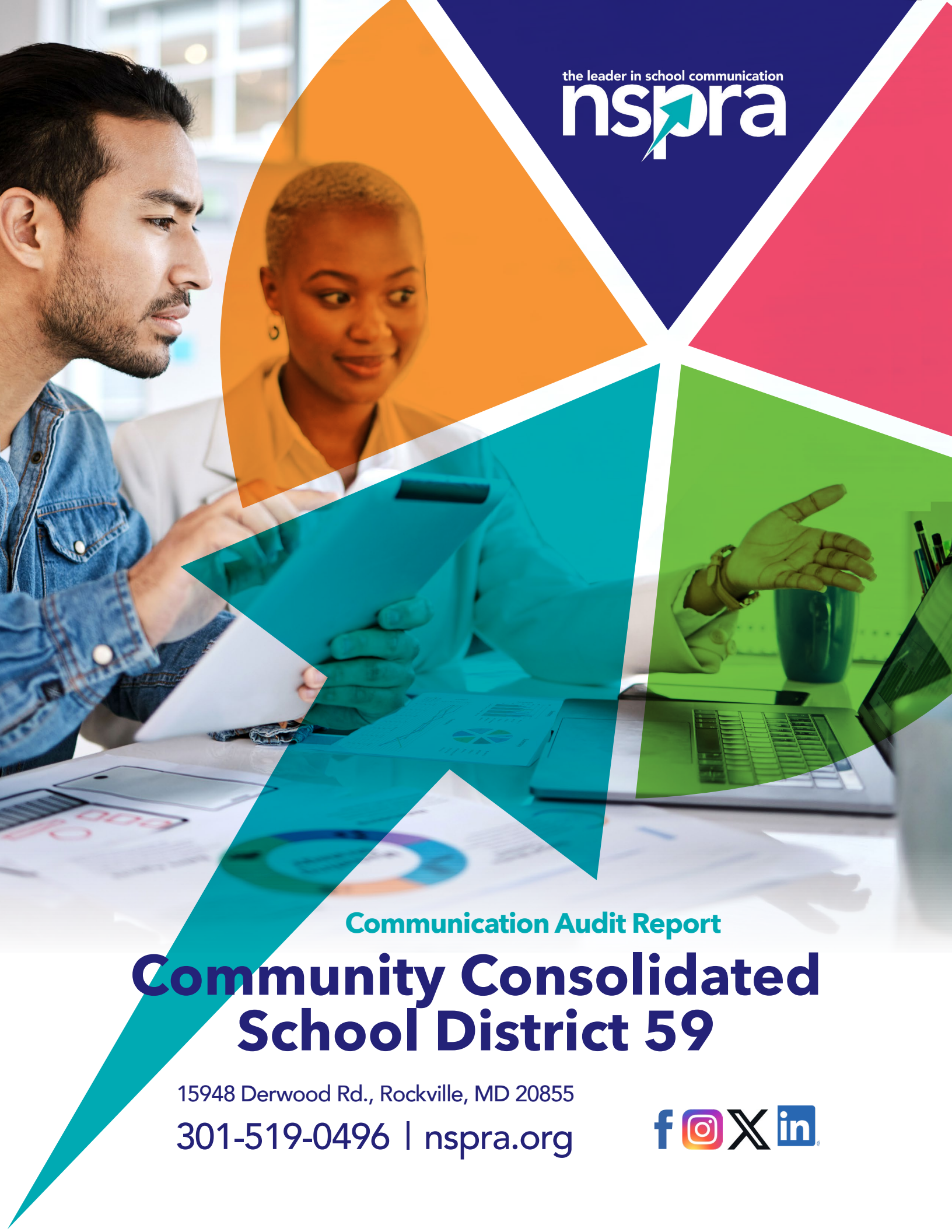


the leader in school communication



Communication Audit Report

# Community Consolidated School District 59

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surveys



materials



focus groups



interviews



results

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Adobe: Malambo C/peopleimages.com (front); WS Studio 1985/Studio Romantic/Yakobchuk Olena/yoshitaka/Andrey Popov (above, clockwise from "materials"); Blue Planet Studio (back).

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# Executive Summary

## About the NSPRA Communication Audit

Community Consolidated School District 59 (CCSD59) has contracted with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for an in-depth, independent review of the school district's overall communication program. The NSPRA Communication Audit process helps to identify the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in a school communication program through an extensive process that includes:

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

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

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

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

reflects how the district's communication program compares to other districts on nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey questions and national standards of excellence in school public relations, as outlined in NSPRA's [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#).

- The [Recommendations](#) section details strategies and tactics, based on industry best practices, for addressing identified communication gaps and for enhancing effective strategies already in place.

## Report Synopsis

Following is an overview of this report. As with all school systems, CCSD59 has areas in which it excels as well as areas where improvements can be made. For a full understanding of what was learned, the rationale behind the resulting recommendations and what will be required to implement those steps, it is recommended that the report be read in its entirety.

## Key Strengths of the Current Communication Program

- The *Weekly Staff Update* emailed to staff every Friday ensures that district personnel receive the same information in a timely manner.
- CCSD59 has a thorough brand guide for the district and its schools to ensure consistency in how they are represented.
- To engage its constituents, board updates are sent to staff, parents and community members after each board meeting. In addition, all board meetings are live-streamed and the video is then posted on the district's website.
- The district engages families through the work of the community outreach specialists, most of whom are bilingual.

- To engage and inform Spanish-speaking families, the Communications Department has a Spanish translator on staff.

### Key Challenges of the Current Communication Program

- The lack of a comprehensive, strategic communication plan to guide the overall communication function means district and school communications tend to be reactive rather than proactive.
- Multiple communication tools with a similar purpose/function are utilized by various departments and schools, which creates confusion for parents and staff.
- Some audiences find it hard to locate desired information on the district and school websites due to the overall volume of information there, and sometimes, due to outdated information.
- Some audiences report that district communications are written at too high a level to understand.
- Some schools do not regularly maintain content on their public social media pages, and at the district and school levels, post content tends to not be differentiated by platform audience.
- Communications at the school and classroom levels are seen as not timely, frustrating staff and parents.
- Nearly half of students are English language learners, but materials translated into Spanish, Polish and other languages are not always accurate, according to non-English speaking parents. There is a desire among parents and staff for more translation and interpreter services.

### Recommendations

Based on the results of the communication audit research, the auditor recommends the

following strategies for enhancing CCSD59's communication program. **For each of these recommendations, a series of practical action steps based on industry best practices, award-winning strategies and innovative approaches to communications are included in the report.**

1. Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.
2. Adapt communication practices to more effectively connect with different audiences.
3. Enhance the district's website to increase stakeholder use and engagement.
4. Maintain a culture of two-way communication throughout the district and schools to build trust with constituents.
5. Increase participation in and transparency around decision-making processes.
6. Enhance internal communication efforts.
7. Support standardized parent communication practices across school and departments.
8. Enhance school board communications and outreach.
9. Increase non-English speakers' access to translated district and school communications.

Implementing these recommendations should be considered a long-term process that involves everyone responsible for communicating in CCSD59, not just the Communications Department. *It is generally not feasible to address more than two to three recommendations each year.* But while some report recommendations may require major investments of time, this report also offers opportunities to rethink existing practices or to make quick improvements without a significant investment of resources.

# Introduction

## The Environmental Setting for Communications

### About the District

Community Consolidated School District 59 (CCSD59) is a K-8 district serving Arlington Heights, Des Plaines, Elk Grove Village, Mount Prospect and a portion of unincorporated Cook County northwest of Chicago, Ill. The district has 15 schools—including the Early Learning Center, 11 elementary schools and three junior high schools—with close to 5,700 students and more than 1,000 staff.

CCSD59 students are 42.2 percent Hispanic, 37.8 percent white, 10.8 percent Asian, 4.5 percent Black, 2.9 percent two or more races and 1.7 percent American Indian. There are 73 languages spoken in the district, with Spanish and Polish being the most prevalent after English. English language learners (ELL) make up 46 percent of the student population, and over the past two years, CCSD59 has enrolled approximately 600 students who are newcomers to the country.

The district is resource-rich, with one of the largest industrial parks in the country situated in its boundaries. Because CCSD59 is financially strong, the district can provide numerous opportunities for students, including a 1:1 student-to-device ratio starting at kindergarten and an 8:1 certified staff-to-student ratio.

CCSD59's mission is to "prepare students to be successful for life," and "communication and collaboration" are listed among the district's

five core values. In addition, one of the four goals of the [five-year Strategic Plan](#) for 2021 through 2026 is entitled Family and Community Partnerships, with one of its strategies reading as follows: "Two-way communication and collaboration - Utilize tools and strategies to effectively connect with all audiences to share and receive information and increase public awareness and perception of the district."

### About the Communications Department

During the communication audit process, the Communications Department at CCSD59 was part of the Office of Innovative Learning and Communications under the leadership of Benjamin Grey, assistant superintendent of innovative learning and communication. He has held this position since 2013, is a member of the Superintendent's Leadership Team and reports directly to Superintendent Dr. Terri Bresnahan. He also serves as the liaison to the District 59 Education Foundation. Other positions in the Communications Department include the director of communications and community relations, a public relations and administrative assistant, and a Spanish translator.

The Communications Department's "Strategy and Guidelines for Communication" document lists the various tools utilized by the department and highlights the department's mission, which is "to create and maintain open, two-way communications both internally and externally to foster collaboration, trust and understanding in an effort to move all stakeholders to advocacy of student success." This mission is elaborated on the department's webpage, which states that, "As part of this effort, the district engages in methods to more effectively communicate with students, parents, staff and community.



COMMUNITY CONSOLIDATED  
SCHOOL DISTRICT 59

We actively utilize social media and send out regular email newsletters to keep you informed about what is taking place across the district.”

## The NSPRA Communication Audit Process

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

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

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

Based on the research findings, the auditor identifies common themes and makes general observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the communication program. The auditor then uses this information to develop [Recommendations](#) designed to help the district address communication challenges and enhance areas of strength. **Each of these customized recommendations are accompanied by practical, realistic action steps grounded in today’s public relations and communications best practices, as**

reflected within NSPRA’s 2023 edition of the [Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures](#) benchmarking publication.

The primary goal of any communication program is to help the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, the auditor developed each recommendation in light of the district’s vision, mission, beliefs and goals. The result is a report that will provide CCSD59 with a launching point for improving and enhancing communication efforts for years to come.

## Research Components

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

### Materials Review

One of the first steps in the communication audit process involved the Communications Department submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various internal and external audiences (e.g., *the Weekly Staff Update*, *the Fall 2023 Newsletter* and the *Strategy and Guidelines for Communications*). 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 and social media platforms also focused on stakeholders’ use of and engagement with online content.

### SCOPE Survey

NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communications Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and the community. The nationally benchmarked SCOPE Survey was conducted for CCSD59 from Feb. 8 - March 3,

2024. It included questions regarding:

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

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

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

- **Parent Survey:**
  - 800 surveys completed
  - 3.2 percent confidence interval ( $\pm$  5 percent target met)
- **Faculty/Staff Survey:**
  - 285 surveys completed
  - 4.91 percent confidence interval ( $\pm$  5 percent target met)
- **Community Survey:**
  - 18 surveys completed
  - 23 percent confidence interval ( $\pm$  10 percent target not met)
  - Due to low participation among community members, no significant findings are included in this report based solely on SCOPE Survey responses by community members.

This survey has been administered to more than 100 school districts across the United

States, and the [Benchmarking of Results](#) section includes the [SCOPE Scorecard](#), which compares CCSD59's survey results with the results of other districts who have conducted the survey.

### Focus Groups and Interviews

The core of the communication audit process is the focus groups component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the district's internal and external stakeholders. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with the superintendent and assistant superintendent for innovative learning and communication on March 11-12, 2024.

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

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

- School building office managers
- Families (two groups)
- Community outreach specialists
- Principals
- Teachers union and staff representatives
- Education foundation and community members
- Bilingual families
- Superintendent's Leadership Team
- Board of Education members



## Your NSPRA Communication Audit Team

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

- Auditor Carol A. Fenstermacher, APR
- Associate Director Mellissa Braham, APR
- Communication Audit Coordinator Susan Downing, APR
- Communication Audit Surveys Manager Naomi Hunter, APR
- Communication Research Specialist Alyssa Teribury

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

## The NSPRA Communication Audit Report

This report demonstrates the willingness of district leaders, including the CCSD59 Board of Education, Superintendent Dr. Terri Bresnahan and Assistant Superintendent for Innovative Learning and Communication Benjamin Grey, to address communication challenges and to continue to strengthen the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders. It is intended to build on the positive activities and accomplishments of the district and its Communications Department by suggesting options and considerations for strengthening the overall communication program.

Adhering to public relations standards is crucial for effective school communication strategies. Thus, an effective strategy in one school system may be applicable in another. **As a trusted leader in school communication, NSPRA advocates for established industry best practices in school public relations.** While our communication audit findings are unique to

each school system and our recommendations are tailored to those findings, industry best practices are applicable to and may be recommended across multiple school systems. With that in mind, the recommendations included here are those the auditor believes are best suited to taking CCSD59's communication program to the next level.

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

- **NSPRA's communication audit process involves a holistic assessment** of a district's overall communication program, meaning it goes beyond any one department or individual to assess communication efforts throughout the district and its schools.
- **Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas.** This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed. It is therefore assumed that CCSD59 would not have entered into this audit unless it was comfortable with viewing the school district and its work through the perceptions of others.
- **Perceptions are just that.** Whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.
- **This report is a snapshot of the district at the time of the auditor's analysis,** and some situations may have changed or been addressed by the time the report is issued.

## Next Steps

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

Implementation of the recommendations should be approached strategically, using this report as a road map and taking the following into consideration:

### Implementing the Recommendations

- **It is generally not feasible to implement more than two to three major recommendations each year** while maintaining all current communication programs and services.
- **The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority**, but school leaders may choose to implement different recommendations at different times.
- **Look for opportunities for immediate improvement and to rethink existing practices.** Action steps that can be taken immediately with minimal effort from the school or the Communications Department and still pay quick dividends are noted as “quick wins” with the symbol shown to the right. There also are action steps that may offer opportunities to “rethink” a task or process that could be eliminated or reassigned based on stakeholders’ feedback and the auditor’s analysis. These are noted with the symbol shown to the left.
- **Some recommendations may require additional staff capacity or financial resources** to undertake while maintaining existing communication activities.



**QUICK WIN**



## Sharing the Report

Participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, NSPRA recommends that CCSD59 share with focus group participants the outcome of the audit process and its plans for moving forward.

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

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

# Key Findings

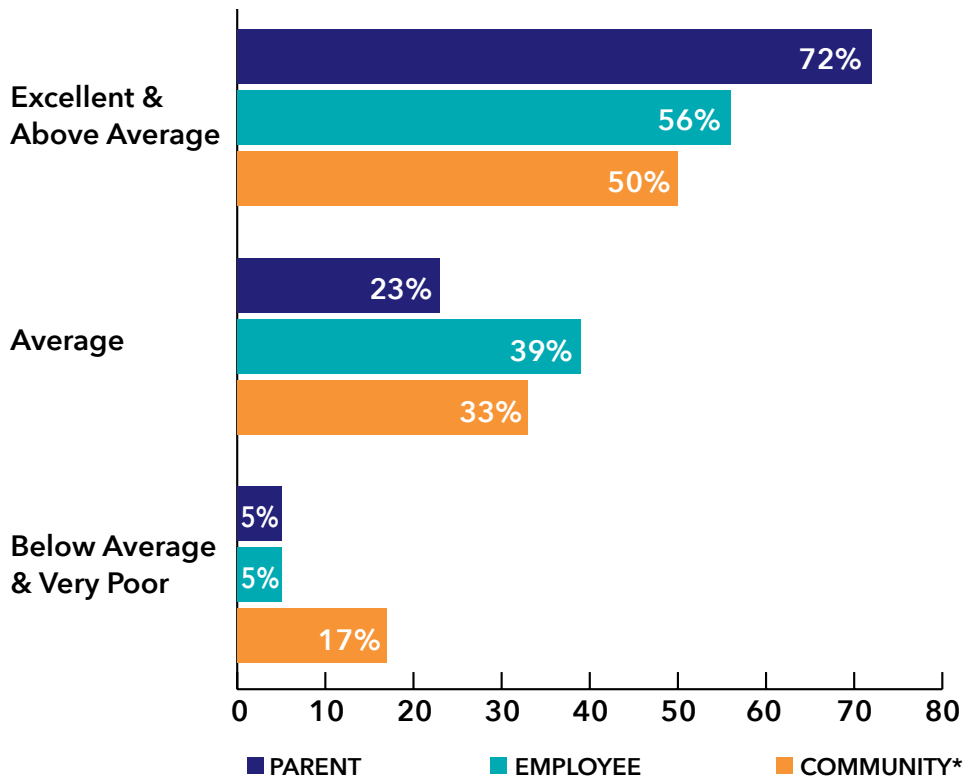
The following key findings reflect themes that emerged from the SCOPE Survey, focus group discussions, interviews with district leaders and review of district materials. This section of the report begins with key findings on stakeholder perceptions of the district’s image because communication from a district influences how it is perceived by stakeholders, while, the image or reputation of a district influences the nature of communications necessary for a district to achieve its goals. When reviewing survey data charts, please note that percentages sometimes may not total 100 due to rounding or respondents’ ability to select more than one response to a question.

## District Image/Brand

- On the SCOPE Survey, when participants were asked to rate their overall perception of CCSD59, 72 percent of parents and 56 percent of staff rated the district as excellent or above average.

As shown on the [SCOPE Scorecard](#), when these results are translated to a five-point scale to compare them with the results of districts nationwide that have participated in the SCOPE Survey, local perceptions of parents, employees and community members were above national averages.

Overall Rating for Perception of School System



Overall Perception of District	CCSD59	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	4.1	3.8	2.6	4.3
Employees	3.7	3.6	2.3	4.2
Community*	3.4	3.3	2.1	4.3

\* Due to low [community participation](#) in the SCOPE Survey, this report does not include significant recommendations based solely on community members’ results.

