

# ***NSPRA's***

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## **Communication Audit Report Executive Summary**

***Prepared for the***

***Blaine County School District  
Hailey, Idaho***

***September 2010***

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## Introduction

### Goal of the communication audit

Blaine County School District possesses a strong reputation as an outstanding school district. The district is clearly seen as a “destination district” – a district selected by families because of its excellent education programs. While the current funding levels allow Blaine County Schools to offer many programs for students not offered by most other Idaho school districts, the district’s outstanding reputation extends well beyond its budget. It is described as a district that posts consistently strong student achievement results and offers students numerous opportunities to learn. It is a district that is sought after by prospective employees because it is a place where people want to work. It is a district that has shown great progress and success with educating its increasingly diverse student population. It is a district that has achieved many great accomplishments and has the vision and plan to achieve even more in the future.

The Board of Trustees and Dr. Lonnie Barber, superintendent, recognize the value and importance of effective communication and are committed to enhancing and improving the relationship between the schools and the communities served by the district. Dr. Barber, the Board, administrators, principals and others are doing great things to communicate and engage with stakeholders. This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the Board and superintendent. It clearly demonstrates a willingness to identify and address communication challenges that are present in Blaine County Schools. The Board and Dr. Barber are to be commended for contracting for the communication audit and for allowing staff members, parents and community members to assist in this process. Focus group participants shared ideas for improvement, but were also quick to point out the many positive aspects of the district.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of parents, community members and district employees, it was obvious to the auditor that there is tremendous pride in the schools and a willingness to support the district’s quality educational programs. At the same time, focus group participants openly provided many suggestions for how the district can improve in the future. Focus group participants helped to identify issues that need attention and then offered positive, productive ideas for addressing these issues.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to assess current communication efforts and offer recommendations to improve the planning and management of community relations, expand marketing efforts, and enhance two-way communication and engagement strategies with all Blaine County Schools’ stakeholders.

The findings and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district administration, Board of Trustees, schools or departments, they are intended to improve communication in a school district that is committed

to excellence and to offering highly-performing schools capable of meeting the challenges of educating students in the 21st Century.

## **Opinion research as a foundation**

A communication audit of Blaine County Schools provides an important foundation for developing a strategic communication plan for the district. The audit informs district leaders about community and staff perceptions and the effectiveness of current communication efforts and offers recommendations to expand, enhance, and improve the communication program. The audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

## **Scope and nature of the study**

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of 11 focus groups representing a variety of the district's internal and external stakeholders. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The sessions were approximately one hour in length and were held April 14-15, 2010, with the following groups:

- Parents (four groups)
- Business/Civic Leaders
- Senior Citizens/Empty Nesters
- Teachers
- Office Personnel and Support Staff
- Principals
- District Administrators
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## Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school district to view its communication program from an “outside” perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit was Bob Noyed, APR. His vita is included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in an NSPRA Communication Audit occurs when the district submits samples of materials used to communicate with various audiences (i.e., publications, reports, surveys, etc.). The auditor also reviews the district and school websites. These materials and websites are all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditor reviews demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, marketing materials, news clippings, and other information provided by the district.

The core of the communication audit is the on-site focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the school district’s internal and external stakeholders. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of current communication programming in Blaine County Schools;
- Solicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of district communications; and
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and improving the management of public relations, marketing, communications and engagement activities in Blaine County Schools.

Following the review of materials and focus group comments, the auditor prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies Blaine County Schools can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve its overall communication program. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, and Associate Director Karen H. Kleinz, APR.

## Guiding Definition

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However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an organization and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of a communication audit. Improvement is impossible unless input is gathered on what may need to be changed.

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist the district in its efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

## **Recommendations**

In response to the key findings, this report contains recommendations for improving communication with internal and external stakeholders in Blaine County School District. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around the country.

## **Supportive Quotes**

The auditor took notes in each focus group session, but assured participants that their comments would be reported on anonymously and not attributed directly to them. Consequently, the focus group summaries are a synopsis of what was said by participants in each group. Some comments are direct quotes, while others are paraphrased for clarity. Any direct quotes will appear inside quotation marks, without personal attribution.

## **Copies to participants**

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop in order to build trust and credibility, we recommend that each focus group participant receive a copy of the executive summary for review and feedback.





## Key Findings and General Observations

As a result of reviewing the materials provided by Blaine County Schools and conducting on-site focus groups, the following key findings and general observations were noted by the auditor, in no particular order:

### General Communication Issues

- Many focus group participants noted that while most information about the district is available on the website or via other sources, parents, staff members and community members often have to seek the information out for themselves.
- Several focus group participants cited the need for the district to find more ways to “toot its own horn” and to share the many good things happening in the district. Participants felt it was important to spread the “good news” because there are so many positive things happening in the district.
- Many focus group participants noted the need for the district to share information about the reasons behind decisions and to provide information on an ongoing basis so stakeholders know the status of issues.
- Several focus group participants noted the need for the district to communicate more about how it is using its financial resources. Participants were interested in knowing how the quality of education in the district relates to the amount of taxes that come from the community.

