be an improvement over daily emails, limited access to such tools can create unintentional silos across buildings and the larger district, so a more integrated districtwide intranet solution

that houses all employee resources and forms along with important announcements and collaboration tools would be preferable.

Strengthening the engagement of staff members in the district’s decision-making process ([Recommendation 4](#)) and a focus on improving internal communications and engagement ([Recommendation 3](#)) will help the district address these challenges and move toward being solidly established and eventually exemplary in this critical function area.

Parent/Family Communications – Established

The district’s efforts concerning parent/guardian communications largely indicate an established program with some exceptions typical of an exemplary program.

The district uses a variety of tactics to communicate with families—websites, social media, emails, phone calls, text messages, print collateral, etc. Focus group participants were primarily focused on sharing their feedback related to school and district email communications. Many participants felt overwhelmed by the volume of communications and by the frequency with which they receive information they don’t actually need. That has led some parents/guardians to ignore most communications from the district and/or schools unless it applies specifically and personally to their child. Very few parents mentioned reliance on the district’s website or social media channels.

The district has access to data on its communication efforts—through website, email and social media analytics, recent surveys, for example—that could help it evaluate the effectiveness of current communications and reprioritize its efforts as necessary to address some of these challenges.

Standardizing communication practices across buildings and departments ([Recommendation 6](#)) and providing support and training to staff at all levels who are responsible for communicating

with students, parents/guardians and the public ([Recommendation 5](#)) will help the district address these challenges and move toward exemplary in this critical function area.

Marketing/Branding – Emerging

The district’s efforts in relation to marketing/branding are largely indicative of an emerging program. Marketing and branding are powerful tools for attracting families to the district. They also help to present a cohesive identity that is easily recognizable to all audiences—whether it’s visually, through the use of words and images, or how information is presented. Every word, image and interaction adds up to people’s perceptions of the Pelham Public Schools brand.

Focus group participants and survey comments reflect an awareness of the district’s mission, vision and points of pride and the promise tagline: “Inspiring Excellence for All Students.” However, they also expressed periodic confusion regarding whether communication and/or materials are official school- or district-sponsored or community-sponsored. In a review of district materials, the auditor observed inconsistencies in the district name with references to both the official name, Pelham Union Free School District, and Pelham Public Schools.

Establishing a brand guide outlining the standards for use of the district’s brand assets (i.e., logo, colors, fonts) and other design elements would help provide clarity. In addition, guidelines should be established for how co-branding with community partners will be handled. Applying consistent use of the brand standards will ensure the district’s identity is clear, professional and recognizable for all audiences.

Implementation of the branding recommendations in this report, ongoing stakeholder research to inform marketing strategies and tactics, and consistent evaluation of those efforts will help Pelham move toward established and eventually exemplary in this critical function area.

Crisis Communications – Emerging

Pelham’s crisis communications program is in the emerging category as they work to finalize and implement a crisis communication plan to improve the transparency and timeliness of crisis-related messaging and response.

In addition to the recommendation and action steps outlined in this report ([Recommendation 2](#)), the district may also consider:

- Ensuring communications staff and district leaders have knowledge of a crisis communication lifecycle and plan messages accordingly.
- Providing staging areas for news media, parent-student reunification, etc., which are determined at the onset of crisis and communicated within the first or second wave of initial information releases.
- Debriefing crisis communication responses with key district staff (including the senior cabinet, principals, department leaders and impacted staff) and responding agencies to identify what went well and what could be improved.
- Revising the crisis communication plan based on these debriefs and communicating the improvements to district leadership.

Bond/Finance Election Plans and Campaigns – Established

The district is in the established category for bond/finance communications based on the district’s 20-year history of success in passing both budget and bond elections.

Currently, the district is in the midst of a \$57 million capital improvement bond project that addresses aging infrastructure needs. The project passed by a 70-30 percent margin in 2018. Photos, construction updates and

historical information are readily accessible in the [Bond](#) section of the district website. However, the last published update was in January 2021. This section would benefit from some pruning to reflect the current status of the project now that students are learning in the new state-of-the-art Hutchinson School and staff members are working on-site in new administrative offices.

Following are some additional best practices that when followed consistently could help propel the district into the exemplary category:

- Before a vote, have school leaders meet with teachers and other building-level staff to explain and answer questions about how the proposal relates to, supports or addresses school and district goals, plans, programs, finances and issues. Inform and empower employees, including through a range of print and digital resources, to speak knowledgeably about the proposal with community members.
- For any bond/finance proposal, develop a mini communication plan based on the four-step strategic planning process (RPIE described in [Recommendation 1](#)).
 - Conduct a situational analysis (e.g., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and identify key messages.
 - Focus communication strategies on internal and external audiences, but prioritize internal communications first.
 - Conduct an exit survey to determine how residents feel and gain valuable data about voters and their opinions.
- After a successful vote, keep stakeholders informed and up-to-date about how and where bond and levy dollars are being spent.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you perceive as the strengths of Pelham Public Schools?
 - 1a. What are the areas needing improvement?
2. What is the current image of Pelham Public Schools in the community?
 - 2a. How would you describe the district and schools to someone new to your community?
3. How do you get important news about issues affecting students, schools and the district overall?
 - 3a. Are school and district emails helpful and informative? How can they be improved?
 - 3b. Do the school system's social media channels provide the information you want and need? How can they be improved?
 - 3c. Do the district/school websites provide the information you want and need? Are they easy to navigate? How can they be improved?
 - 3d. Do you ever seek outside sources of information about the district and schools like the Pelham Examiner and community Facebook pages? If so, what exactly and why?
4. 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?
 - 4a. Is information delivered in a timely manner?
 - 4b. How often should the school system send information to you?
 - 4c. What additional information would you like to receive that you don't get already?
 - 4d. What is the best way for the school system to communicate with you?
5. What does Pelham Public Schools do well when it comes to communicating on important issues that affect schools such as budget, academics and operational changes?
 - 5a. How might the district and schools improve on that?
 - 5b. Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?
6. What does Pelham Public Schools do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis (e.g., bomb threat, student misbehavior, employee misconduct, national events)?
 - 6a. How might the district and schools improve on that?
7. Do you feel that school and district leaders provide opportunities and truly listen to input from you when appropriate and consider it before important decisions are made?
 - 7a. What makes you feel that way?
 - 7b. How would you most like to provide your input?
8. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system?

Additional Questions: All Staff

1. Are current communication vehicles effective in delivering information to you as an employee?
2. How do district and school communications affect your ability to be successful in your job?

- 2a. Are there any areas where you need more communications support?
- 3. What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community?
 - 3a. Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

**Additional Question:
Administrators and Board**

- 1. What are your greatest communication challenges in your leadership role?

What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

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

With more than 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. The association offers useful communication products and programs as well

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

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

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

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

Join NSPRA

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

Auditor's Vita

Audrey Brahler, APR ***Consultant auditor***

Audrey Brahler, APR, has over 20 years of public relations and marketing experience and is currently the communications manager for a workforce training provider in New York state.

The majority of her career has been spent in public education. She previously served as a manager for a local education service agency (LEA) in upstate New York where she led the communications function with an in-house team. Prior to that role, Audrey served as a public information officer in dozens of public school districts.

She is the recipient of many state and national awards, including the prestigious Public Relations Society of America's Silver Anvil Award and NSPRA's Golden Medallion Award. Audrey holds Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) and a bachelor's degree in communications from the State University of New York at Plattsburgh.



Communication Audit Report

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