Word that Best Describes the District: *Parents, Staff & Community*



- As illustrated above, when SCOPE Survey participants were asked for words to describe the district, “diverse” was the number one word used by parents, staff and the community. The district’s diversity was mentioned in one focus group when discussing the strengths of CCSD59.
- When asked about the district’s strengths, parents and school board members touted staff and their dedication to students with comments such as:
  - “Teachers are fantastic—they care about students.”
  - “Our teachers are really good and eager to make improvements.”
  - “The teachers and principals are very responsive.”
  - “The staff are caring and nurturing.”
  - Staff in the focus groups described Superintendent Bresnahan as “very personable,” “very approachable” and “authentic.”
- In all focus groups, participants consistently highlighted the district’s financial stability and ability to provide

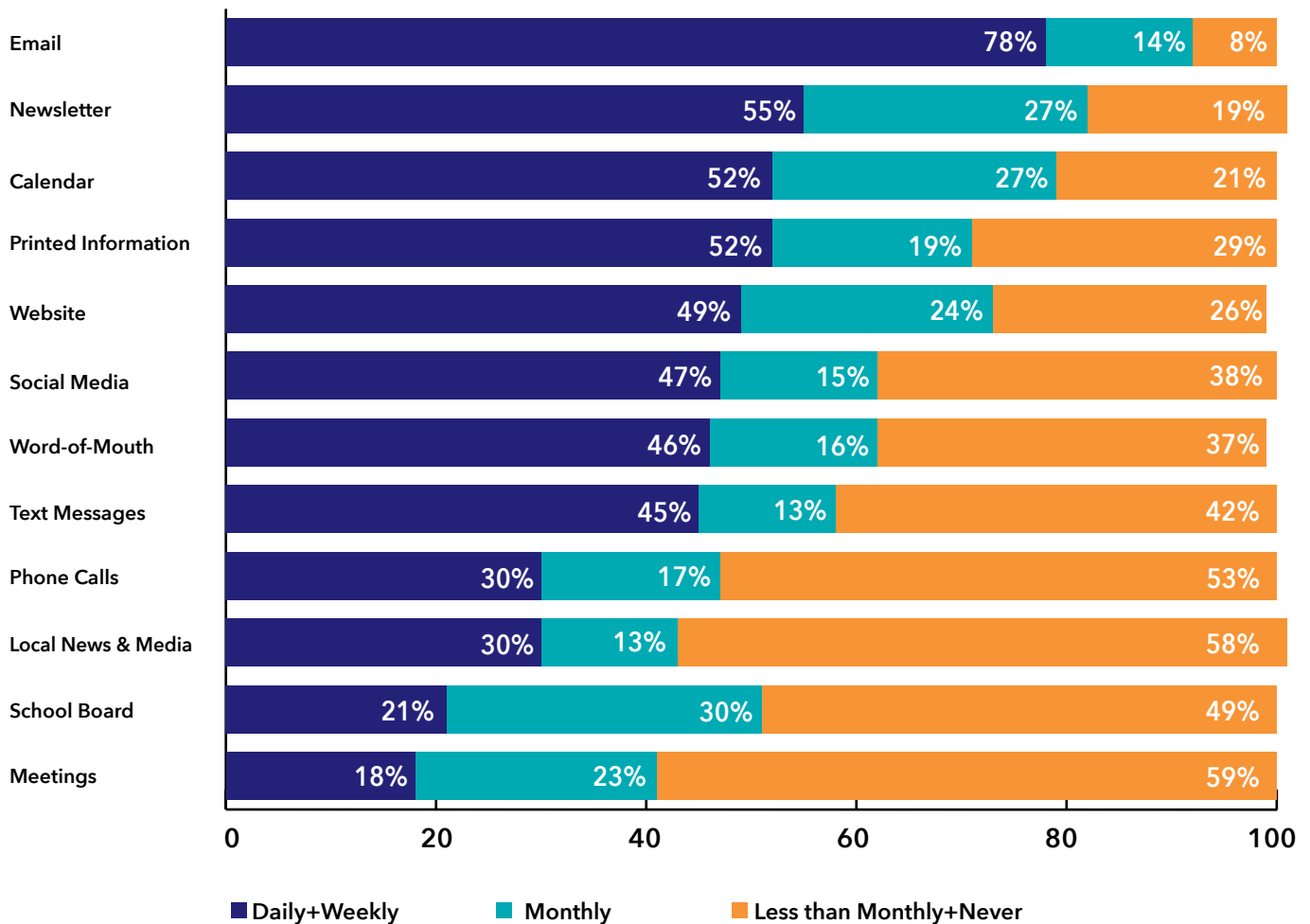
numerous resources for students and staff. As shown on pages 22 and 23, 60 percent of parents and 62 percent of staff reported feeling at least moderately informed about district finances.

- Some staff at the district office shared that CCSD59 is a destination district to work in, but staff in the school buildings and some parents shared a perception that this sentiment is no longer true.
- When asked about the district’s communication challenges, multiple participants in the staff, parent and board member focus groups expressed concerns that trust in CCSD59 leadership has eroded. Some staff and parents also expressed a belief that the Board of Education listens more closely to a select few individuals who attend and speak out at board meetings. They perceive this as creating a sense of divisiveness, with comments shared such as, “The board is divided, and a vocal minority voice is all they hear,” and, “The board doesn’t represent the community. They appeal to the 12 percent who voted for them.”

## Communication Sources and Preferences

- **When asked how often they use different sources to find or learn information about CCSD59**, parents and staff who responded to the SCOPE Survey overwhelmingly rely at least daily or weekly on email (78 percent of parents, 98 percent of staff) as shown below and on pages 14-15.
  - For both groups, newsletters are the second most-used source of information, with 55 percent of parents and 78 percent of employees saying they use newsletters at least weekly for information about the district.
  - This aligns with comments in the staff focus groups about their reliance on the district’s *Weekly Staff Update* for information.
    - The Communications Department emails the *Weekly Staff Update* every Friday at 11 a.m. to all district staff with the intent to streamline all of the announcements and updates that come from the various departments of the district.

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



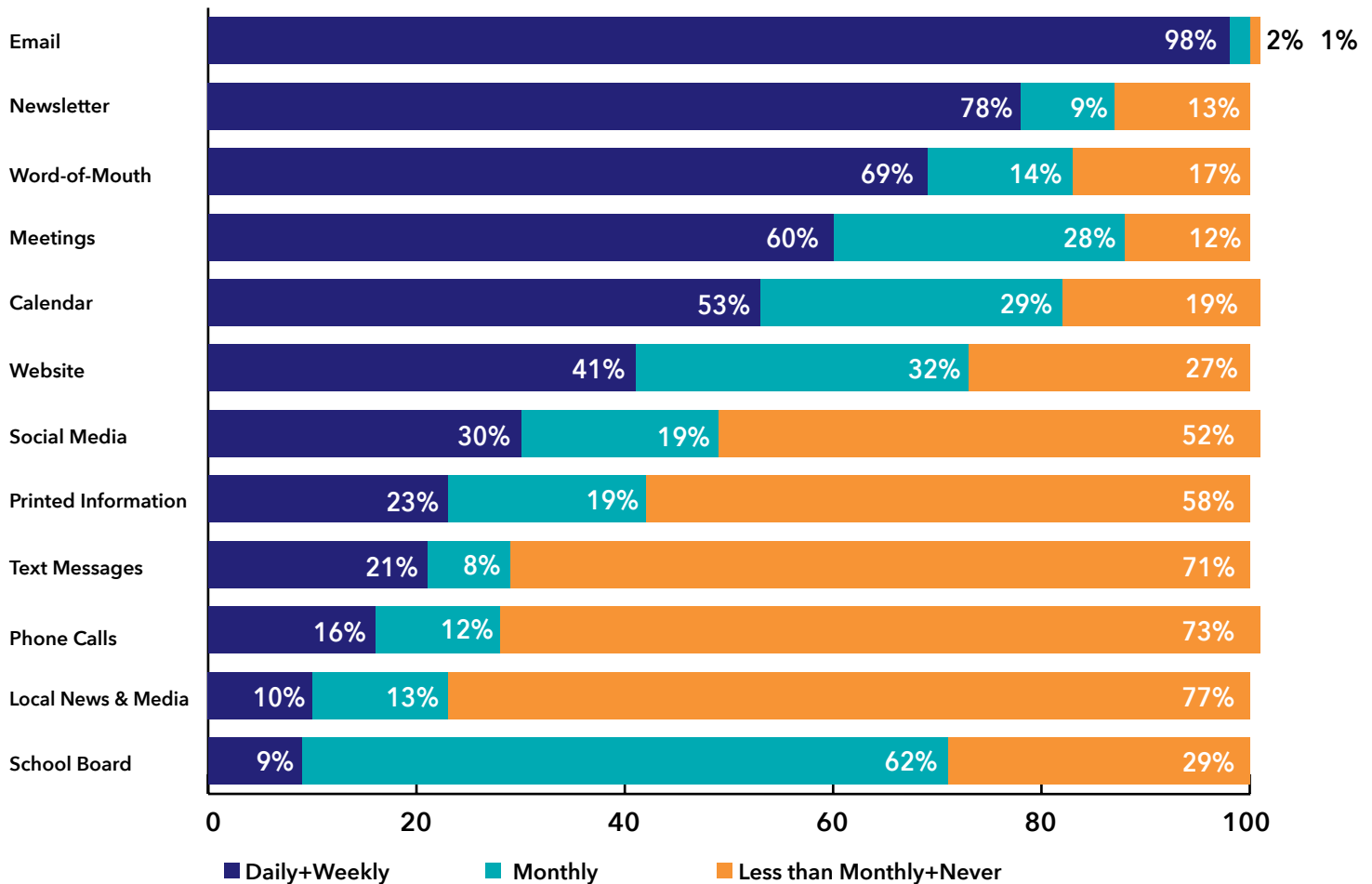
- While the Friday update is meant to reduce the volume of ad hoc all-staff emails and uncoordinated updates from various district departments, some staff in the focus groups believe there are still department newsletters circulating and that not everyone who needs the information receives them.

communication tools are also utilized by various departments throughout the district, and communications are not always sent out on a set schedule. Parents and staff in the focus groups shared that the use of such a wide variety of communication tools creates confusion for them, as illustrated in the following representative comments:

- Schools and classrooms utilize multiple communication apps to communicate with parents/caregivers** such as SeeSaw, Kaymbu, Skyward, Class Dojo, Google Classroom and Remind. Multiple

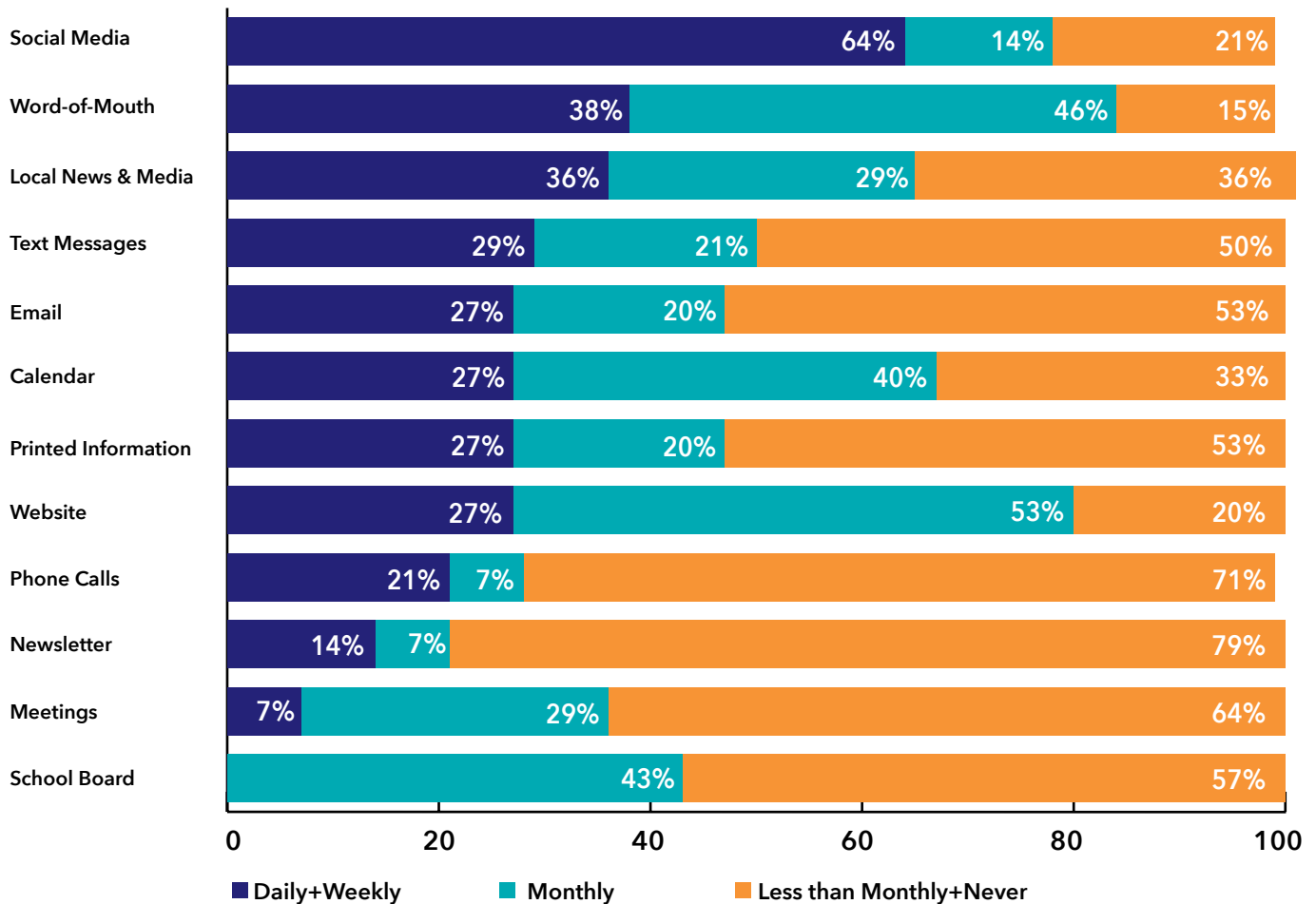
- “I don’t want to log in and search for messages that each teacher and the principal sends, plus read a newsletter from the school and teachers.” (parent)
- “It’s hard to predict when the next

### Frequency of Reliance on Communication Sources for Information About the District - *Employees*



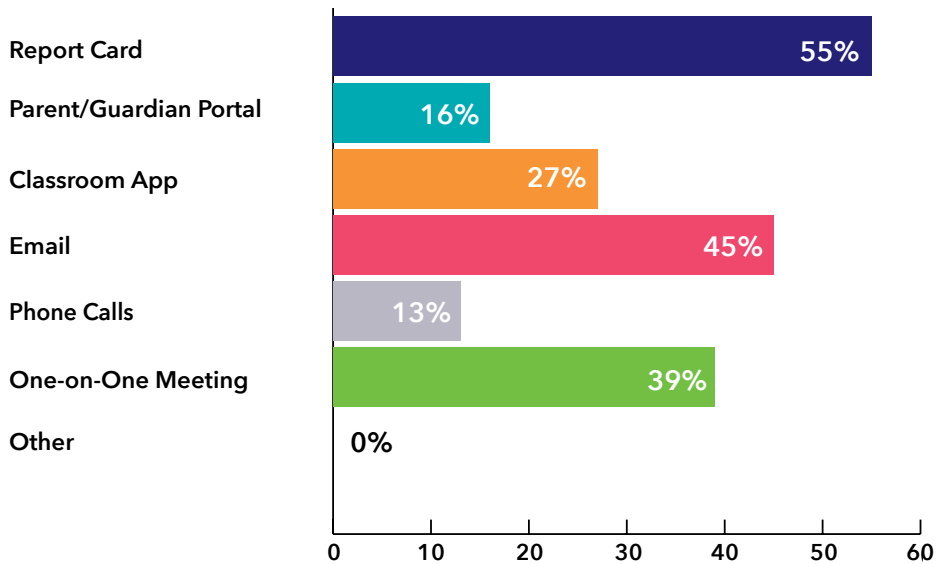
- communication is coming from the teacher or school.” (parent)
  - “Different newsletters go to different staff groups but are not shared with all, including building principals who need the information.” (employee)
- **When parents were asked how they prefer to receive information about their child’s progress and how they can best support students’ learning**, their top choice was report cards, followed by email and one-on-one meetings with teachers as shown in the top chart on [page 16](#).
- **When employees were asked how they prefer to receive information to help them perform their duties and support student learning**, their top choice was email, followed by group meetings and individual meetings with their supervisor as shown in the bottom chart on [page 16](#).

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

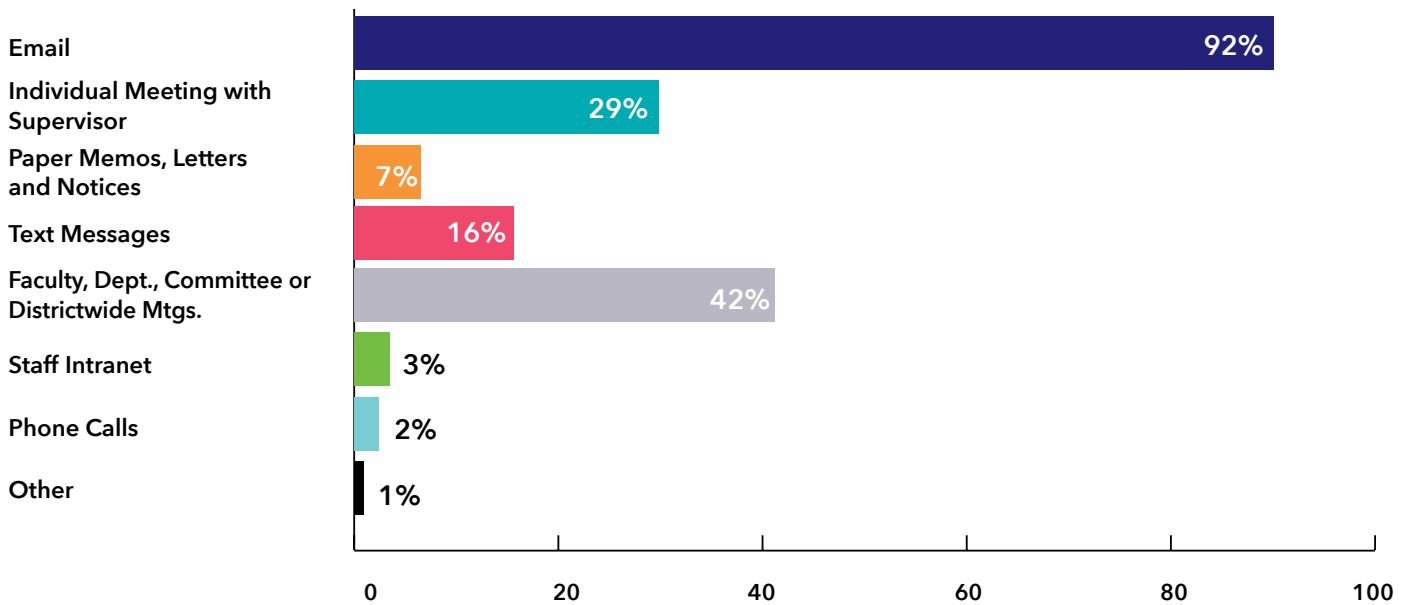


\* Due to low [community participation](#) in the SCOPE Survey, this report does not include significant recommendations based solely on community members’ results.

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



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



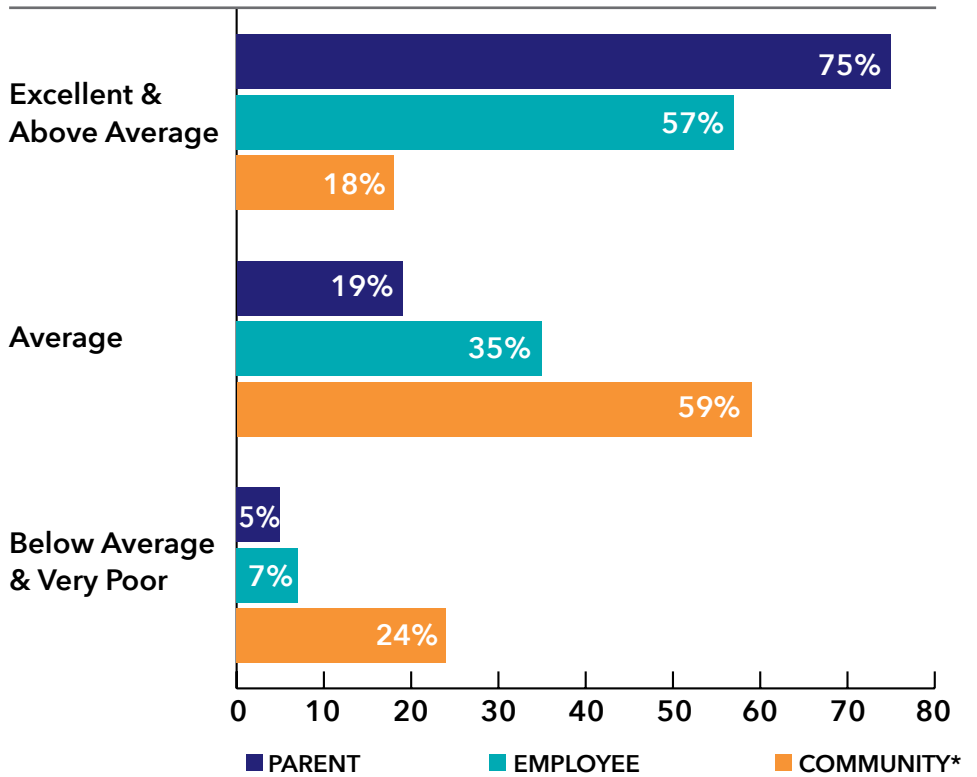


## Communication Satisfaction, Effectiveness and Quality

- On the SCOPE Survey, participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with communications from the district, with 75 percent of parents and 57 percent of employees rating communications as excellent or above average.