### Sources of Information

- Many focus group participants cited “word of mouth” and “local newspapers” as significant sources of information about the district. While the “district’s website” was cited by numerous participants, a large number of people seem to be getting information about the district from outside sources.
- The “Partners in Education” publication inserted into the local newspaper is seen as informative and a good way to communicate with residents without kids in school. It was suggested by several participants that the frequency of this publication or something similar be increased. Participants appreciated the district’s efforts in sharing information with the community.
- Because many people in the district rely on “word of mouth” as a significant way to get information about the district, there is a tendency for rumors to spread quickly. According to several focus group participants, it is at times difficult to know what is true and what is rumor because communication from the district does not combat rumors.

### Electronic Communication Issues

- Most focus group participants identified the school district’s website as an effective form of communication and gave the site high marks for its content, organization and ease of

navigation. This is a highly effective communication tool and is a great source of information for the community.

- The recent implementation of live webcasting of Board meetings was seen as a very positive step by most focus group participants. Participants noted that it demonstrates a positive effort by the superintendent and Board to reach out to the community.

### **Internal Communication Issues**

- There is an “information gap” between employees and the district office. There is a need for the district to increase the flow of information directly to staff members.
- Staff members described the need for more opportunities for dialogue and face-to-face contact with district leaders. More interaction would allow staff members to share input and feedback, which would work to build trust between staff members and district leaders.
- Employees in the focus groups noted that principals are out of their buildings too often, which makes building-level communication and work flow more challenging. They also noted their desire for district leaders to be more visible in the schools and to connect with all types of employees.

### **Parent Communication Issues**

- Many parents in the focus groups cited the Skyward Family Access system as an outstanding way for them to connect with their child’s school and to see details about their child’s academic progress. This is seen as a very effective way to share information with parents.
- The district’s use of its text-messaging system was seen as an effective way to share information quickly with parents and community members. While generally used to share information related to emergency situations, several parents expressed an interest in expanding its use to share other types of information.
- The district has many effective strategies in place to communicate and connect with its increasing number of Hispanic families. Focus group participants favorably noted past efforts and cited the need for continued work in this area as the district’s demographics continue to evolve.
- The implementation of new programs such as International Baccalaureate should be seen as opportunities for the district to communicate with parents. Parents in the focus groups cited the need for ongoing communication about these programs so that they can be informed about what is offered.
- There is a concern among some parent participants about the process used to select parents to serve on district committees. The process is perceived to be closed and one where parent members are hand-picked by district administrators.

- The amount and timeliness of information posted on the Skyward Family Access system varies by teacher. This inconsistency creates challenges for parents because access to information about their student is often different, depending on the teacher.

### **Reputation and Engagement Issues**

- Blaine County School District has a reputation of being “progressive compared to other Idaho districts” and is known to be a well-funded district. At the same time, many people from outside of the area may not fully understand the diversity that exists in the district.
- There is a gap in trust between the Board of Trustees/district leaders and many of the district’s stakeholders. While some perceive it as improving compared to past years, there continues to be a need to improve communication and connections with both internal and external stakeholders.
- Both parents and staff members in the focus groups noted that the district may seek their feedback or input, but there is a sense that this information is not always incorporated into the decision-making process. There is also a need for the district to communicate to parents and staff members how their input makes a difference in decision-making.
- There is a sense by many focus group participants that while a small group of parents and citizens may be critical of the district and its process for making decisions, there is a large “silent majority” that has not been engaged in district conversations, but whose voices need to be heard. Many of these individuals have had many positive experiences with the district and have much to contribute to the schools.
- Participants have a positive view of the many opportunities provided for them to be involved in the district. Participants suggested that parents can be as involved as they want to be if they are willing to seek out opportunities.

### **Overall Issues**

- Blaine County Schools’ newly developed strategic plan is the product of extensive community engagement. The plan outlines a well-defined direction that will guide the district for several years.
- Many focus group participants noted that the greater use of technology to communicate with parents is isolating people who do not have regular access to computers and other technology. Continued attention to using a variety of communication tools will help the district stay connected to all parents.
- Many focus group participants noted that many residents perceive that the quality of education depends on which school students attend in the district. Participants also noted that schools may have different programs, but the quality of all schools is high even though the perception still exists.
- There is a sense among both internal and external stakeholders that Blaine County Schools needs a full-time communication/public relations director to help the district improve its

communication and public engagement activities. While the hiring of this position may not be possible given potential budget issues, it is positive that many participants are recognizing the value for the district in investing in such a position.