As shown on the [SCOPE Scorecard](#), when these responses are converted to a five-point scale to compare with SCOPE Survey results of districts nationwide, parent ratings were above the national average, and employee ratings were at the national average.

Overall Rating for Satisfaction With Communication From the District



Overall Perception of District Communications	CCSD59	National Average	National Low	National High
Parents	4.1	3.8	3.1	4.2
Employees	3.6	3.6	2.6	4.2
Community*	2.9	3.2	2.0	4.1

- CCSD59 has developed a thorough brand guide for the district and individual schools (<https://www.ccsd59.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Brand-Guide-Pages-2018-UPDATED.pdf>) that aligns with the district’s mission and vision. District materials, including the website, newsletter and posters, consistently demonstrate the CCSD59 brand.
- The CCSD59 Communications Department has detailed its available communication tools and mission in a “Strategy and Guidelines for Communication” document.

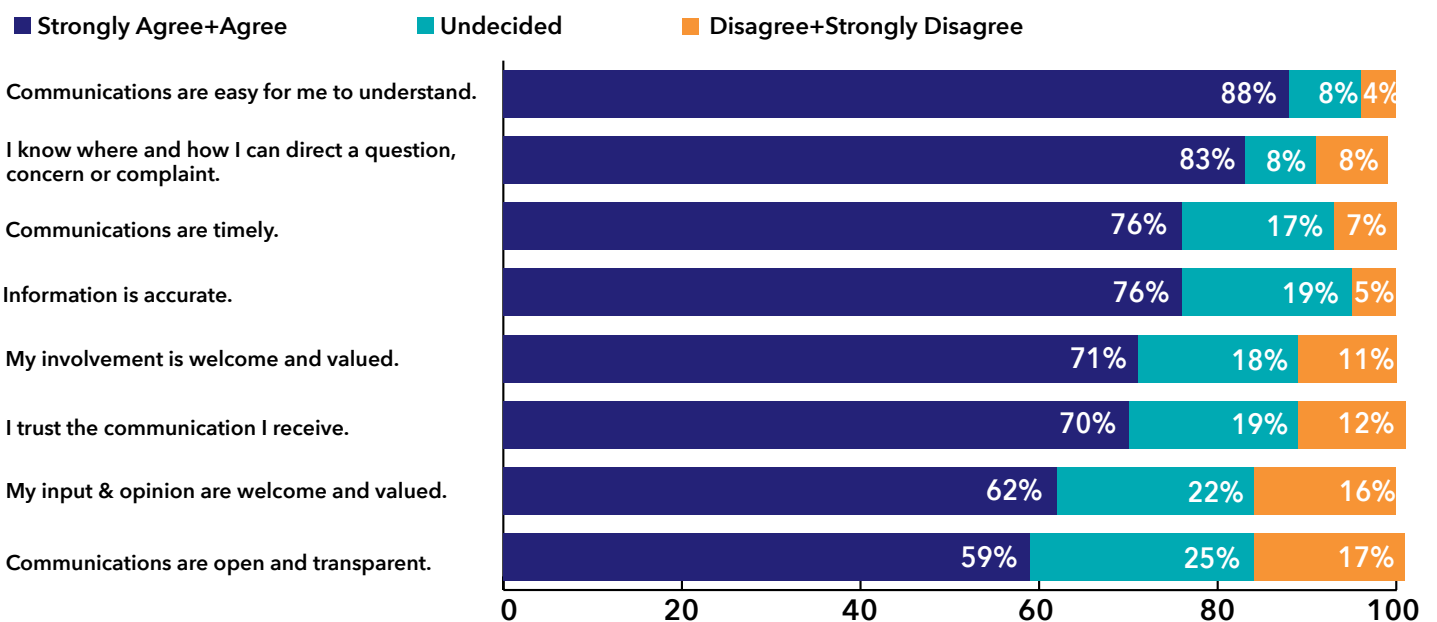
\* Due to low [community participation](#) in the SCOPE Survey, this report does not include significant recommendations based solely on community members’ results.

- **On the SCOPE Survey, more than two-thirds of parents and employees agree or strongly agree that communications are easy to understand;** they know where to direct a question, concern or complaint; information is accurate; and communications are timely, as shown on pages 18-19. In other areas where the survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements about the quality of communications:
  - For parents, the categories with the least agreement were “communications are open and transparent,” “my involvement is welcome and valued” and “my input and opinion are welcome and valued.”
  - For employees, the categories with the least agreement were “I receive communication that makes me feel valued as an employee,” “my input and opinion are welcome” and “communications are open and transparent.”
  - The percentages of agreement or strong agreement, while generally high, were lower among employees

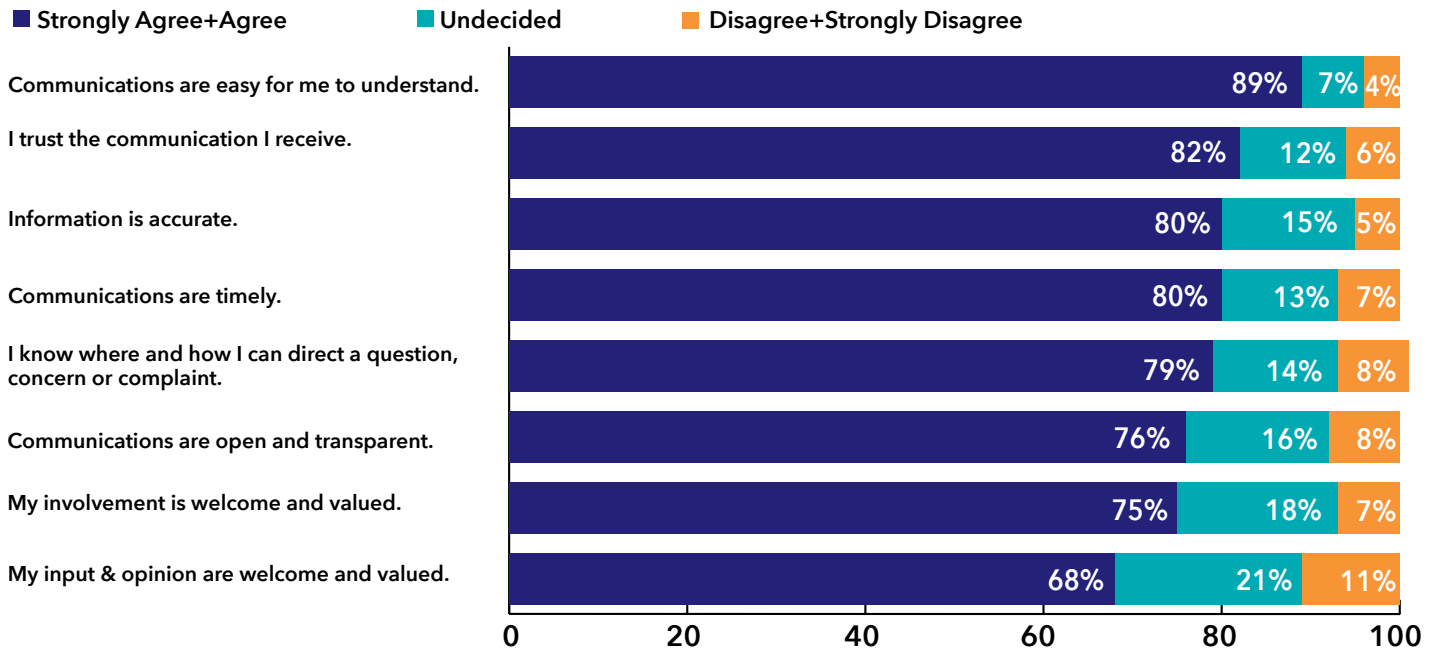
than among parents in all but one category; NSPRA’s survey research has found that this is not an unusual trend for school districts.

- **In focus groups, less satisfaction with the quality of communication was expressed by parents and staff.** Participants often described communications from the district as being written at too high of a level for the intended audiences. When reviewing the district’s website and various materials, the auditor also noted instances where the style of writing was not conducive to the intended audience being able to easily understand the message. The focus group feedback notably differs from the survey results about communications being easy to understand, suggesting there are barriers to understanding for some stakeholders, as indicated by the following representative statements:
  - “Anything from the district is usually filled with jargon and is either too late or too vague to be useful.” (parent)
  - “They should use the KISS Method: Keep it simple and explain things using

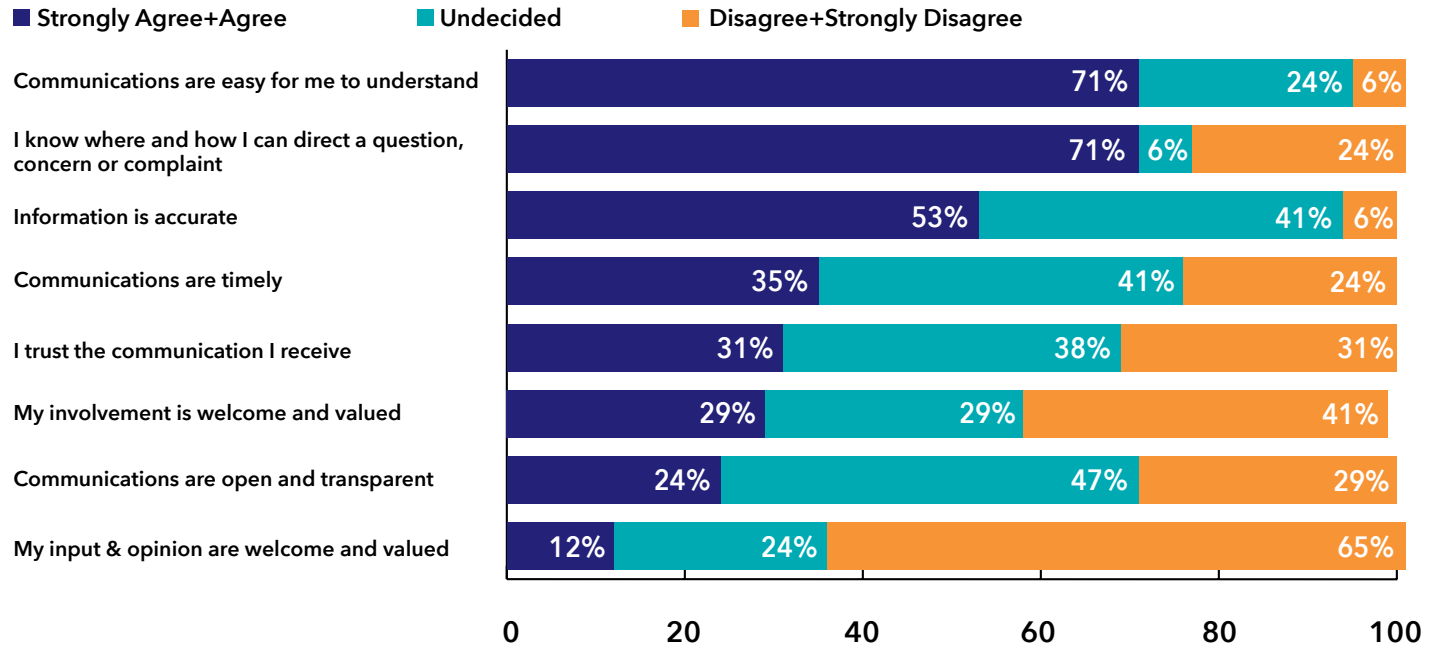
### Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communications - *Employees*



### Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communications - *Parents*

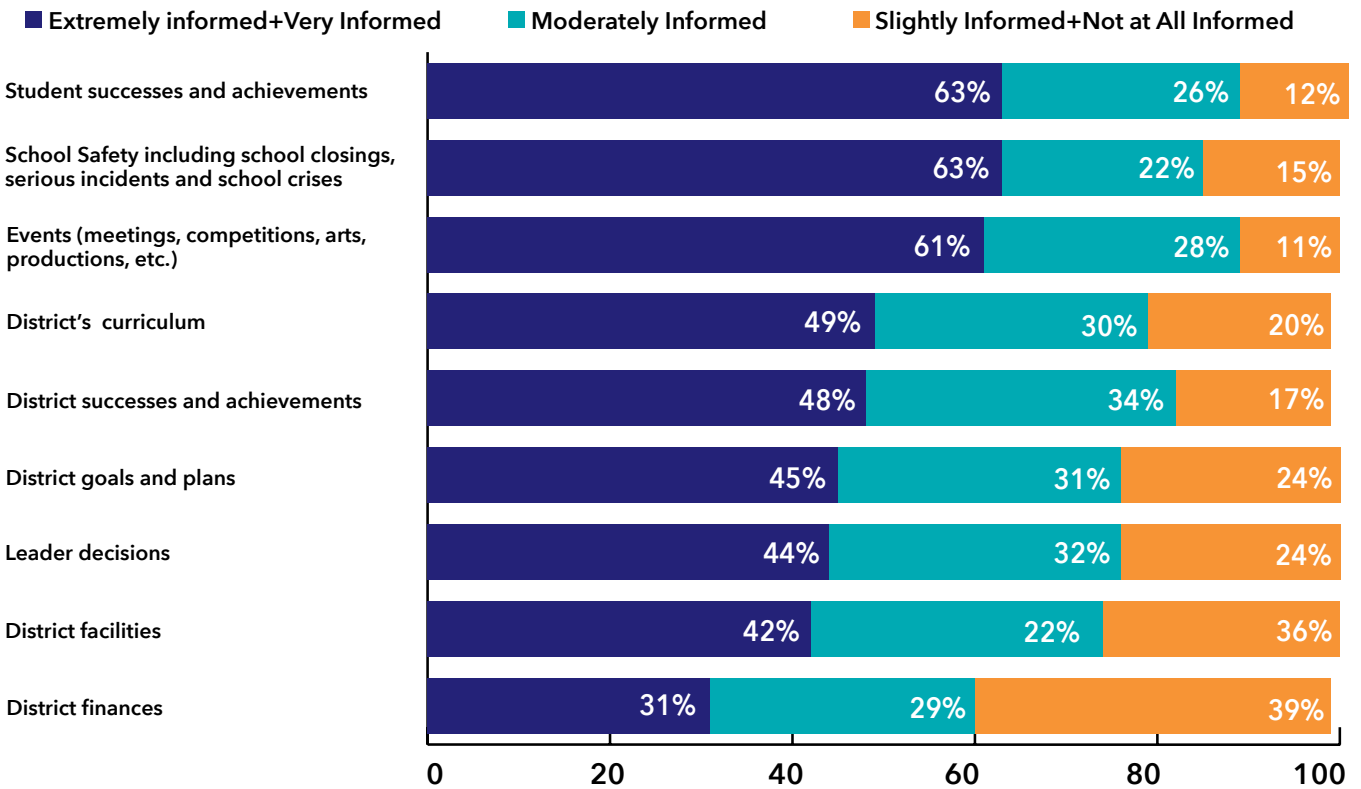


### Level of Agreement With Statements About District Communications - *Community\**

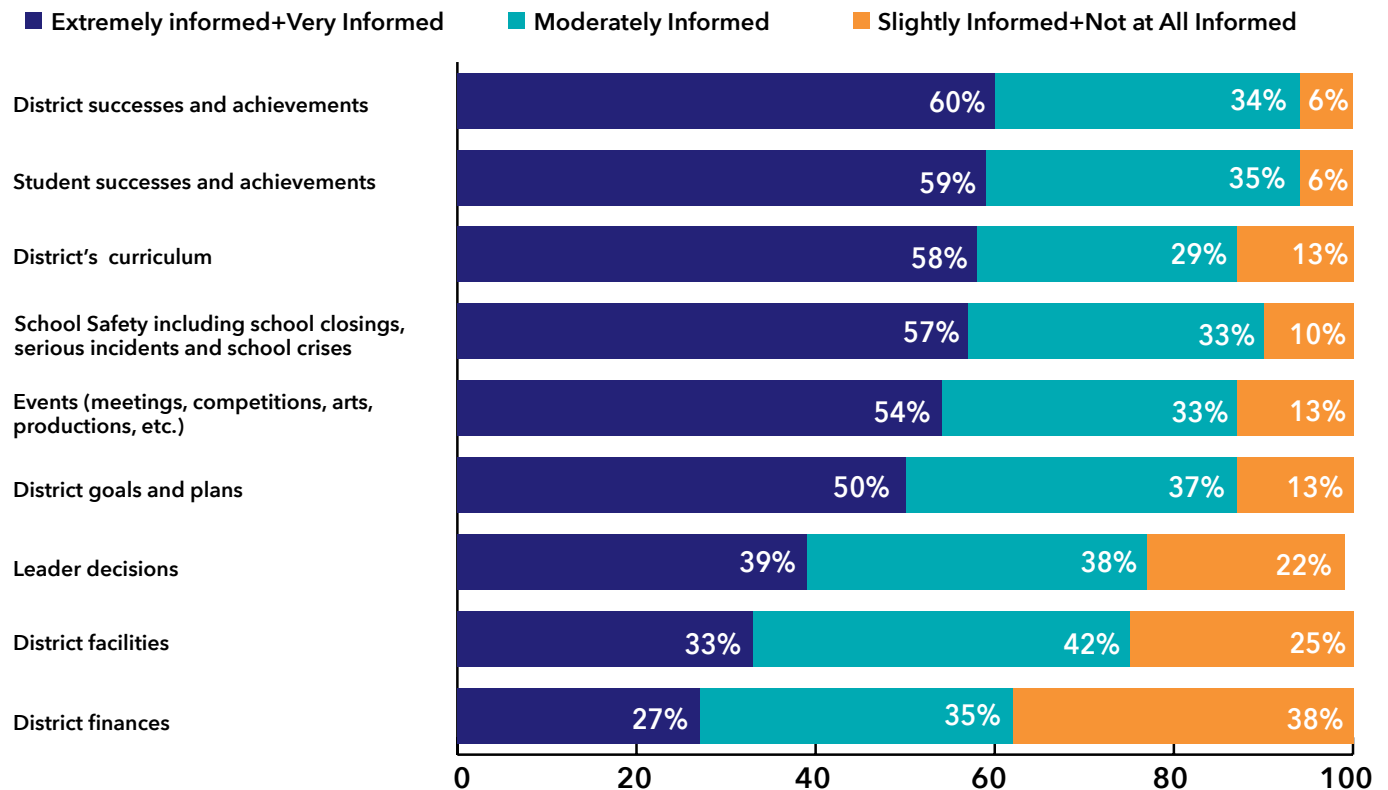


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Level of Feeling Informed in Eight Areas of Communications - *Parents*

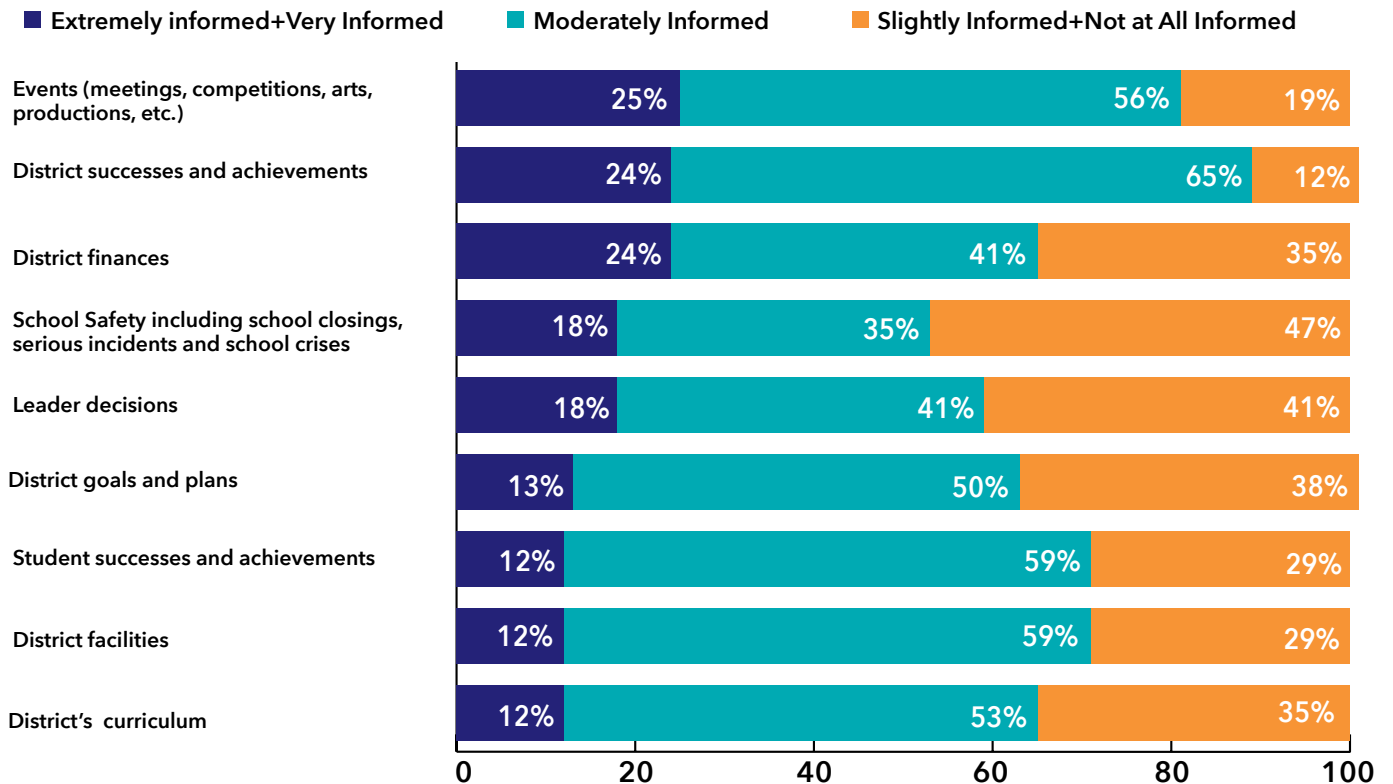


Level of Feeling Informed in Eight Areas of Communications - *Employees*



- language parents can understand.” (parent)
- “They need to know their audiences and should not assume they know what all the acronyms and educational jargon mean.” (employee)
- **When asked to rate how informed they are on eight key topics related to the school district:**
  - Parents feel most informed about student successes and achievements, followed by issues surrounding school safety and events as shown on [page 20](#).
  - Employees feel most informed about district successes and achievements, followed by student successes and achievements, and the district’s curriculum as shown on [page 20](#).
- Community members generally feel only moderately informed and mostly about district successes, achievements and events as shown in the chart below.
- **When parents were asked how informed they feel about areas pertaining to their role as parents,** “about my student’s progress in schools,” “about PTA/PTO activities,” “about homework and projects” and “how I can support my student’s learning” were rated the highest, with more than 70 percent of parents feeling very or extremely informed in these areas, as shown in the top chart on [page 22](#).
- **When employees were asked how informed they feel in areas pertaining to their role as an employee,** approximately 80 percent said they were extremely or very informed about “how to best perform

**Level of Feeling Informed in Eight Areas of Communications - *Community\****

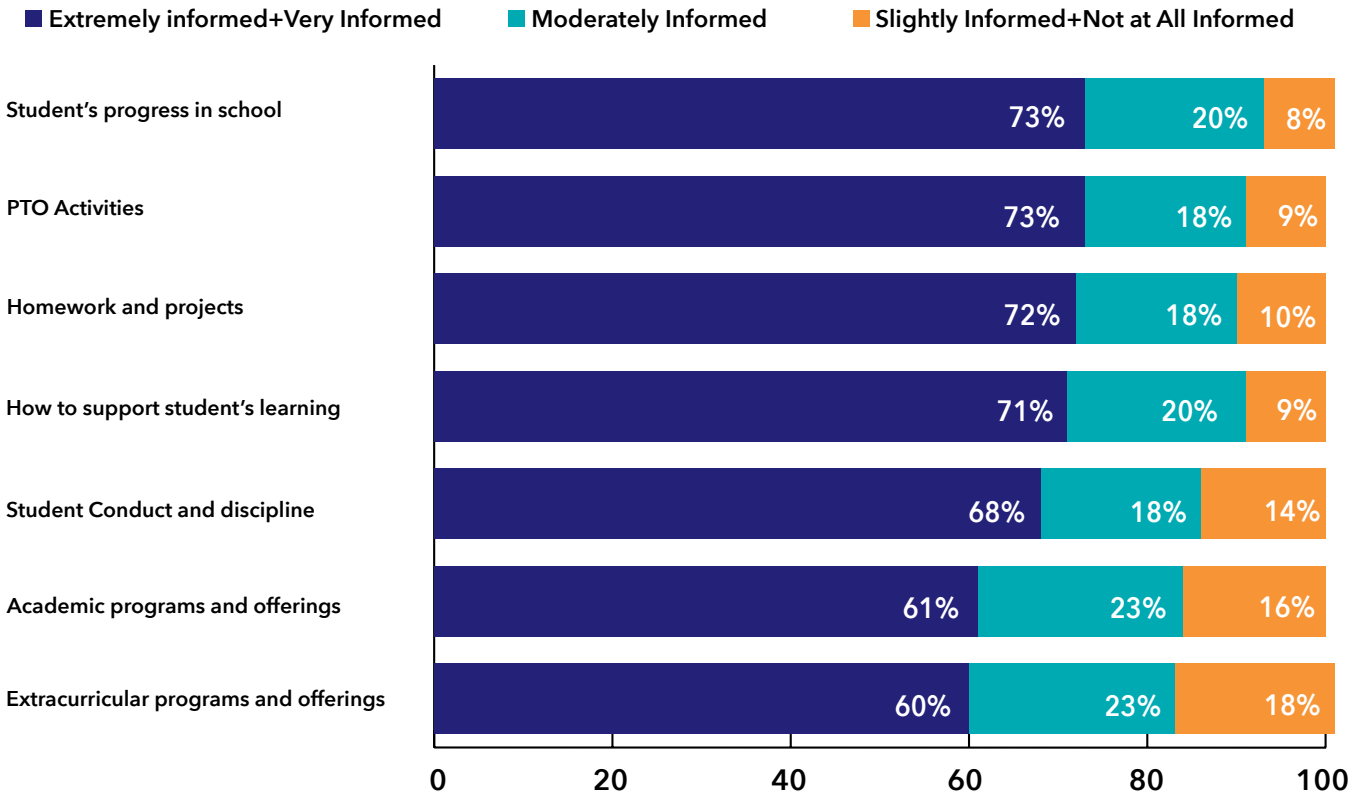


\* Due to low [community participation](#) in the SCOPE Survey, this report does not include significant recommendations based solely on community members’ results.

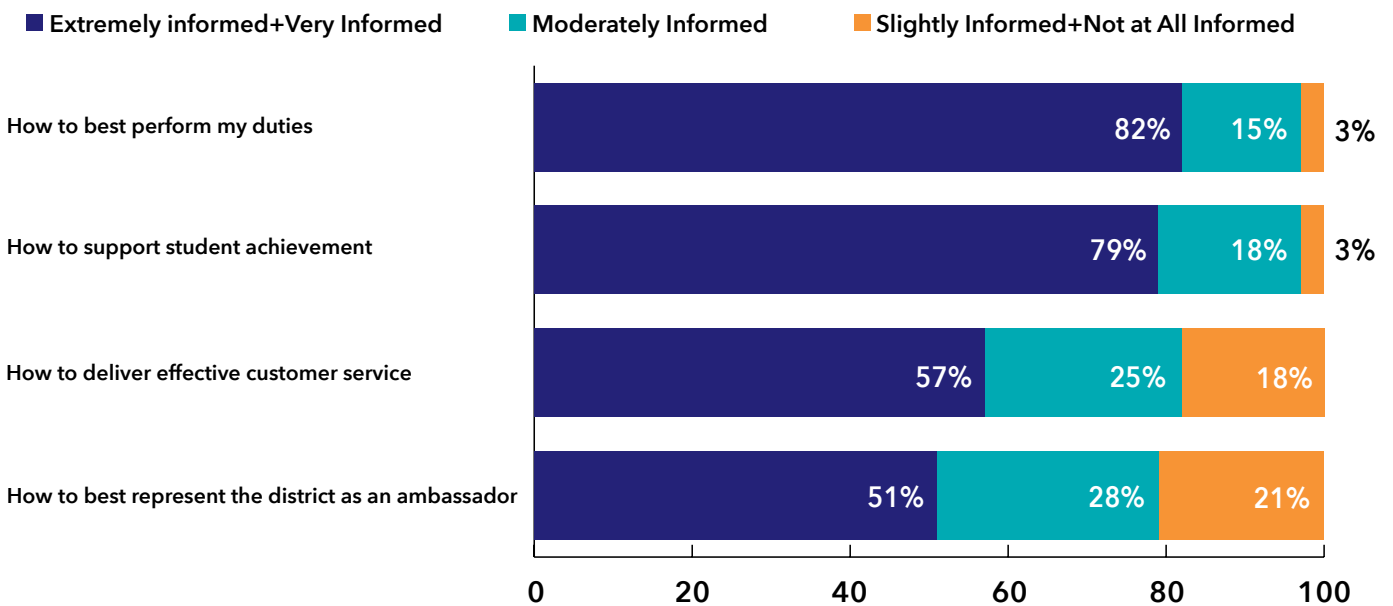
my duties” and “how I can support student achievement” as shown below in the bottom chart.

- In focus groups, when parents were asked to share any concerns they had about how they are communicated with by the district or schools, the following themes arose.

### Level of Feeling Informed in Areas Pertaining to Role as a Parent



### Level of Feeling Informed in Areas Pertaining to Role as an Employee



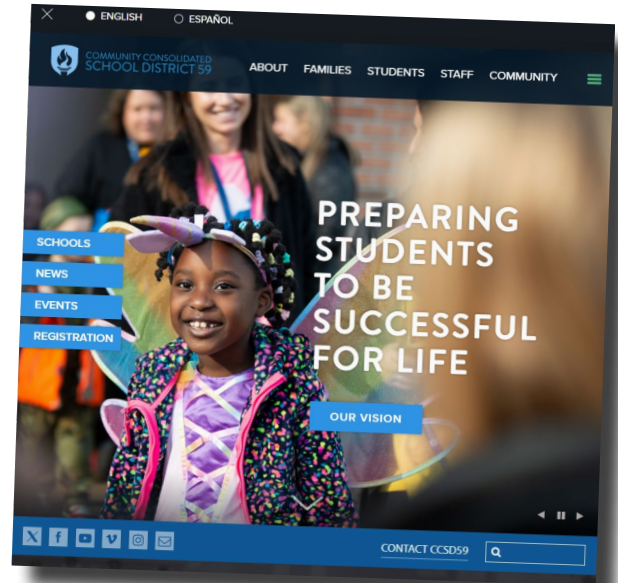
- Some parents are unaware that, as shared by district leaders, more than one person in the same household can receive information about their children in the same way. This perception leads to frustration, with a parent focus group participant sharing that, “Only one parent is allowed to get their child’s school or district email, so I miss lots of information that my husband gets.”
  - Some parents feel that the amount of time it takes for principals, teachers and district-level staff to respond to parents’ emails and/or concerns is too long and would like a response within 24 hours.
  - Some parents find teacher communication to be inconsistent. Participants shared that some teachers send a daily message to parents, while others communicate weekly or less often. Similarly, some teachers are seen as maintaining grades in a timely manner, while others are seen as recording grades too infrequently.
  - A number of parents expressed frustration about the timing of communications, which has contributed to a perception for some that schools are “sending notes and emails at the end of the day so you can’t call with questions.”
  - In one focus group, parents expressed frustration with what they perceived to be little to no communication from their child’s school about bullying and discipline measures.
- **In focus groups, employees expressed frustration about how and when they receive information.** While a less representative sentiment on the SCOPE Survey, 24 percent of employees did disagree, strongly disagree or were undecided about whether district communications are timely, as shown on [page 18](#). The following statements are representative of what the auditor heard during focus group discussions:
    - Some employee participants perceive that information is shared on a “need-to-know” basis that does not include all of the people impacted by the message or decision. For example, it was suggested to “let the office managers know what is being sent out to parents—because we are the ones who get the phone calls.”
    - Many employee participants find that messages are often sent at times when they are not able to access or act upon them, which results in them hearing news from a colleague or a parent before reading it for themselves.
    - Many employee participants share the perception that important information is too often “buried” in lengthy emails.
    - Many employee participants report receiving conflicting messages from different district sources.
    - Some employee participants also express fear of retaliation for speaking out against district decisions and frustration at not having formal expectations around how they are to communicate with parents.
  - **Parent and staff focus group participants mentioned that they would like to see more good news stories on the district website and in publications.** While a less representative sentiment on the SCOPE Survey, 38 percent of parents and 41 percent of employees did report feeling moderately, slightly or not at all informed about student successes and achievements, as shown on [page 20](#). The following are representative comments from focus group discussions:
    - “We never tell all the good news stories. We need to celebrate our wins.”

- “The good news and the accurate news about the district isn’t getting out.”
- **Many of the district’s community outreach specialists are bilingual.** Their role is to enhance student achievement by engaging families through strong relationship building, visiting families in their homes, assisting with family and community engagement events, and helping families access resources, including school supplies and clothing.
- **The Communication Department’s Spanish translator and some school building office managers also speak Spanish,** and some other staff speak Spanish or Polish. School-based staff can use Pocketalk devices to assist with translation.
- **CCSD59 translates all written district materials into Spanish and some into Polish** as well as offering several language options for students, including Spanish/English and Polish/English dual immersion programs and the English as A Second Language Program.
- **Parents and staff in the focus groups felt that communication with non-English speaking families is sometimes a challenge.**
  - There is a perception that materials that are translated into Spanish are not always accurate. As one Spanish-speaking parent said, “The translations into Spanish are interpreted incorrectly, but not bad enough that I can’t figure it out.”
  - Staff in the focus groups also acknowledged the need for broader translation services: “The district only offers English, Polish and Spanish translations, but we have lots more languages spoken such as Russian and Ukrainian.”
  - Staff members who can speak non-English languages report being frustrated that they are often called upon to fill in the translation gaps: “When a translator or interpreter isn’t available, it falls on those of us who speak Spanish to translate.”
- Parents in the bilingual focus group said they prefer text messages since they don’t check their email very often. The community outreach specialists also shared this, saying, “Many of our families do not have email. Many families only use WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger because it only requires Wi-Fi.”
- **Staff and parent stakeholders expressed a desire for district leadership to be more visible and accessible,** including for the board to improve communications about what they are working on. The following are representative comments:
  - “I would like to see the school board and district-level administrators at school events so I could talk with them there and so they could see what was happening at every school.”
  - “The district administrators and school board need to go to events at the schools to engage parents.”
  - “I can’t say for sure what the current priorities are for the board.”
- **In several focus groups, some participants expressed a desire for the district to be more transparent about decisions that impact students, families and staff.** While a less representative sentiment on the SCOPE Survey, 42 percent of employees and 24 percent of parents disagreed, strongly disagreed or were undecided about whether district communications are open and transparent. In the focus groups, the two most frequently given examples of when stakeholders perceived the district was not transparent and did not get buy-in about important issues were the proposed



changes to the elementary grade structure and to junior high school schedules. Some staff also shared that they feel frustrated when their input is not solicited when decisions will impact their jobs. Following are some representative comments:

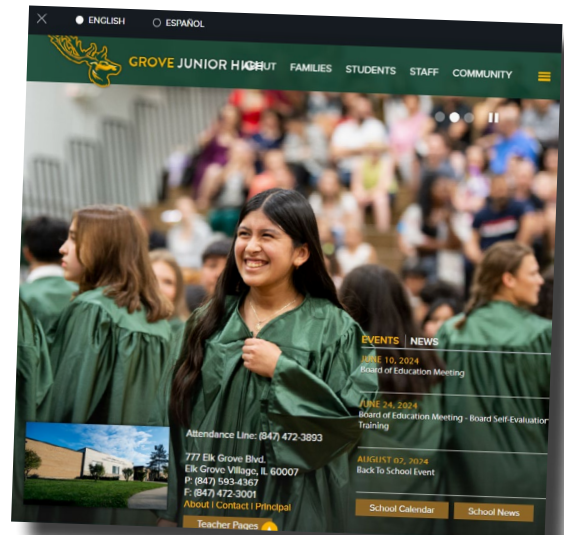
- Regarding the proposal to change the structure of the elementary schools, “I was not necessarily opposed to the idea, but it came as a shock and seemed very rushed and poorly communicated.” (parent)
- “I want to be involved early on through listening sessions and forums.” (parent)
- “The district has a long-standing habit of asking for teacher input and ignoring it.” (employee)



## Digital Communication Tools

### District/School Websites

- **The district homepage at [ccsd59.org](https://ccsd59.org) fares well when analyzed by the [WebAIM website accessibility tool](#).** There are no serious errors and only five areas with low contrast between text and background colors. There are 95 alerts, which are less serious than errors, and most are due to redundant links that create repetitive navigation and unnecessary output for assistive technology.
- **The CCSD59 district and school websites utilize the WordPress platform.** The websites (examples pictured at right) are maintained by the Communications Department, with a handful of individuals in the district having access to update their department pages.
- **There is a relatively low level of reliance on the district and school websites for information,** with fewer than half of parents and employees and fewer than



a third of community members turning to them daily or weekly. On the SCOPE Survey, the website was the fifth-rated source of information for parents and the sixth-rated source of information for employees. In the focus groups, very few participants indicated that they use the district and school websites to find information about the district.

- **Google Analytics for the district website** show that it had more than 81,500 users in

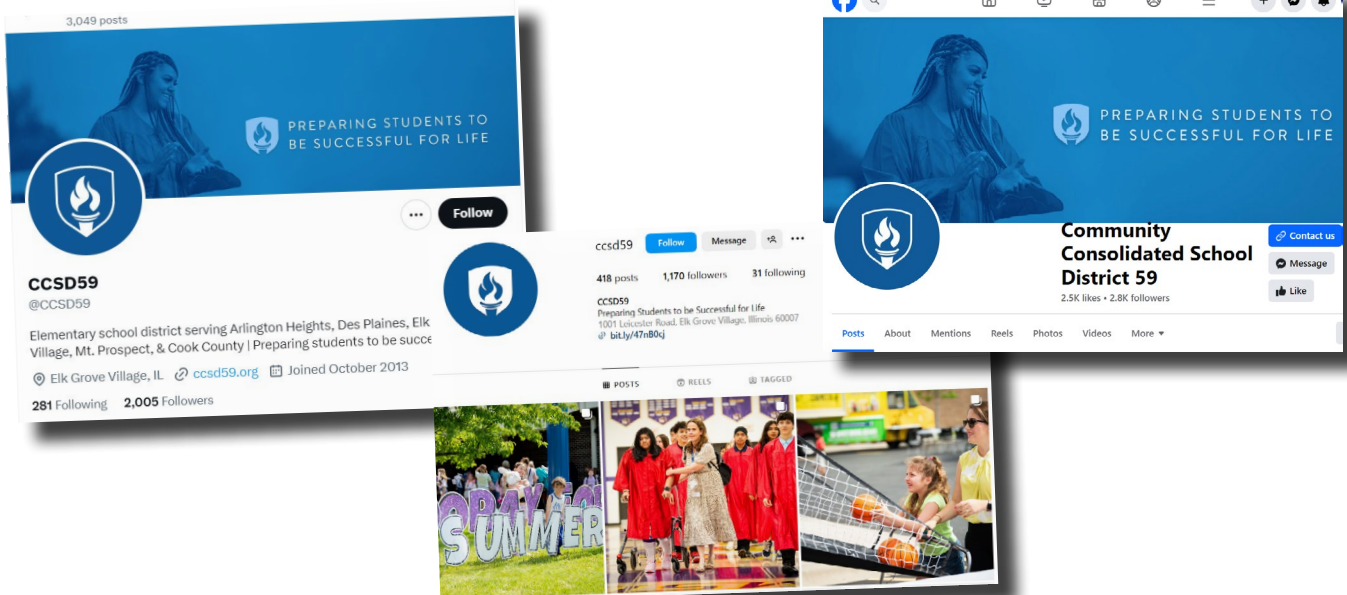
total from August 2023 through May 2024, including repeat visitors. Users viewed on average 4-5 pages on the site each visit, and the top 10 pages viewed were for:

- The [main homepage](#),
- The [school nutrition](#) page with menus and meal prices,
- Calendar information (the [calendar of events](#) page and the [year-at-a-glance calendar](#) page),
- Current and prospective employee information (the [employment opportunities](#) page and the Human Resources page),
- Directory information (the [find a school](#) directory page and the [staff directory](#) page), and
- The [student registration](#) page for kindergartners and new students.