## Conclusion

The leaders of the Blaine County School District clearly realize the value of taking a comprehensive approach in communicating and connecting with stakeholders. The decision by the Board and district administration to conduct a communication audit signals their desire to improve communication with internal and external audiences.

There are many things that are working well in the district. There is a great deal of support and pride in the schools among both internal and external stakeholders. The quality of the school district draws people to the area. It is seen as an area “where people want to live and raise their kids.” The district has done a great job implementing programs and services to meet the needs of students and has a deep commitment to do “what is best for kids.”

The district has faced, and will continue to face, challenges, but leaders are well aware of these challenges and are prepared for them. The biggest of these challenges is the changing demographics of the student population. The increasing number of Hispanic students has forced the district to think and act differently. And while it has room to grow in this area, many people recognize that the district has already taken great strides to address this profound change. The work the district has done to more effectively communicate with Hispanic families has made a difference.

One of the issues that arose during the focus group portion of the communication audit process was the lack of trust between some stakeholders and the district. Based on the input from the focus groups, the lack of trust has been present in the district for several years, and according to some, has improved in the past few years. Nonetheless, it is still an issue that must be addressed. An increased focus on effective communication and the engagement of internal and external stakeholders will go a long way toward rebuilding trust in the district. It is also clear that the district is making progress in working on this issue.

The most significant overall finding from the communication audit of Blaine County Schools is that the district has accomplished as much as it can given its current level of investment in communication. The district is to be commended for its efforts in communicating with stakeholders. However, in order to address many of the issues outlined in the “Key Findings and General Observations” section, it is critical to increase the investment of time and resources in communication-related functions. Without it, the district is not likely to see much improvement in the quality or quantity of communication with its internal and external stakeholders.

The communication audit process has identified several issues that will help improve the communication and engagement climate in the district. The good news is that these issues can more easily be addressed through the implementation of the strategies recommended in this

report. Blaine County Schools has accomplished great things with its current level of communication and engagement and will benefit from an even greater return if investment increases. We strongly believe in a measured implementation approach rather than tackling too much in the first few years of implementation.

The other significant finding of the communication audit is that the district's current strategic plan lacks any communication-related objectives. The strategic plan is impressive and clearly outlines where the district is headed as an organization. However, the plan is missing objectives that target the communication and engagement of stakeholders. There is also no communication plan for articulating and disseminating the goals and results of the plan to stakeholders. Adding these components will make the strategic plan more meaningful and comprehensive. It will also help stakeholders to better understand the implementation action steps of the overall plan.

It is also important to note two other significant aspects of the Blaine County Schools communication audit findings. First, the interest of the superintendent and Board in conducting this audit shows a willingness to solicit input and take action to improve. Very few school districts across the country – especially smaller districts like Blaine County Schools – seek this level of review of their communication efforts. Second, it is important for stakeholders to know that the findings of the Blaine County Schools audit are similar to those in other districts where NSPRA has conducted communication audits. These are issues that can easily be addressed with a focused communication effort.

The Board and administration of Blaine County Schools are committed to keeping the school district on the leading edge of education innovation. They are to be commended for their willingness to evaluate current communication efforts and have the vision to set forth a plan to improve. The recommendations presented in this report are designed to provide a framework to help Blaine County Schools improve and expand the overall communication program to better meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders in the community.



## Implementation Schedule

The recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* focus on strategies and activities Blaine County School District can implement to develop a more comprehensive communication/community relations program that will build greater staff and community support. A broad spectrum of communication needs is covered on the following pages. It would be unrealistic to attempt to undertake all of the proposed strategies and activities in one year. We advise district leaders to carefully consider and prioritize those recommendations that can be implemented immediately with the staff and resources available and incorporate others into long-range plans.

In addition, we have developed a suggested implementation schedule for the district to consider. This framework will help to determine priorities and establish expectations for what recommendations the district will opt to implement and when stakeholders can expect implementation to begin.