- **The pages that users engage with the most are the staff directory page**, where they spend on average 2 minutes, and the calendar of events page, where they spend on average 1 minute. Otherwise,

most of the top pages are visited only for about 15-45 seconds.

- **Focus group participants’ website usage aligns with the analytics results.** They reported using it mainly to find lunch menus, the calendar, the staff directory and to access Skyward. Multiple focus group and survey participants felt that it’s hard to find information on the website, and some noted that forms are outdated. A representative survey comment was a belief that, “The district website has too much information on it.”
- **The homepage contains 29 separate navigation links, with an additional 70+ direct links to district and external pages under the drop-down menus.** No hierarchy of information could be visually identified, with a wide variety of different subjects and content areas vying for users’ attention.
- **The school websites are uniform and reflect the district’s brand, but also feature the individual school’s logo and colors.** However, the landing page for each school is predominantly district information and news. To learn about the



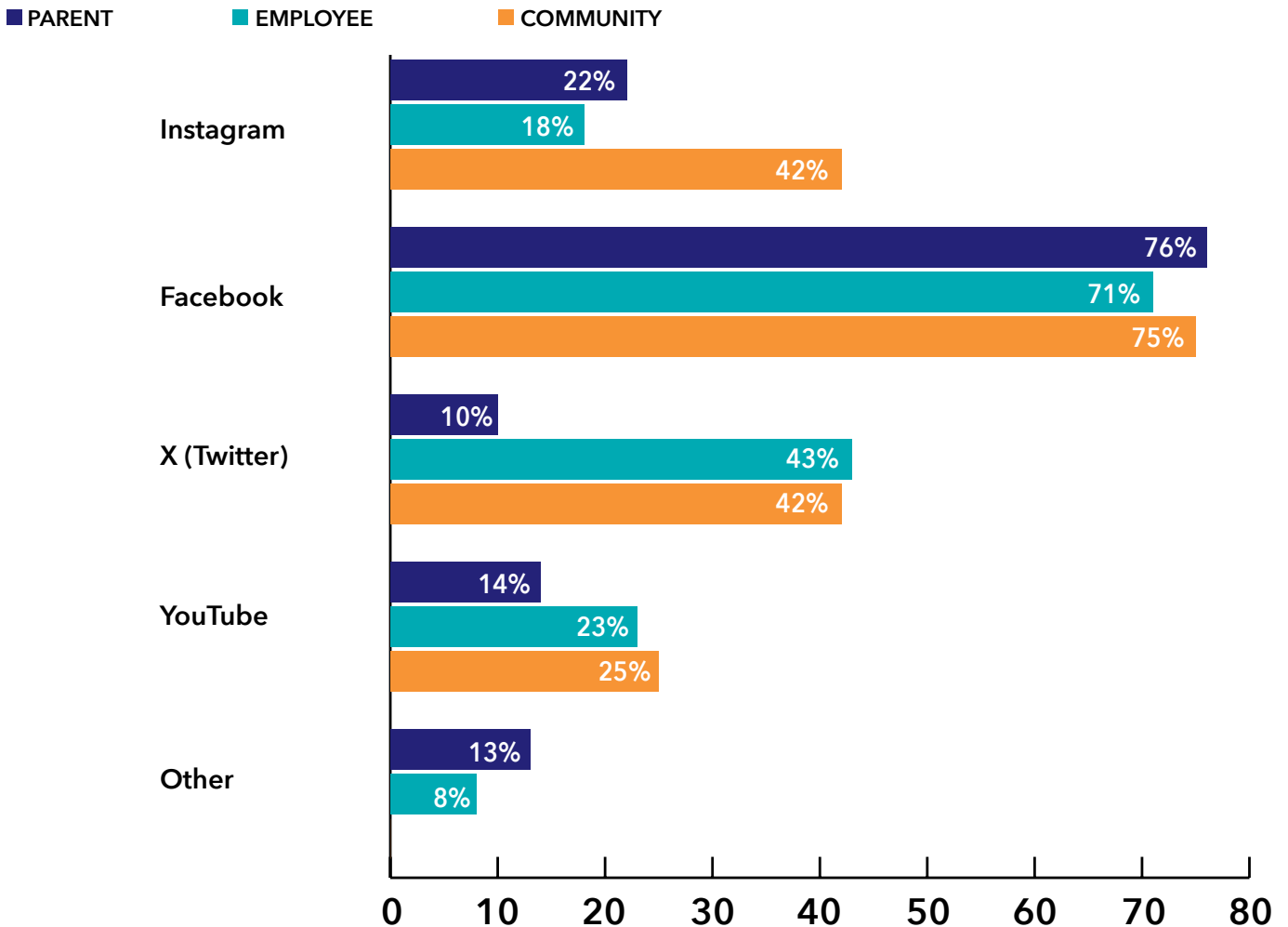
individual school, visitors must go to the “About” menu and select “About (School Name).” The section on each school site labeled “School News” is mostly filled with district news such as Board Updates.

### District/School Social Media

- **CCSD59 has an official presence on the following social media platforms**, each of which are linked in the footer of the district website homepage. At the time of the auditor’s review:
  - [X/Twitter](#) had 2,003 followers.
  - [Facebook](#) had 2,800 followers.

- [Instagram](#) had 1,167 followers.
- **The auditor found that engagement with each of CCSD59’s social media platforms is above average** when using industry formulas for determining engagement rates through publicly available post data (e.g., reactions/likes, comments, shares) and reviewing a typical week of posts from March 1-8, 2024.
  - The average engagement rate for district posts to its Facebook page was 0.43 percent, while the average engagement rate across industries in 2022 was 0.15 percent.

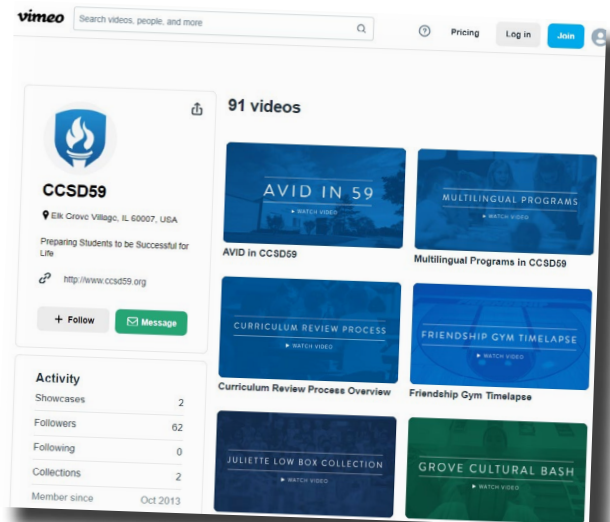
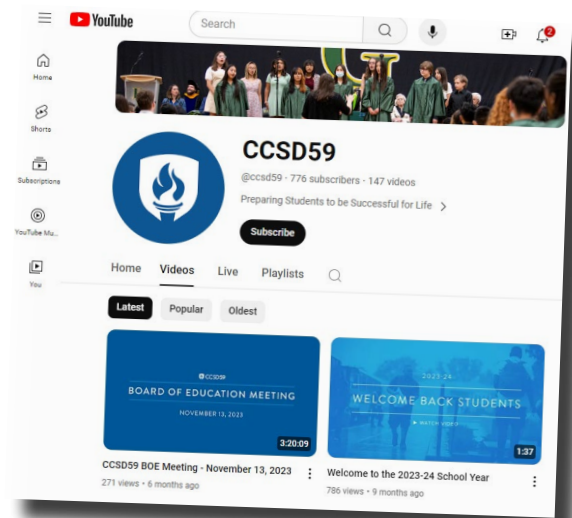
### Which social media platforms do you use for school related information?



- The average engagement rate for district posts to its X/Twitter page was 0.45 percent, while the average engagement rate across industries in 2022 was 0.05 percent.
- The average engagement rate for district posts to its Instagram page was 3.08 percent, while the average engagement rate across industries in 2022 was 0.60 percent.
- **All individual schools have a school-level presence on Facebook and X/Twitter, and many also have a presence on Instagram.** Their social pages are linked in the footer on school homepages, but some of the links are to district social media in lieu of a school page.
- **A majority of the district and school posts are shared with the same content across their respective X/Twitter, Facebook and Instagram pages.**
  - Most schools post regularly, with several posts a month during the school year, but a small number of schools have not posted new content in months on at least one of their school-level social media pages.
- **More than 70 percent of stakeholders who use social media for information about the district use Facebook** as shown in the SCOPE Survey results below.

videos of this nature have been posted during the current school year.

- Comments are turned off for YouTube videos, but viewers can like, dislike and share videos.
- **CCSD59's [Vimeo](#) account has 62 followers**, and it houses videos from last school year and beyond. It appears to not have been used in the current school year, but the link to the page remains on the district and school homepages.



## District/School Video Channels

- **CCSD59's [YouTube](#) channel has 765 subscribers.**
  - The channel is mostly used to stream Board of Education meetings, and each meeting has 300-700 views.
  - The district periodically posts videos produced to share information about specific topics or projects, but no

# 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 CCSD59 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
<b>INTERNAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The CCSD59 Board of Education has established “two-way communication and collaboration” as a strategy for achievement of its five-year Strategic Plan goal related to family and community partnerships.</li> <li>CCSD59 has an abundance of resources that allow the offering of a large number of educational opportunities for students.</li> <li>CCSD59 staff are held in high regard for their dedication to students.</li> <li>The district has devoted resources to engagement with its families through the work of the community outreach specialists, most of whom are bilingual.</li> <li>Branding is established and used consistently to support the district’s mission and vision.</li> <li>The Communications Department has identified its available communication tools and departmental mission in a “Strategy and Guidelines for Communication” document.</li> <li>The <i>Weekly Staff Update</i> sent out every Friday provides a one-stop shop for important news for district staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some stakeholders do not feel they are included in the decision-making processes of the district.</li> <li>Some stakeholders feel that district communications are hard to understand and written above their reading level.</li> <li>The district, schools, departments and classrooms use multiple, sometimes duplicative, communication tools and do not have an aligned schedule for regular communications.</li> <li>There do not yet appear to be enough translation resources to fully support students and families whose first language is not English, and the communications provided in Spanish, Polish and other languages are not always timely or accurate.</li> <li>There is no comprehensive strategic communication plan to guide the district’s communication priorities, which leads to communications that tend to be more reactive than proactive.</li> </ul>

EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholders want to see and hear the good news stories and what is happening throughout the district.</li> <li>Parents want to support their children by reinforcing what students are being taught in schools. This includes wanting information about discipline.</li> <li>Parents and school building staff would like to see and have the opportunity to talk with more district-level administrators and school board members at their school events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some stakeholders feel that a small vocal minority is having the most influence on CCSD59 decision-makers.</li> <li>Trust in CCSD59 has eroded amongst several important stakeholder groups, which will make it difficult for the district to pursue its stated goals and objectives.</li> <li>CCSD59 continues to see an influx of newcomer students and families who speak a wide variety of languages other than English, Spanish and Polish.</li> </ul>

# Benchmarking of Results

## National Benchmark: SCOPE Survey Scores

As part of this communication audit, NSPRA conducted its proprietary, online School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey to collect feedback from three stakeholder groups: parents/caregivers, employees (instructional, support and administrative staff) and community members. This data was used by the auditor to identify strengths and weaknesses of CCSD59's communication program, and many of these data points are included in the [Key Findings](#) section of this report.

An additional value the SCOPE Survey brings is the ability to compare a school district's local survey results on issues that matter most in school communication with the results of the more than 100 surveys conducted by districts across the United States since 2015. This data is presented in the SCOPE Scorecard on the following page.

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

1. **When participants were asked to rate *how informed they feel* on specific topics, they responded using the following scale:**
  - 5 = Extremely informed
  - 4 = Very informed
  - 3 = Moderately Informed
  - 2 = Slightly informed
  - 1 = Not at all informed
2. **When participants were asked to rate *their level of agreement with specific statements*, they responded using the following scale:**
  - 5 = Strongly agree
  - 4 = Agree
  - 3 = Undecided
  - 2 = Disagree
  - 1 = Strongly disagree
3. **When participants were asked to provide ratings about their *perceptions of the district and their overall satisfaction with communications*, they responded using the following scale:**
  - 5 = Excellent
  - 4 = Above average
  - 3 = Average
  - 2 = Below average
  - 1 = Very poor

SCOPE Scorecard		CCSD59	NATIONAL		
			Avg.	Low	High
PARENTS/FAMILIES	General Perceptions				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	4.1	3.8	2.6	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	4.1	3.8	3.1	4.2
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About school and district events and programs (1)	3.7	3.3	2.5	4.1
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	3.7	3.5	3.0	4.1
	About my student's progress in school (1)	4.0	3.7	3.1	4.4
	About how I can support my student's learning (1)	3.9	3.4	2.4	4.1
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	I trust the communication I receive from my school/department (2)	4.0	3.8	3.1	4.4
I trust the communication I receive from the district (2)	4.2	4.1	3.4	4.5	
STAFF	General Perceptions				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.7	3.6	2.3	4.2
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	3.6	3.6	2.6	4.2
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About crises/serious incidents (1)	3.6	3.4	2.8	4.0
	About how I can support student achievement (1)	4.1	3.7	3.0	4.4
	About how I can best represent the school/district as an ambassador (1)	3.4	3.2	2.4	3.8
	About topics that make me feel valued as an employee (1)	3.9	3.2	2.3	4.0
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
	Trustworthiness of communication from the district (2)	3.7	3.7	2.7	4.3
Trustworthiness of communication from my school/department (2)	4.0	4.0	3.3	4.5	
COMMUNITY	General perceptions:				
	Overall perception of the district (3)	3.4	3.3	2.1	4.3
	Overall satisfaction with communication (3)	2.9	3.2	2.0	4.1
	Level of feeling informed:				
	About student success/achievements (1)	2.8	2.9	2.0	4.2
	About district finances and related issues (1)	2.8	2.5	1.7	3.6
	About school safety (1)	2.5	2.9	1.7	4
	Agreement with statements about communication:				
Trustworthiness of communication from the district (2)	2.9	3.4	2.2	4.3	



## National Benchmark: *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*

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

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

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

Within each critical function area (CFA), research teams of award-winning, accredited association members identified top performers in school systems across the United States and Canada. Top performers' best practices—as demonstrated through essential program components identified for each area—provide a benchmarking framework for school communicators to assess whether their communication programs are emerging, established or exemplary.

Benchmarking against the [\*Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures\*© - Fifth Edition](#) differs from other parts of the communication audit

process in that it is not measuring and making recommendations based on survey results, what an auditor heard in focus groups and interviews, or discovered in district materials. Instead, it addresses how the CCSD59 communication program compares to national, benchmarked standards of excellence in school public relations.

### Benchmarked Areas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Benchmarking Scale

The chart below reflects the auditor's assessment of where CCSD59 falls within the seven benchmarked areas, in line with these definitions of the progressive scale levels:

- **Emerging.** The program is in the early stages of development and largely responsive to immediate needs or problems, with minimal proactive planning. Goals, if articulated, are loosely defined with minimal alignment with district goals and objectives.
- **Established.** The program includes a series of defined approaches based on some research. Strategies, tactics and goals are defined. The program aligns

with district goals and objectives. Some evaluation may occur.

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

When considering the CCSD59 communication program in light of this benchmarking scale and the essential program components of each benchmarked area, as detailed in the *Rubrics of Practice*, **the auditor found the district to be well-established in all CFAs except CFA 4 (Marketing/Branding Communications), where the auditor found the district to be exemplary.**

The [Recommendations](#) in this report provide insight and advice that will help CCSD59 continue to enhance its efforts in each benchmarked area. However, the Department of Communications staff can regularly use the *Rubrics of Practice* to make comparisons against national benchmarks. That might involve including self-assessment via the rubrics as an evaluation measure in CCSD59's strategic communication plan, for example.

For more details on the national benchmarks established in the *Rubrics of Practice*, visit <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Books-and-Publications-Online-Store/Product-Info/productcd/RUBRICS-2023>.

# Recommendations

Through conducting focus groups and interviews, analyzing SCOPE Survey results and reviewing communication materials, social media channels and websites, a clear picture of the strengths, needs and opportunities for the CCSD59 communication program has emerged. NSPRA advocates for industry best practices in school public relations because they are critical to delivering highly effective communications and maintaining good relationships between a district and its school community. As such, **the recommendations in this report offer ideas and strategies that are tailored to the research findings in CCSD59 while being grounded in industry best practices.**

Currently, the district employs a variety of communication tools but lacks a comprehensive strategic communication plan—based on research and tailored to its diverse audiences—to guide the use of those tools in support of specific objectives and strategies that align with the district’s communication goals. Recommendation 1 specifically focuses on this area of need, while the other recommendations and their action steps can become strategies and tactics within the plan.

Making sure stakeholders have the information they need when they need it and in forms that are easily accessible is at the heart of three of the recommendations in the report:

- Recommendation 2 focuses on communicating in ways that effectively reach all target audiences;
- Recommendation 3 focuses on enhancing the district and school websites so they are an engaging, relied-upon source of information for stakeholders; and
- Recommendation 7 provides strategies for standardizing parent communication practices.

Strategies for increasing transparency and building trust are addressed in three of the recommendations:

- Recommendation 4 provides suggestions for how to more effectively engage in two-way communication with stakeholders;
- Recommendation 5 demonstrates how the district can be more inclusive in its decision-making processes; and
- Recommendation 6 focuses on internal communication efforts to ensure that staff feel valued and supported in their work.

With all members of the CCSD59 Board of Education having served less than four years, now is a good time for the district to work with board members to expand their communications and outreach activities. Recommendation 8 outlines ways for them to hear from more of the district’s constituents.

With the large number of parents whose first language is not English, it’s important that the district enhance its communication practices to engage diverse families, as outlined in Recommendation 9.

The recommendations are provided in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to address these recommendations in a different order and with tactics other than those outlined here. Some recommendations can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. **Generally speaking, a district should not try to address more than 2-3 recommendations each school year while continuing to deliver existing communication programs and services.**

This is a long-term and multi-year effort, and new components for the district communication program will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

## Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a strategic communication plan that includes measurable objectives focused on moving the district toward achieving its goals.
2. Adapt communication practices to more effectively connect with different audiences.
3. Enhance the district's website to increase stakeholder use and engagement.
4. Maintain a culture of two-way communication throughout the district and schools to build trust with constituents.
5. Increase participation in and transparency around decision-making processes.
6. Enhance internal communication efforts.
7. Support standardized parent communication practices across schools and departments.
8. Enhance school board communications and outreach.
9. Increase non-English speakers' access to translated district and school communications.

## Recommendation 1:

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

Planning strategically for communications is about taking a proactive approach to the exchange of information between a school system and its stakeholders. When done well, it allows a school system to strengthen relationships with stakeholders by building credibility for the system and its leaders, and by increasing understanding on both sides of the relationship. Developing a formal, strategic communication plan helps those responsible for implementing a communication program prioritize their efforts and ground them in industry best practices that are mission-oriented, time- and cost-effective for the school system and most likely to succeed in their unique, local community.

CCSD59 has created a strong brand for its communications and has developed a “Strategy and Guidelines for Communication” document that highlights the various tools that will be used in communications at the district and school levels. What it does not include are the goals, objectives or tactics that these tools will be used to address.

To have an effective communications program, CCSD59 needs an annual or multi-year strategic communication plan to guide the overall efforts of the Communications Department. Without a plan, the daily communication demands of a school district often consume most of a communication team’s time. That results in a great deal of reactive communication, rather than efforts focused on delivering key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships.

The following action steps offer tactics to enhance the Communication Department’s planning efforts and help maximize the district’s return on its investment in communications.

#### Action Step 1.1

### Follow the four-step strategic public relations planning process of research, planning, implementation and evaluation (RPIE).

A strategic communication plan explains where the district wants to go with its communications program through clear goals and measurable objectives, and how it plans to get there through specific strategies, tactics, target audiences, key messages, timelines and staff responsibilities. It sets up evaluation criteria for each initiative to help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of CCSD59’s communication dollar. There are a variety of styles for writing a formal communication plan, but following the RPIE process—research, planning, implementation, evaluation—has proven successful for many school districts and is a best practice of accredited public relations practitioners.

#### Research

Research (R) requires an analysis of the situations facing the district, including stakeholders’ communication needs and wants. When writing an annual or multi-year communication plan, it is helpful to summarize or link to any relevant findings from that research in a few paragraphs at the beginning of the plan. This NSPRA Communication Audit Report, including the SCOPE Survey data, should be included in that research section.

Following are some additional data types

worth researching when creating a strategic communication plan and analyzing the situations (or opportunities) for the district that might be addressed through communications:

- 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>)

To get an accurate picture of how communication is currently integrated into district and school operations, determine all communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement activities currently happening in CCSD59. Include ongoing communication activities and tactics: managing website content, the *Weekly Staff Update* newsletter, building newsletters, social media postings, videos, parent and staff emergency notifications, news releases, crisis communication, etc. Also include the efforts of staff members to build relationships with internal and external

# #1

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

stakeholders, such as parent conferences, open house programs, news media relations and the work of the community outreach specialists. This will provide a realistic look at the scope of responsibilities and tasks assigned to the Communications Department.

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.

### Planning

Planning (P) is at the heart of the RPIE process. When approached strategically and methodically, it is where the communications road map (see page 39) will begin to come to life. A communication plan is primarily used as a guide for communications staff, but it should align with and ultimately support the aims of the district's five-year Strategic Plan.

Follow these steps to build out the plan:

- **Develop Measurable Objectives.** In the planning phase, CCSD59 will 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 objectives as desired outcomes, stated in a way that can be measured later, which builds trust by establishing accountability.

When developing objectives, make sure they are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound), meaning they state what needs to be changed, by whom, by how much and by when. Here is an example objective:

- **Sample Objective:** By the end of the 2024-25 school year, the percentage of parents and employees who strongly agree or agree that the district's communication is open and transparent will be 80 percent or higher.

- **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 other district and department leaders. It will also make it easier for communications staff to implement and evaluate for effectiveness. As an example with the previously provided sample objective, a strategy and its related tactics might include:

- **Sample Strategy:** Increase information access and transparency around decision-making processes (aka, [Recommendation 5](#)).

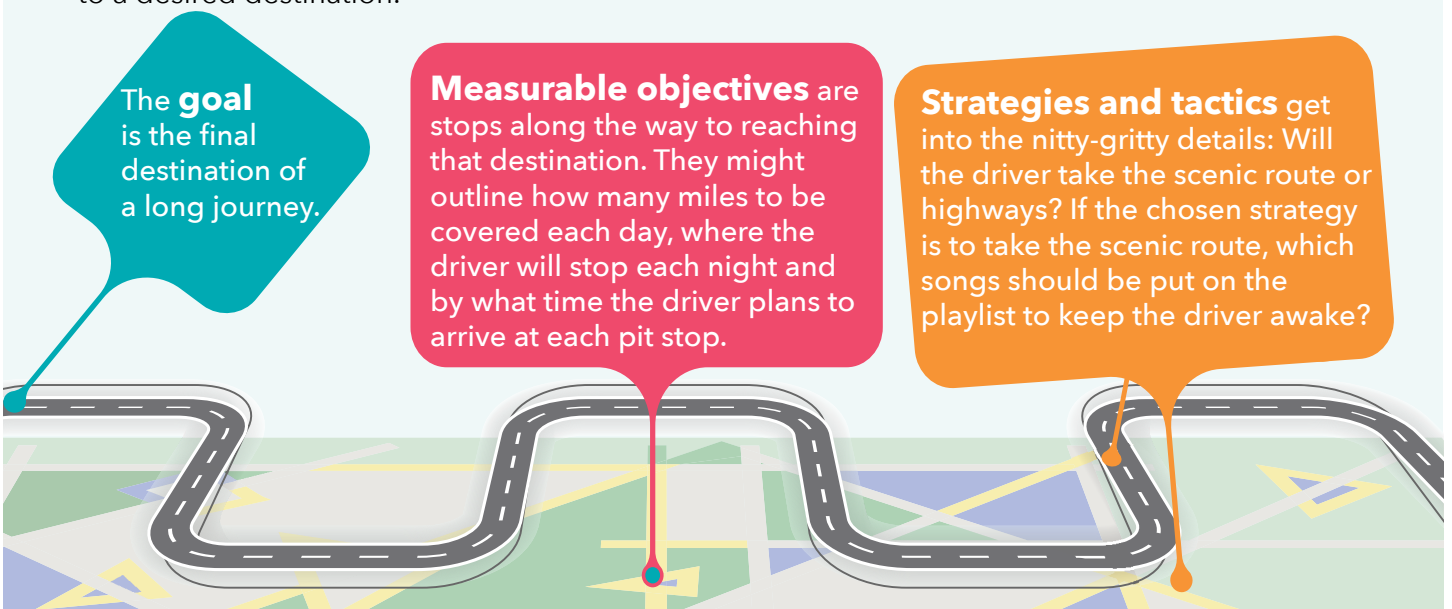
## Get on the Road to Achieving Communication Goals

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?



- **Sample Tactics:**
  - Give principals guidance on utilizing rounding conversations with staff to elicit input on topics that impact their work.
  - Create “What We Heard” features in district and school newsletters to highlight the status, results and next steps regarding recent public input requests.
- **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 are limited, so messages that are short, narrowly focused and repeated consistently have a better chance of being noticed and absorbed. For the strategy in the prior bullet, the following is an example key message:
  - **Key Message:** CCSD59 values our community’s support and welcomes their participation in decisions impacting the future of our schools.
- **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. The following are some common stakeholders for schools:
  - Parents broken down by grade levels (e.g., elementary and junior high school) or by another identifier (e.g., non-English speaking)
  - Employees sub-grouped into teachers, principals, administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals
  - Business and community partners such as civic and faith community leaders, vendors, scholarship providers and real estate agents
  - Elected officials, including local, state and federal legislators
  - Non-parents, including empty nesters, retirees and community members without children in CCSD59 schools
  - Media representatives from broadcast, print and digital outlets
- **Establish Tools and Tactics.** For each strategy and stakeholder group, identify the best tactics and tools for deploying communications. This type of information can be found in the [Key Findings](#) of this report and the SCOPE Survey for example.
 

Be sure to consider the needs of families whose primary language is other than English. Like many districts across the country, CCSD59 is experiencing an increase in students whose first language is not English. In addition to the built-in translation options available through CCSD59’s website and emergency notification systems, consider using contracted translation services to increase the availability of translated materials. Examples of providers for this type of support include Alboum Translation Services (<https://alboum.com/>), Hanna Interpreting Services (<https://hannais.com/>) and Homeland Language Services (<https://homelandlanguageservices.com/>).

Consider also any resources that may need to be acquired or budgetary funds that may need to be assigned. Areas to be considered for expenditures in the communication plan might include:

  - Equipment, software and subscriptions
  - Materials and supplies
  - Printing and duplicating



- Print and digital advertising
  - Professional development
  - Contracted translation services
  - Additional staff
- **Set Timelines.** To ensure effective and efficient information delivery, 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, the plan should identify key times to take stock during the implementation phase to see if it needs modification.
  - **Assign Responsibility.** For each tactic, determine who will be responsible for deployment. Currently, the CCSD59 communication staff have well-defined responsibilities that will be refined to reflect this new plan. Also, keep in mind that responsibility for communication is not only the purview of the Communications Department. Other district leaders may need designated roles to reach communication goals.

As CCSD59 works through the planning process, ensure the following questions are addressed for every major initiative:

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

## Implementation

Implementation (I) may be the easiest and most enjoyable part of the 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. This phase, then, is basically when and how a plan is rolled out. During implementation, be sure to include regular points at which staff will review and discuss their roles in the various strategies and tactics of the communication plan rollout.

## Evaluation

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.

In addition to the overall communication plan for the district, project-specific communication plans should be developed whenever key issues or initiatives (e.g., finance proposals, boundary or schedule changes) need to be addressed or implemented. While these issue or topic-focused plans may not be as elaborate as the overall strategic communication plan, the same type of thoughtful RPIE process around key issues affecting the district is important.

NSPRA offers a number of resources that will help the CCSD59 Communications Department develop its strategic communication plan:

- Download a strategic communication plan template for audit clients at [https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/Com-Plan-Template-NSPRA.docx?ver=\\_uTy38UcQPNMSa8fuxJ16g%3d%3d](https://www.nspira.org/Portals/0/PR Resources Section/Samples and Resources/Com-Plan-Template-NSPRA.docx?ver=_uTy38UcQPNMSa8fuxJ16g%3d%3d).

- Watch the NSPRA PR Power Hour on “Simple Steps to Transform Your Communication To-Dos Into a Strategic Communication Plan” available on the association website in the members-only Samples and Resources sub-section on Strategic Communication Plans at <https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Strategic-Communication-Plans>. The webpage also contains communication plan templates, including one for use with a communication audit report.
- Review these NSPRA Gold Medallion Award-winning strategic communication plans for reference and inspiration:
  - Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program—<https://www.nspra.org/Portals/0/Awards%20Section/Award%20Winners/School%20Comms%20Awards/Gold%20Medallion/gm-low-pattonville-sd-year-round-communicationpdf?ver=HEgwT3my8cFJJ0vUwHOAIA%3d%3d>
  - Alexandria City (Va.) Public Schools Strategic Communications and Public Engagement Plan—<https://alexandriapublic.ic-board.com/attachments/dce41d87-af3a-4c04-8e3a-5a7b8d27d556.pdf>

### Action Step 1.2

#### Provide administrators and front-line staff with an overview of the communication plan.

On a daily basis, responsibility for the exchange of information extends beyond the official work of the Communications Department, so it is important to clarify others’ informal communication roles and the expected flow of information for administrative leaders and front-line staff, who regularly communicate with stakeholders.

The auditor recommends that the assistant superintendent for innovative learning and communication (along with the director of communications and design, when that position is filled) offer a meeting for administrators and front-line staff where they can be given an overview of the preliminary strategic communication plan and learn about and discuss their roles in its success. This also creates an opportunity to educate colleagues about the mission of the department and the connection between excellent communication and achieving district goals.

Periodically, the assistant superintendent for innovative learning and communication should utilize part of the Superintendent’s Leadership Team meetings to review the progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This focus will keep department staff and the administrative team energized on impactful communications work instead of becoming distracted with less impactful tasks. Another benefit of this review is helping administrators to understand why communications staff may sometimes have to say “no” to new projects or ideas that are less aligned with the strategic communication plan and/or beyond current communications staff capacity.

### Action Step 1.3

#### Provide regular strategic communication plan updates to the Board of Education.

When the new communication plan is finalized, as well as when annual changes are made, the document should be shared at school board and leadership meetings to highlight its major components and provide updates on progress. This ensures all district leaders are informed about communication strategies and activities. It also sends a clear message to all stakeholders that the district is serious about communication.

## Recommendation 2:

### Adapt communication practices to more effectively connect with different audiences.

Public relations is rooted in the desire to create greater understanding between an organization and its publics, and research is essential to treating those “publics” as unique audiences rather than a monolithic group. All communities are full of potential audiences for district and school communications, and each audience type has different needs, preferences and barriers. This was particularly true in CCSD59, where the auditor observed in several cases an interesting divergence in opinion between survey response averages and focus group feedback, as noted several times in the [Key Findings](#).

Districts that address the communication needs and interests of their larger audience groups while also seeking to understand and be mindful of the challenges experienced by smaller audience groups will find themselves in a position of high trust and respect. In many cases, overcoming a barrier for those smaller audiences also leads to a positive outcome for all potential audiences. The resulting goodwill is essential for a district when communicating later during an urgent or crisis situation.

CCSD59 received high ratings on topics related to its communication efforts from most survey respondents, but the following action steps offer ideas for addressing important concerns expressed by a smaller but still essential part of the audience for district and school communications.

## Action Step 2.1

Write content at no more than an eighth-grade reading level.



It has been said that “clear is kind,” and this holds true especially for the complex topics that often come up in school settings. When writing, consider who makes up the district’s general public: office workers, stay-at-home caregivers, factory workers, agriculture workers, entrepreneurs, doctors, accountants, elected officials, etc. To effectively communicate and engage with all of these disparate audiences, CCSD59’s communication must be written at a level that the vast majority of its stakeholders can easily understand.

According to the [National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#), approximately 43 percent of American adults have basic or below-basic literacy skills. In Cook County, literacy levels are below the state average with 55 percent of adults at or below level 2 literacy, according to the [Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#). With level 2 literacy being around the sixth-grade reading level, the auditor recommends that CCSD59 communications for the public be written at no more than an eighth-grade reading level.

Writing at an eighth-grade level is not about dumbing down writing; it’s about smarter writing, using concise and succinct words that don’t alienate readers or make them struggle to absorb the message. Take advantage of built-in readability features and apps for writing programs or online readability tools to evaluate draft content for district communications prior to a public release.

Creating easily understood content for all public-facing communication platforms is essential to conveying information effectively and engagingly.

## Action Step 2.2

**Create written content that captures the attention of the reader.**



Research conducted by the [Nielsen Norman Group](#) found that the average online reader comprehends only about 60 percent of the content they read. To improve the chances of your message getting through, avoid overly formal or technical language. Instead, use everyday language that readers can easily understand and connect with.

As relayed in the article "[Why You Should Write at an 8th Grade Reading Level for Everyday Readers](#)" on [Readability Formulas](#) (a free site for calculating reading levels), this can be achieved by:

1. Captivating your audience. Begin writing with a compelling question, an interesting fact or a relatable anecdote to grab readers' attention.
2. Using clear and concise language. Avoid unnecessary details or complex explanations. Get straight to the point.
3. Using visual aids and multimedia. Images, charts and diagrams help readers visualize concepts and make the information accessible and memorable, while videos and interactive content increase engagement.
4. Dissecting the information. Present information in smaller, digestible chunks. Use subheadings, bullet points or numbered lists to organize your content and help readers to follow along and comprehend the information.

Additional tips for creating understanding when sharing complex ideas include:

# #2

**Adapt communication practices to more effectively connect with different audiences.**

- Providing context and background. Before diving into the topic, explain to readers why the information is important and how it will impact them as a parent, employee or community member.
- Reinforcing key points. Repetition and reinforcement are essential for understanding and retention.

## Action Step 2.3

**Tailor key messages to specific audiences.**

To communicate effectively, a sender's words and symbols must mean the same thing to the receiver that they do to the sender. Unfortunately, education-ease uses lots of jargon and acronyms that are familiar to teachers and administrators but not to parents and community members. In addition to adapting strategies to an audience's needs and preferences for how communication happens, it is important to adapt messaging to the interests and existing knowledge of a specific audience.

Commonalities in communication are essential to understanding, and the district (or schools) can establish commonalities with an intended audience by keeping in mind not only what the district wishes to say but also to whom it is speaking and under what circumstances.

Carefully select and transmit for each audience the words and phrasing that are most likely to be received and understood in the manner in which they are intended. When writing communications for district and school websites, newsletters and social media, use familiar, memorable terms that will enable the target audience to quickly relate to and accurately grasp the meaning of the message.

### Action Step 2.4

#### Present facts and figures in an engaging, narrative manner where possible.

There is scientific evidence that most human beings have a better grasp of narrative than other styles of communicating information, that narrative delivers a clearer message to the majority of readers, and that readers prefer narrative presentations. Yet much of the information school districts provide to parents and the general community is often full of terms, facts and figures that can lead to confusion or appear overwhelming to someone who is not a professional educator.

Parents, staff and community members are more likely to remember the important facts that CCSD59 is presenting when they are presented within the context of a story, or narrative, rather than a list. In journalism, this might be what is considered writing “soft news” rather than “hard news,” but for school communicators, it is a powerful way to deliver key messages more memorably.

To build trust with the district’s diverse audiences, don’t assume that every narrative has to be about a positive topic.

Also, don’t be afraid to write in a way that stirs up emotion. Inspiring wonder, awe, happiness, sadness or even anger can lead to better engagement with a reader.

### Action Step 2.5

#### Prevent, monitor and prepare proactively for areas of potential confusion or misunderstanding.

When developing district communications on a complex or potentially controversial topic, take some time before a release to picture each potential audience for the communications. Consider, are there any points in the prepared message at which they might get confused about a detail or angry if they misunderstand something? Others might describe this as “walking in someone else’s shoes,” but for a writer, it means reading a message through someone else’s eyes.

This first activity is a proactive measure to prevent confusion and misunderstanding, but in case it may later prove unsuccessful, be sure to also monitor conversations about the topic among the target audiences on social media channels, on local media outlets and at community events. When possible, conduct brief polls on the topic with those key audiences. This will help CCSD59 leaders identify issues to be addressed through communications and determine whether concerns are those of just a few individuals, of many members of a key audience, of multiple audiences within the local school community, or possibly of unconnected individuals outside the local community.

For more strategies and advice for districts dealing with confusion and misunderstandings in a school community, review NSPRA’s recent report “From Distortion to Clarity: Empowering School Districts to Overcome False Information” at <https://www.nspira.org/News/new-nspira-report-explores-how-false-information-impacts-schools-and-students>.

## Recommendation 3:

### Enhance the district's website to increase stakeholder use and engagement.

A district's website is an integral part of promoting key messages that reinforce the school district's brand to both internal and external audiences. As the first point of contact for prospective students and families, it sets the tone, conveys the district's successes and defines its aspirations and goals. District websites are also a common information source for community members without children and for outside organizations such as the news media and business partners. As the initial gateway into the district, it is important for the website to express the district's personality while making information easy to find and accessible to all visitors.

The CCSD59 website is visually pleasant, mobile-responsive and generally accessible, but focus group participants were almost unanimous in their dislike of the current site, saying it is too difficult to find the information they want or that they feel is relevant. Another frequent complaint was the elevated reading level addressed in [Recommendation 2](#). Fewer than half of staff (41 percent) and parents/caregivers (49 percent) and fewer than a third of community members (27 percent) report relying on it at least weekly for information about the district, as noted in the [Key Findings](#). The only staff who indicated they frequently and consistently use the website are community outreach specialists, who use it to access the staff portal, the staff directory, the calendar of events and school supply lists, often for the families they are assisting.

While aesthetically pleasing and on-brand, the website has several challenges observed by the auditor, including the following:

- There is a high number of navigation and sub-navigation choices (100+) from the homepage for users to decide between when searching for information.
- The district and school websites rarely feature timely and engaging storytelling to educate the public about the exciting and newsworthy things happening in schools.
- Information on the websites is not kept up to date and not all forms are translated into Spanish, as noted by parents and staff.

Over time, almost all websites deteriorate in functionality, usefulness and accessibility as content is added by different people and visitors' preferences and needs change. School communicators are encouraged to use summer breaks for a thorough website review to ensure content is accurate and updated. When school district leaders start thinking about a design update or complete redesign to meet new website standards, it is vital to also identify content that can be eliminated and potential navigation changes based on the pages visitors go to most often and where they expect to find certain content. The following action steps are designed to help CCSD59 with either process.

#### Action Step 3.1

**Introduce new content and design features.**



There are some positive practices on the current website to expand on and some newer website communication tactics to try as the district looks to increase visitors to its district and school webpages. Try these tactics:

- **Use video on each school's homepage to communicate its unique personality.** The "Learning in 59" video on the district homepage provides a great overview of education in CCSD59. Consider making

school-specific videos for each school homepage that communicate the unique value and experience of an education at that particular school. This would be a time-consuming undertaking, which may be why the school sites all currently feature the districtwide “Learning in 59” video. The benefit of that time investment, though, would be found in helping each school to communicate its personality and better market itself to new families and prospective employees.

- **Expand the translation capabilities of the site.** With the increasing number of newcomers to CCSD59’s schools, consider adding Google Translate or another translation tool to the website for visitors who prefer languages other than English or Spanish. Also keep in mind that PDF forms and other documents linked on the site will not be translated by these services and will need to be provided in multiple languages. At the beginning of each school year, remind staff what documents are on the website, where they are located and what languages they are provided in.
- **Invite and spotlight user-generated content.** The level of engagement on CCSD59’s social media pages is higher than industry averages. Take advantage of that trend by inviting followers on the district’s social media pages to share their own photos of student activities for the district’s use in its communications. Credit their user-generated content when featuring it on the district and school homepages or elsewhere. UGC serves as visual testimonials and often enjoys an extra level of trust due to its authenticity.

## #3

### Enhance the district’s website to increase stakeholder use and engagement.

#### Action Step 3.2

#### Improve navigability and relevance through user testing and use of analytics.

A consistent observation by staff and parents in focus groups and on the SCOPE Survey was difficulty in finding needed information on the district website. Beyond the research captured in this communication audit report, it would be beneficial to do more website analysis by:

- **Conducting short user-experience activities to broaden the audience that is able to weigh in on website issues.** Share a link to the activity with parents, staff, students and the community via email, social media and the website. The following are two activities to consider:
  - Card sorting is a research method in which study participants place individually labeled cards (print or digital) showing different potential types of content into groupings that make the most sense to them.
  - Tree testing helps to evaluate existing or proposed new site structures by asking users under which navigation menu labels they would expect to find different items on the website.

- **Review at least quarterly the web analytics** that track the number of visitors to each page, how long they spend on the pages, which pages they visit most often and which pages they start on when visiting the site. Consider deleting or re-organizing pages receiving few visits, and if many visitors' landing pages are somewhere other than the district homepage, consider how best to get important district information in front of those visitors.
- **Aim to get visitors to the information they want in three clicks or less.** Once you understand what information is most important to visitors, develop navigation that focuses more on what users come to do (e.g., I want to... Enroll a student) than on what the district wants to post.

### Action Step 3.3

#### Explore options for improving the timeliness of website content maintenance.

While some departments may be able to update their departmental pages, most seem to have to go through the Communications Department to get changes made or to add information. School building staff also indicated they do not have access to update everything on their school site. This is a common practice in schools meant to maintain quality control on official websites, but with smaller communications teams, it can lead to a backlog of website updates due to insufficient staff time for monitoring and updating where needed. It is perhaps not surprising then that focus group participants noted that information on the website is often outdated.

In some districts, keeping web pages up to date is a full-time job, but when that's not possible, it's helpful to have other staff

trained and responsible for maintaining their department/school pages.

All staff with site or department webmaster responsibilities should receive initial training upon assumption of the duties and annual training to ensure they maintain the requisite knowledge and skills to fulfill their responsibilities. Regular website housekeeping efforts and protocols should be established so that web authors are alerted to outdated links and content. All staff members assigned to web work need sufficient time to attend to routine maintenance and updates and will need training to do it correctly.

In addition to regular updates, key areas of the district and school websites should be audited by Communication Department staff at least twice a year (in the summer and after the New Year) to ensure content is current, accurate and complete. The results of those internal audits should be communicated to the appropriate administrators and webmasters as part of the district's commitment to ensuring a useful and robust website.

### Action Step 3.4

#### Identify CCSD59's ideal district and school website features.



CCSD59 plans to continue to keep the district and school websites on the WordPress platform, but the navigation and content on these sites can be strategically enhanced by having communications staff answer these questions:

- Who are our primary audiences for the district website and the school websites?
- What are our objectives for each audience? What should they be able to do, know or believe by visiting the sites?



- What features should be kept, deleted or improved based on our analytics about current usage and the audit findings?
- How much staff time will be required for and can be devoted to making website enhancements?
- When the enhancements are complete, how will we know if we were successful?

For inspiration, it may be helpful to check out the Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) area of the NSPRA website dedicated to website resources for members at <https://www.nspr.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine> and a few recent award-winning websites such as the following:

- Issaquah (Wash.) School District website—<https://www.isd411.org>
- Edina (Minn.) Public Schools website—<https://www.edinaschools.org>

## Recommendation 4:

### Maintain a culture of two-way communication throughout the district and schools to build trust with constituents.

One theme in the focus groups and SCOPE Survey comments was a strong perception that information that comes from the district is meant only to inform, not to engage or solicit feedback. Meanwhile, in conversations with the auditor, district leaders (including school board members) made it clear that they do care very much about listening to and engaging with staff, parents and the community. The disconnect appears to arise at least in part because leaders have not articulated their commitment to two-way communication or created a specific communication plan for sharing this commitment with stakeholders.

Listening to stakeholders and truly honoring all voices builds trust and leads to consensus; whereas the perception that the district is not genuinely interested in the views of its constituents creates a lack of trust and leads to higher levels of controversy and reactivity.

The [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), an annual global survey of more than 32,000 respondents in 28 countries, covers a range of timely and important societal indicators of trust among businesses, media, government and NGOs. According to Edelman, "If you go into a crisis as a distrusted company [or organization], it takes only one or two negative stories for a person to believe negative news. If you go in as a trusted company, it takes only one or two positive stories for you to achieve belief. Trust is a protective agent, a facilitator of action."

Maintaining a culture of two-way communication cannot be accomplished by the Communications Department alone. It requires a commitment from leaders at all levels to

commit to and demonstrate that listening and responding are part of the CCSD59 culture. The following are action steps aimed at expanding opportunities for two-way communication within the CCSD59 community.

#### Action Step 4.1

**Be transparent about the outcome of the communication audit.**



Staff focus group participants felt they could provide key information to help administrators understand the implications of rolling out a new program or communicating a decision. Parents suggested that asking for input would make them feel heard and appreciated. Closing the communication loop with these individuals, who volunteered their time to offer feedback, is an important step in building trust and credibility.

Develop a clear plan for how the audit results will be communicated to focus group participants and others invested in the district and its schools. In the plan, include methods for telling stakeholders why the district conducted the audit, how it is taking the findings to heart and what the district's next steps will be in response to those findings. Be sure to include strategies that will allow stakeholders to be a part of the improvement processes through ongoing feedback.

Common tactics for sharing the outcome of a communication audit include presentations to a school board, sending emails to staff and focus group participants, posting information on the website, featuring brief articles in district and parent newsletters, and issuing news releases. Also, consider the following:

- Sharing and discussing the results at department and school staff meetings.
- Sharing and discussing the results during parent meetings.

- Sharing and discussing the results with non-English speaking parents during meetings hosted by district interpreters.
- Using a crowd-sourcing feedback tool such as ThoughtExchange so that feedback can be categorized and shared.

### Action Step 4.2

#### Develop an infographic to help employees understand and remember the importance of two-way communication.

To reinforce the responsibility of all staff to engage in two-way communications, develop and share a simple infographic that explains the difference between two-way and one-way communication. This might be done initially as a digital or print flier, but even better would be to share it in a setting that allows for discussion. The graphic might be posted as a colorful poster in employee break rooms, too.

Boston (Mass.) Public Schools shares a “A Model for One-Way and Two-Way Communication” handout with staff as a reminder to both listen and explain. View it at this link: <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib07/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/112/model%20for%20one-way%20and%20two-way%20communication.pdf>

### Action Step 4.3

#### Continue to develop and implement listening campaigns.

Listening campaigns can be useful for gaining feedback on particular issues and initiatives. They can also be developed as a general, ongoing strategy for maintaining two-way communication with constituents. The following are suggested topics for future campaigns:

## #4

### Maintain a culture of two-way communication throughout the district and schools to build trust with constituents.

- **Develop a listening campaign to dive deeper into specific stakeholder concerns identified in this communication audit.** The [Key Findings](#) focus mostly on stakeholders’ perceptions around communications, but that section also identifies some challenges related to perceptions of the district image. Consider holding a series of listening sessions designed to increase the district’s understanding of broader concerns brought forth through this audit, while demonstrating the district’s commitment to responding to those concerns.
- **Schedule a leaders listening community tour for the superintendent and other key administrators to meet with external stakeholders.** Identify opportunities to meet with diverse groups of constituents in places like public libraries, community centers, coffee shops, etc. Provide a structure for the conversations and increase the appeal for potential attendees by designating specific topics; a meeting with no clear purpose is a poorly attended meeting. For example, one session might focus on school safety and another might focus on student mental health and wellness. Make it clear that the purpose of these listening opportunities is to hear from stakeholders, not to make decisions or to solve individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

## Recommendation 5:

### Increase participation in and transparency around decision-making processes.

Building public confidence in the decision-making process of a school system is not without challenges, and struggles to ensure that all voices are heard are not unique to CCSD59. NSPRA's audits of school districts large and small often show that it is impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of all groups when school system leaders must make a decision that will impact multiple stakeholder groups with diverse and varying perspectives. Additionally, NSPRA auditors consistently hear from the parents, teachers and support staff in many districts that they feel their feedback is neither wanted nor considered, even when formally collected through surveys and community meetings.

However, decisions do not need to be seen as a zero-sum game. Districts that aim for public consent around decision-making processes avoid the perception of winners and losers. In other words, the goal is that all stakeholders affected by a decision are aware that the decision-making process was fair and reasonable, even if they don't like the outcome.

As noted in the [Key Findings](#), multiple focus group participants commented that "making a lot of noise" or showing up at a Board of Education meeting are the best ways to influence a decision because they feel they are not heard otherwise. The downsides are that such noisy debates can be unproductive, distracting, erode trust and drain staff time away from educational priorities. As a staff member said in one of the focus groups, "The vocal minorities are enabled, so it feels like the vocal minority drives us."

Increasing transparency around and building consent for the decision-making process itself can help minimize divisiveness even in a polarized environment. Once consent for the process is earned, supporters of the decision are more confident in their agreement and detractors are less motivated to fight the final decision because they understand why it was necessary, even if they don't like it.

The following action steps should be considered for making the decision-making processes in CCSD59 more transparent and participatory for more stakeholders.

#### Action Step 5.1

**Be clear and consistent about when leaders will involve stakeholders in the decision-making process.**



When deciding whether and how to include stakeholders in the decision-making process, keep these best practices in mind:

- **If a decision has already been made, do not ask for input from stakeholders.** When stakeholders perceive that district leaders have already decided on a direction for a particular issue, they feel their input does not matter and that they have been asked to provide input only to create the appearance of transparency.
  - Not all decisions require public input, but the more controversial a decision is likely to be, the more important it is for the district to involve stakeholders in the decision-making process.
  - If a decision is routine, innocuous or predetermined, due to mandates for example, it is less likely to require public input. Instead, focus on building understanding around the situation

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

- **Give public input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions.** Sometimes, school system leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, based on their intimate knowledge of the schools or their professional expertise. However, if they choose to seek input from stakeholders before finalizing the decision, and if that input favors a different solution or choice, they must truly listen to the input and consider the alternative options.
  - Research the alternative ideas and give feedback regarding what those ideas would actually cost to implement. Provide the costs of the district's preferred option for comparison, and help stakeholders see for themselves why that would be the best decision.
  - If the stakeholders' alternatives are not actionable, explain why and the rationale for the final decision.
  - Always be considerate of those who provide feedback, whether they represent a relatively small or large portion of the community.
- **Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input.** Confusion and frustration may arise if those asked to offer input mistakenly believe they are making the final decision. System leaders may be gathering the input to help make a more informed decision and may be considering a much wider scope of input beyond one particular group. To avoid confusion, clearly explain why input is being sought, how it will be used and who ultimately will make the final decision.

# #5

## Increase participation in and transparency around decision-making processes.

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### Action Step 5.2

#### Develop consistent systems for communicating pending decisions, identifying stakeholders who should provide input and creating strategies for reaching them.

The process of keeping stakeholders informed begins before the decision-making process has begun and continues during and after the decision is made. Consider incorporating these communication protocol questions into district and school leaders' discussions of major decisions:

- **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem and the specifics that stakeholders need to know about it.
- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem and how it will be presented to stakeholders.
- **How does this issue/problem affect different stakeholders?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district.

- **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue. They are the ones directly (or perceived to be directly) affected by it.
- **What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue?** Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or talking points.
- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.
- **What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue?** Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.
- **Who is the main spokesperson on this issue?** Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson with news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

### Action Step 5.3

**Engage employees in discussions of major decisions that may impact them.**



A participant in the employee focus groups stated, "Someone always needs to ask, 'Who does this impact?'"

By purposefully engaging employees, CCSD59 leaders will expand the ownership of change and contribute positively to employees' feelings of being valued team members. Their

input can be gathered informally through staff meetings and personal interactions as well as through formal surveys and polls. Conversations are particularly useful for giving those who will be directly impacted by a decision the opportunity to troubleshoot any unintended consequences of the change.

A simple way to seek employee input is through the practice of "rounding," which involves brief but intentional and personal conversations. It is a quick way to gather input from staff while building familiarity with issues and demonstrating that administrators care about staff members' input. As an example, pretend the Superintendent's Leadership Team is discussing an idea where staff input is needed to inform the decision:

- The Superintendent's Leadership Team develops two or three questions that would provide helpful staff insight into the issue.
- The Superintendent's Leadership Team asks principals and department supervisors to pose the questions to five staff members in their building or department.
- Principals and department supervisors share the responses with the Superintendent's Leadership Team for consideration in the decision-making process.

Again, 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. The same type of process could be used by the Board of Education so that they hear from more than the handful of parents or staff that speak at the school board meetings.

## Action Step 5.4

### Seek input and perspectives from a variety of constituents.

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

One of the challenges of effective engagement is broadening the voices included in any engagement process. It is tempting to go back to the same people who always respond when a request for input is made rather than to seek new and different voices from people who are otherwise less likely to get involved. However, with the goal of honoring all voices, it is important for CCSD59 to be intentional about who is invited to participate in its decision-making processes.

## Action Step 5.5

### Share progress updates and contributing data/factors throughout the decision-making process.

Create feedback loops that let stakeholders know the status and results of decision-making processes that invited their input.

This might look like “What We Heard” features in website articles, social media posts, videos or newsletters to highlight the status of and next

steps regarding recent public input requests. When sharing what district leaders heard:

- Include information on how stakeholders are, were or can be involved in the decision-making process as well as on how their input has been or will be used.
- Thank those who participated in the input process, remind them of the general areas in which they provided feedback, share a few notable findings, tell them where to find summary results if available online and let them know what will happen next in the decision-making process.
- Enhance how the data used in decision-making processes is shared with infographics and videos, as opposed to lengthy spreadsheets and charts, to explain the rationale for a decision in clear, easy-to-understand ways.
- Acknowledge that not all input may be actionable, but it still helps district leaders understand the public’s concerns.

Another simple way of assuring stakeholders that their voices have been heard is to graphically illustrate the results of a decision-making process, as in the “You Said., Changes Made...” example shown here: <https://x.com/sjmenefee/status/1627785580753960962>

When stakeholders see evidence of their input being valued—rather than simply being told that it is—they will also be more willing to answer future requests for input.

## Recommendation 6:

### Enhance internal communication efforts.

In 2015, a marketing group prepared a Strategic Communication Planning report for CCSD59 as part of the district's strategic planning process. That report found that overall, a slight majority of teachers and a slightly higher majority of non-teaching staff believed that communication between the district and staff was satisfactory. As shown on [page 18](#), the SCOPE Survey showed similar results, with approximately 75 percent or more employees strongly agreeing or agreeing with nine affirmative statements about the quality of communications in CCSD59. On the [SCOPE Scorecard](#), these results are at or above the national averages.

However, in employee focus groups, multiple participants shared concerns that relate to internal communications. Examples included not feeling they have input into decisions that impact them; observing a lack of accurate, consistent, timely messaging to employees across the system; a "need to know" communication philosophy that sometimes leaves out staff who feel they actually do need to know; and not hearing enough about the good things that are happening in the district.

While national and global research has shown that employees' job satisfaction rests on a variety of factors (salaries, benefits, wellbeing, opportunities for professional growth, acknowledgment by superiors, etc.), it has also found that effective communication programs positively impact employee engagement:

- A [2021 Workplace Culture Report](#) by SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, found that 59 percent of Americans credit effective communication with improving their workplace culture.

- In a study published in the October 2020 issue of *Public Relations Journal*, researchers found that, "Employee-centered communication that is characterized by listening, reciprocity, trust, appreciation of employee feedback and care of employee concerns during times of organizational change can help boost employee engagement."

Following are steps that can assist CCSD59 leaders at all levels in strengthening internal communications effectiveness, while promoting and continually reinforcing a culture of communication so all employees feel part of a united team and welcome their roles as informal ambassadors for the district.

### Action Step 6.1

**Increase staff awareness of district administrators' visits to schools and departments.**



It can be challenging in a district with so many buildings, but in-person visits to schools and departments by district administrators in a non-evaluative capacity, outside of press events, can be a great way to personally connect with employees. CCSD59 leaders report hosting meetings at individual schools at least two times a year. To build awareness of that effort, share a schedule of upcoming visits in the *Weekly Staff Update* and later highlight what administrators saw during their visits as well as any changes/improvements to be made as a result.

This will communicate the message that whether employees work at the district office or in one of the school buildings, all employees are vital to the success of CCSD59.

Focus group participants stated they would like to hear more good news stories about



CCSD59 students and staff, and these visits could be a great source of news ideas. Set aside a few minutes at each meeting of district administrators to share good news from the visits. The assistant superintendent of innovative learning and communication can bring back fresh story ideas to the Communications Department, so they can consider using them on social media or in a newsletter.

### Action Step 6.2

**Consider expanding the audiences included in staff communications.**



A frequent observation among the non-administrative staff focus groups was that information was not always made available to all those who need it. Similarly, other staff members shared that while the *Weekly Staff Update* features lots of useful information, they are not getting enough information that is directly relevant to their jobs. Some staff in the focus groups believe there are still department newsletters circulating and that not everyone who needs the information receives them, though communications staff shared that the *Weekly Staff Update* is the only staff newsletter.

A reminder may be needed to department leaders, whether that is about not sending individual department-level newsletters if it is still happening or about ensuring their staff are aware that the *Weekly Staff Update* is the only staff newsletter circulated.

In addition, both department and school leaders should make it a habit to consider which staff might be indirectly effected by information or asked questions about it once the information is shared. It is natural to focus communications on those most directly effected, but to avoid leaving other staff who perceive themselves to also be effected out of the communication loop:

## #6

### Enhance internal communication efforts.

- Post a copy of the *Weekly Staff Update* in employee break rooms and on the staff intranet so that even if an employee overlooks the information, they are easily able to encounter or access it.
- If possible using the district's current platform, tag communications on the intranet by topic, and allow employees to indicate topics of interest so that chosen content is provided on a customized landing page for each employee at login.
- When issuing more informal department or school staff updates via email, use email subject lines that make it clear who will benefit most from reading the information. (Think, "Calendar Changes for Elementary Staff" versus "Update from Administration.")

### Action Step 6.3

**Clearly define the communication roles and expectations of administrators.**

While the Communications Department has specific responsibilities for planning, coordinating and managing the dissemination of information through the district's primary communication channels, the effectiveness of a comprehensive communication program hinges on the active buy-in of all administrators. These education leaders are essential partners to formal communications staff in building a system-wide culture of communications.

All CCSD59 district, department and building-level leaders should be able to articulate their communication roles and have collaborative relationships with the Communications Department. Following are some simple methods to define and build understanding about administrators' roles and expectations as partners in communication.

- **Regularly remind administrators who should share what information and how.** Consider using a chart, such as the one on [page 59](#), to clearly define communication roles and responsibilities for administrators. By clarifying their responsibilities and ensuring communication activities are aligned with the strategic plan and integrated at all levels, the district can connect more directly with parents and community members while also strengthening internal trust and engagement among employees. The Communications Department can best support administrators in their communication roles for major initiatives by providing them with toolkits that include key messages, talking points, templates and tips for sharing information.
- **Promote a consistent process for how key information is to be shared at the building and support staff levels.** Throughout the focus group sessions, staff members reported significant differences in how they get information, depending on their work location and supervisor. The Superintendent's Leadership Team should work closely with the communications team to clarify the process for internal communications, to identify which communication tools are preferred for which situations, and to set expectations for the timeliness of sharing information. It may be helpful to incorporate check boxes for "FYI," "to be shared" and "confidential" to agenda items, so everyone leaves a meeting knowing who is supposed to communicate what and when. Consider also producing a communications guide for administrators like the Administrators Guide to Communications and Public Relations at <https://bit.ly/3uoCe8J> or the Communication Guide for School-Based Administrators at <https://bit.ly/4a0z0ZF>.
- **Reconsider who is notified in an urgent situation.** In the focus group with school building office managers, there was frustration expressed about how some information—such as notifications of lockdowns—is sent only to the building principals, who may not be in the building, and the office managers have no idea what is going on. Consider these types of scenarios when determining whom to share information with in an emergency.
- **Determine the best times to send information to internal stakeholders.** When planning communications, be mindful of employees' schedules and when they might not have easy access to their email or smartphone. While the district is consistent in when the *Weekly Staff Update* is sent out, other messages may be missed or be perceived as being sent at different times to different employee groups due to the time of day they are delivered.
- **Structure messages for efficient reading.** Employee focus group participants also referenced feeling that important information is "buried" in lengthy emails, including in the *Weekly Staff Update*. A simple solution is to start such messages with a quick summary listing major topics to be covered in a given email, then expand on the topics on a linked webpage or later in the email for those wanting more information.

Staff Position	Type of Information to be Communicated	Communication Channel(s) Used
Communications Department	District-level updates on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine matters that impact more than one school</li> <li>• Urgent matters that impact any school</li> <li>• Major division-wide initiatives</li> <li>• Staff and student stories that illustrate the district’s mission, vision and goals</li> </ul>	District-level tools for internal and external audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emails</li> <li>• Automated messages</li> <li>• Text messages</li> <li>• Website</li> <li>• Print/digital newsletters</li> <li>• Social media</li> <li>• Videos</li> <li>• News releases to media</li> </ul> Tool kits for administrators
Superintendent	Board decisions and policy changes	Email/phone/in-person responses to community members’ inquiries Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Superintendent’s Administrative Assistant	Board meeting agendas, minutes, extras/action briefs Board policy changes	Board webpages
Assistant Superintendent of Instruction	Academic/curriculum updates and changes	Curriculum webpages Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Assistant Superintendent of Business Services	Budget and finance updates Bond/capital project updates	Business office/budget webpages Facilities project webpages, e-newsletter Emails to staff Staff, board and community meetings
Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources	Employee benefits and resources Job openings Compensation-related items	HR webpages Emails to staff Administrative and staff meetings Board meetings
Principals	School-level updates on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School-specific routine matters</li> <li>• School-specific urgent matters</li> <li>• Major district-wide initiatives (using tool kit provided)</li> </ul>	School-level tools for internal and external audiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emails</li> <li>• Automated messages</li> <li>• Text messages</li> <li>• Website</li> <li>• Print/digital newsletters</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>

## Recommendation 7:

### Support standardized parent communication practices across schools and departments.

There is a lot of competition for parents and other caregivers' time and attention, between their children's activities, work, household chores, family recreation, social media and more. NSPRA auditors have found that among parent focus groups, a consistent theme today is their sense of being overwhelmed by trying to keep up with school news along with everything else on their to-do list. They want to know about and support their children's education, but they also want school communications to be brief, tailored to their unique needs and interests, and easy to access and digest.

CCSD59 parents report that one of the most frustrating aspects of school communications is the inconsistency between their children's schools and teachers. In the focus groups, they recited long lists of apps and notification systems used in schools (e.g., SeeSaw, Skyward, ClassDojo, Google Classroom, Bloom, Google Talk, Kaymbye) and explained how unmanageable that is when a parent has more than one child in different schools.

Addressing these issues often starts with standardizing parent communication processes throughout a school system by:

- Establishing a framework for school communications based on best practices.
- Implementing the framework through guidance, templates and regular training.
- Ensuring consistent application of the framework as families move through the K-8 experience.

When parents know what communications to expect and when, and if they can easily

see that the communications applies to them personally, they are more likely to consume communications coming from teachers, schools and the district. Establishing and enforcing districtwide guidelines for parent communications and offering staff professional development in this area will reduce parents' frustrations and lead to more well-informed and engaged families.

#### Action Step 7.1

**Streamline and standardize the use of automated notification systems for parent communications.**



Begin to streamline and standardize parent 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, teacher apps, text messaging systems, e-newsletters, print newsletters, paper flyers, etc.—along with their recommendations to retain or replace each tool.

Then convene a small review committee—with sample representatives of teachers, parents (including English and Spanish speaking), school-level administrators, community outreach specialists, and technology and communications staff to review the principals' 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 list of communication tools recommended for use by

teachers and schools. The recommendations should take into account 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. In these discussions, keep in mind that some families in the district reported that they rely on WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger for communications.

The list of recommendations should be shared with district leadership to make the final determination of which tools are endorsed and can be supported for use districtwide.

### Action Step 7.2

#### Annually review communication expectations for teachers and establish a common framework for parent communications.

In CCSD59 and nationwide, a common parent complaint involves a perceived lack of timeliness and consistency in teachers keeping student information systems current. These days, almost all teachers communicate in some way with parents, but there can be significant inconsistencies among teachers, grade levels and schools.

According to parent and teacher focus group participants, formal expectations around communications with parents do not exist in CCSD59, so consider convening a small committee of teachers, parents (English and Spanish-speaking) and administrators to identify and recommend communication expectations. Those expectations should balance meeting the needs of most parents with maintaining a reasonable workload for teachers. The committee's recommendations should be shared with district leadership to make the final determination of official expectations. Establishing clear expectations will not completely eliminate inconsistencies, but it will

## #7

### Support standardized parent communication practices across schools and departments.

go a long way toward reducing inequities in parents' communication experiences.

After the review of parent communication tools, develop a guidance document that details which tools are preferred for which buildings/grade levels, how frequently (or infrequently) they should be used, which general situations are appropriate for their use, and where to turn for assistance and/or training. Thoughtful, consistent use of a select set of tools will increase the likeliness that messages are read because, while different parents prefer to access information differently, no parent wants to receive the same message seven ways in the same day.

Following is additional content to consider incorporating into the guidance document.

- Offer general formatting tips to maintain good readability.
- Share approved sources of royalty-free visual content that won't violate copyright.
- Provide templates or examples for the most commonly occurring school-to-parent or teacher-to-parent messages.
- Summarize any relevant school board policies, state regulations or federal laws that govern the use of such tools.
- Provide links to additional communication guidance documents, such as the district's style/brand guide.

- Include data on parent communication preference, as captured by the SCOPE Survey results.

Discuss this guidance with school principals and department chairs and ask them to review it annually during back-to-school staff/department meetings. Find an example of this type of guide in Osceola (Fl.) School District's guide on "[When to Use What Communications Platform](#)," available in NSPRA's online Samples and Resources (Gold Mine) section on training (<https://www.nspra.org/PR-Resources/Samples-and-Resources-Gold-Mine/Training-Administrators-Board-Members-Staff>).

### Action Step 7.3

**Ensure all parents/caregivers have the opportunity to choose to receive school communications.**

When looking into the various apps to communicate with parents/families, select apps that allow for messages to be sent to more than one phone number or one email per student. Parents in CCSD59 want to be informed about their child's progress, events at their schools and how to support their child. By not limiting the number of parents/caregivers that can access or receive messages, CCSD59 will show its commitment to communications and willingness to partner with families on their students' education.

## Recommendation 8:

### Enhance school board communications and outreach.

School boards represent the community's interests as elected officials, but they are also charged with acting on behalf of and in the interests of students, schools and the school district. This sometimes places a school board in between competing interests. The CCSD59 Board of Education faces this strain, like other boards, and has also experienced a full board turnover during the last four years, pressure from what seems to some audiences to be a small but vocal group of parents, and heated responses to some recent decisions and initiatives.

Supporting the board in being a part of the two-way communications culture of CCSD59 may not change opinions about governance decisions, but it can help build and maintain community support for and trust in the governance process. The following action steps offer ideas for how the board can strengthen community relationships through its communications, at times with support from the Communications Department.

#### Action Step 8.1

### Review and update board policies on communications.

Official communication policies demonstrate a school board's commitment to transparency, responsiveness and engagement with stakeholders. CCSD59 includes communications in [Board Policy 8.10: Public Relations](#) (last revised June 2020) and [Policy 2:140: Communications To and From the Board](#) (last revised September 2019) as well as in the district's core values and strategic plan. To ensure the policies align with the board's communication philosophies and commitments today, it is recommended that both policies be

reviewed and updated in light of the findings and recommendations of this report.

Board communication policies take many forms and can be tailored to the specific needs of a school community. It is generally advised, though, to contain a statement of purpose for communications followed by board expectations for the actions of the school board and staff, and to outline what information stakeholders can expect from the district. In conjunction with a strategic communication plan ([Recommendation 1](#)), such policies clarify the district's commitment to ongoing, proactive communication.

The Illinois Association of School Boards (<https://www.iasb.com/>) likely has sample communications policies, but the following is example text for a board policy establishing communication as a priority in CCSD59.

#### Communications and Public Relations

##### I. PURPOSE

- Effective communications and public relationships are essential for the success of CCSD59 as a public entity. The purpose of this policy is to ensure effective, results-oriented communications with a goal of increasing awareness, understanding, interest in, and support for the students, staff, programs and goals of the district—a learning community whose mission is to provide the skill, knowledge and experiences that will prepare students to be successful for life.

##### II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

- The Board of Education is committed to providing factual, honest, accurate and timely information and engaging stakeholders in the mission of the district.
- The Board of Education directs the administration to implement a communications and public engagement program with the goal of stimulating

understanding of the goals, needs and accomplishments of the organization in fulfilling its mission for students.

- The Board of Education understands the district's communication program can only be effective if everyone in the organization accepts responsibility for communicating effectively, building relationships, marketing the organization, and serving as ambassadors of the district as they meet and greet people during their daily work.

### III. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- The Board of Education is responsible for ensuring a planned and effective two-way communications and public relations program. The Board of Education authorizes the expenditure of public funds to support communication goals.
- The Board of Education delegates to the superintendent the development and coordination of a public relations and communications program in accordance with Board of Education policies.
- The responsibility for effective building level or department level communications lies with the principal or department supervisor.
- All school employees serve as representatives of the schools during their daily work. Employees have a responsibility to communicate accurately and effectively about their school, the district or issues within the realm and scope of their professional responsibility. District employees should make appropriate efforts to be knowledgeable about the district, its programs, services, accomplishments, challenges, plans and priorities.

### IV. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- The school district's public relations and communications efforts will:



## Enhance school board communications and outreach.

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- Encourage formal and informal communications;
- Be a planned, systematic flow of information among school employees, parents and community members;
- Provide clear channels for individual and public inquiry, input, feedback and resolution when ideas, questions or problems arise among students, staff, parents and community members.
- Be guided by the pursuit of truth, accuracy and fairness. Incorrect information shall not be released intentionally, and unintentional release of incorrect information shall be rectified immediately upon discovery.
- Protect and respect the privacy of students, families and employees. Students and staff private data shall not be released, except as provided by law or by other board policy.
- Use positive, inclusive language and personalized communication.
- Leverage appropriate communication technologies to efficiently and effectively engage stakeholders.
- Strive for openness in decision-making, provide appropriate access to public information, and respect the First Amendment, the ideal of free inquiry and the opinions of others.
- Ensure all major change initiatives or new programs have a written communication plan.



## Action Step 8.2

### Show board members engaged in schools on the board webpage.



The [Board of Education's webpage](#) invites questions; provide board members' photos, bios, terms and contact information; and links to policies and meeting schedules, agendas and minutes. It is a streamlined page found in the main navigation menu under About. The district homepage also devotes considerable real estate to "Board Updates" on meetings in the District News section.

There is clear and regular evidence of the governance work of the board throughout <https://www.ccsd59.org/>, but the auditor was unable to find storytelling components that could humanize the board and help constituents to feel more personally connected to its members.

Make a plan to capture photos and videos of board members visiting schools, interacting with staff and students, and performing other board-related duties out in the wider school community. Look beyond the formal board meetings for storytelling opportunities that show board members' engagement in local education. Then feature some of those stories on the board webpage, the district homepage and district social media.

## Action Step 8.3

### Offer informal opportunities for dialogue between board members and the public.

When the public interacts with school board members in informal settings, it can build trust in elected officials and lead to greater support for education initiatives. While the Board of Education meetings are live-streamed and watched by many parents and staff, the auditor

heard from several stakeholders that they would like the opportunity to connect with board directors outside of school board meetings.

Consider having a board member join the superintendent and other administrators for the leaders listening community tour suggested in [Action Step 4.3](#) or have some board members host coffee and conversation opportunities prior to school events or PTO meetings. Some school systems have each board member "adopt a school" (or two) to pay extra attention to each year for attending events.

The Mountain View Whisman School District in California earned a 2023 Award of Merit from NSPRA for its [campaign to promote civic engagement with the school board](#). Consider developing a brief video on "Connecting with the Board," similar to the one by MWSD at <https://vimeo.com/657925306>.

## Action Step 8.4

### Develop a Board Academy for potential candidates.

Build board relationships with administrators and the schools early by preparing potential candidates at the start of the election filing period. Set aside a Saturday morning or weeknight to hold a Board Academy for anyone eligible and interested in running. Educate candidates about election laws and filing timelines, provide factual school information as candidates begin campaigning, and help them understand the responsibilities and time required for board service.

The academy could include presentations by the current board president, superintendent, key leadership team members and those who oversee district elections. A board member could outline the duties and time commitment of serving. Candidates could be given binders with the presentations and all election information, but be sure to allot time for questions and answers.

## Recommendation 9: Increase non-English speakers' access to translated district and school communications.

CCSD59 has a diverse school community: More than 60 percent of students identify as races other than white, 46 percent of the student population are considered English language learners, and more than 60 languages are spoken by students and their families.

The district translates most materials into Spanish and some into Polish, but in the last two years, there have been 600 newcomers to the schools, with many coming from Russia, Ukraine and Venezuela. This is increasing the challenge and the demand for translated communications that engage all students' families.

Meeting this challenge will require more than staff time and resources from the Communications Department, and in many respects, it goes well beyond the purview of a communications-focused audit. However, NSPRA offers the following action steps for consideration as CCSD59 works to communicate with its increasingly diverse students and families.

### Action Step 9.1

**Expand the placement locations for communications to non-English speaking audiences.**



As the Communications Department develops its strategic communication plan (see [Recommendation 1](#)), be sure to explore the available national research on new methods to better connect with various racial, ethnic and cultural groups.

For example, radio is consistently the most-used tool for media consumption among Hispanic and Latino individuals of all ages, according to the Hispanic Marketing Council's [2023 market guide](#). Based on that data, CCSD59 might compile a list of local non-English radio stations and develop targeted, translated news releases and public service announcements—in ready-to-use audio file and print form—to share with those outlets.

As more newcomers move into the area, be sure to also expand the placement of physical communication materials such as posters and brochures to include neighborhood religious centers, community organizations and employers in agricultural and industrial areas.

### Action Step 9.2

**Develop website landing pages customized for Spanish, Polish and Russian speakers.**

The district and school websites include Spanish language translation features, but give consideration to also developing website landing pages designed specifically to appeal to the interests of current and prospective students and families who speak a primary language other than English.

These pages should be customized, not just translated, and contain photos and content that addresses the topics and issues likely to be of greatest interest to the specific population, particularly if they are newcomers to the area or to the United States. For example, the content might include information about district and school policies, programs, services and events specifically for that language population as well as content developed in collaboration with members of the community on what to expect when a child moves up a grade level and/or to a new school building, how parents can get involved in their child's school and connect with

fellow parents, major ways in which the CCSD59 school environment might differ from that of their home country, etc. Such a page would also be a great place to feature news items spotlighting students and families from that specific population.

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

- ¡Usted forma parte del Distrito 196!, District 196, Rosemount, Minn.—<https://www.district196.org/espanol>
- Adiga ayaa Ka Tirsan Degmada 196!, District 196, Rosemount, Minn.—<https://www.district196.org/somali>

### Action Step 9.3

**Ensure staff know how to access current translation/interpretation services and build community awareness of the need for more such services.**

Provide at least annual reminders to administrators, teachers and support staff of the various translation/interpretation services available and how best to deploy these services. It was apparent in the focus groups that staff sometimes tap employees with language skills but who are not trained as interpreters to act as translators. This is understandable when there are limited translation/interpretation resources, but it may present problems for the district if the information being translated is confidential or if the employee interpreting and the parent don't speak the same dialect.

Districts like CCSD59 with large populations of students and families who have difficulty reading, writing and/or understanding English often struggle to meet the demands for live translators during parent-teacher meetings, on phone calls, during registration events and

## #9

### Increase non-English speakers' access to translated district and school communications.

information nights, and when parents drop by school offices unexpectedly.

While CCSD59 does have some interpreters and provides Pocketalk devices, it is possible those resources may not be fully meeting the schools' needs for translated communications.

Consider spotlighting the services currently provided and the growing need for translated communications in videos and articles shared with parents and the wider, taxpaying community to start building understanding and support for future budget investments in this area. It is worth considering hiring a second translator for supporting communication efforts or using more contracted translation services like Alboum Translation Services (<https://alboum.com/>) and Hanna Interpreting Services (<https://hannais.com/>) to help increase the availability of translated materials.

# Appendix

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# Focus Group Discussion Questions

## All Participants

1. What do you perceive as CCSD59's overall strengths as a district?
  - 1a. What are the areas needing improvement?
2. Do you ever use the district's website to find information?
  - 2a. What kind of information are you looking for?
  - 2b. Is it easy to find the information you are searching for? If not, why?
  - 2c. (Follow-up for parents) How often do you use your child's schools website and what kind of information are you looking for?
3. When district leaders make important decisions that will affect you (or your student,) do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
  - 3a. What makes you feel that way?
  - 3b. If not, how would you like to provide your input?
4. What types of information or topics do you want the district to share with you?
  - 4a. What is the best method or way to get that information to you?
5. What is the best way for you to engage with/or have CCSD59 engage with you?
6. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing CCSD59?

## Additional Questions: Staff

1. How can the district's communications staff best support you in your role?
2. As an employee, do you receive the information you need and in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job as an ambassador for the schools/district?

# What Is NSPRA?

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

NSPRA members:

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Join NSPRA

To join this vibrant, national association and reap the benefits of being an NSPRA member, visit [www.nspra.org/membership](http://www.nspra.org/membership).

# Audit Team Vitae

## Carol Fenstermacher, APR

### Lead Consultant Auditor

Carol Fenstermacher, APR, is the owner of FenstermacherPR. She retired from the Centennial School District in Portland, Oregon, in 2021, after serving eight years as the district's chief communications officer.



Prior to Centennial, she worked in the Evergreen School District in Vancouver, Washington, for 14 years as the director of community relations. Carol also worked for the City of Portland as a communications specialist, the Portland Rose Festival Association as the community relations director, and United Way of Columbia-Willamette as the assistant vice president of communication and marketing.

A member of NSPRA since 1999, Carol has served on the Executive Board Search Committee, School Communication Benchmarking Project Team and the Communication Equity and Diversity Task Force. She was the Northwest Region vice president from 2012-2015 and NSPRA president in 2018-19. She served on the boards of the Washington School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) and the Oregon School Public Relations Association (OSPRA).

Carol received her accreditation in public relations (APR) in 2004. She has served on a wide variety of boards, including the local Habitat for Humanity, DePaul Treatment Centers, Oregon Repertory Singers, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), KBPS Public Radio, the Oregon Chapter of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and Women in Communications, Inc., where she

was president of the Portland Chapter and the international president in 1994-95.

## Mellissa Braham, APR

### NSPRA Associate Director

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



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

## Naomi Hunter, APR

### NSPRA Communication Surveys Manager

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



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

**Alyssa Teribury**

*NSPRA Communication  
Research Manager*



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

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



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