### Consideration for a One to Three Year Implementation Timeline

- Incorporate information from the district’s overall strategic plan into regular and ongoing communication efforts (related to Recommendation 1).
- Use “communication protocol” questions to guide thinking when decisions are being made (item under Recommendation 2).
- Add a “How this [issue, decision, information] will be communicated” section to agendas for Board, administrative, principal and advisory committee meetings (item under Recommendation 2).
- Develop clear “purpose” statements for committees to outline the work of the group (item under Recommendation 4).
- Identify how input gathered from engagement processes will be used by the district in the decision-making process (item under Recommendation 4).
- Communicate the results of surveys and other information gathered from stakeholders (item under Recommendation 4).
- Place special emphasis on engaging Hispanic families (item under Recommendation 4).
- Focus on an “inside out” method of communication (item under Recommendation 5).
- Produce and distribute an electronic internal newsletter on general and strategic news and information (item under Recommendation 5).
- Create a weekly electronic newsletter for administrators and principals to help streamline meeting agendas (item under Recommendation 5).
- Prepare talking points on key issues for principals, administrators and Board members (item under Recommendation 5).
- Continue and expand the scheduling of regular meetings with the superintendent and school staff (item under Recommendation 5).
- Continue and expand the involvement of employees in decisions that impact them (item under Recommendation 5).
- Continue and expand the sharing of information about school and district issues and decisions directly with school administrative assistants and office staff members (item under Recommendation 5).



- Use electronic publication and newspaper inserts to drive people to the district website for more information (item under Recommendation 6).
- Include district news and key messages in school newsletters (item under Recommendation 6).
- Re-establish a Key Communicators' Network (item under Recommendation 6).
- Continue to use the district's website as a key communication tool (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop guidelines for teachers to post information on Skyward Family Access (item under Recommendation 6).

### **Consideration for Three to Five Year Implementation Timeline**

- Use key messages to focus communication on critical issues and to ensure consistency (Recommendation 3).
- Develop a district-wide visibility plan and schedule (item under Recommendation 4).
- Hold "listening lunches" or "coffees" (item under Recommendation 4).
- Hold community forums and study circles on "hot topics" that emerge from "listening" sessions (item under Recommendation 4).
- Provide opportunities for public input that don't require attendance at a meeting (item under Recommendation 4).
- Emphasize the role of employees as ambassadors for the district (item under Recommendation 5).
- Monitor the scheduling of district-level meetings to reduce the amount of time that principals are away from their schools (item under Recommendation 5).
- Create a Staff Advisory Committee (item under Recommendation 5).
- Transition the "Partners in Education" newspaper inserts to a different, more frequent format (item under Recommendation 6).
- Create a new e-newsletter to deliver time-sensitive news and key messages in a brief, reader-friendly format (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop an annual content plan for publications (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop target information materials (item under Recommendation 7).
- Implement a "See for Yourself" program (item under Recommendation 7).
- Develop guidelines for offering school tours (item under Recommendation 7).
- Create a "Moving to Blaine County School District" section on the district website (item under Recommendation 7).
- Develop user guidelines for the district's Facebook page (item under Recommendation 8).
- Post discussion topics on the district's Facebook page to solicit feedback and input (item under Recommendation 8).
- Implement a Twitter account for the district (item under Recommendation 8).
- Cross promote the district's social media outlets in district publications and on the district's website (item under Recommendation 8).
- Schedule special announcements on Facebook and Twitter as a way to boost participation (item under Recommendation 8).
- Consider the use of a blog by the superintendent (item under Recommendation 8).

### **Consideration for a Long-range Implementation Timeline**

- Create a strategic communication plan to support and coordinate with the district's existing strategic plan (Recommendation 1).
- Consider creating a Government Advisory Council (item under Recommendation 4).
- Implement an outreach campaign to real estate agents (item under Recommendation 7).
- Evaluate "first impressions" at all district schools (item under Recommendation 7.)
- Provide communication training to district staff members (Recommendation 9).

While we encourage the district to consider Recommendation 10 to create a full-time communication position as soon as possible, we understand that the ability to act on this recommendation depends on budget issues. Nonetheless, we believe that this position will help to implement many of the other strategies noted above and may likely quicken the pace of implementation.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

The following is a summary of the recommendations included in the *Communication Audit Report*. More detailed descriptions of the recommendations are included in the full report.

**Recommendation 1:** Create a strategic communication plan to support and coordinate with the district's existing strategic plan.

**Recommendation 2:** Implement strategies to create a culture of communication in the district.

**Recommendation 3:** Use key messages to focus communication on critical issues and to ensure consistency.

**Recommendation 4:** Continue efforts to engage the community in the work of the district.

**Recommendation 5:** Enhance communication content and processes to improve the flow of communication with staff members.

**Recommendation 6:** Enhance communication with external stakeholders by increasing the flow of communication from the district to the community.

**Recommendation 7:** Develop marketing strategies to continue to enhance the image of the district and schools, and to connect with new residents.

**Recommendation 8:** Continue to expand the use of social media strategies to communicate and connect with stakeholders.

**Recommendation 9:** Provide communication training to district staff members.

**Recommendation 10:** Consider creating a full-time position to direct and manage the district's communication program.

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As a result of reviewing the materials provided by Blaine County Schools and conducting on-site focus groups, the following key findings and general observations were noted by the auditor, in no particular order:

### General Communication Issues

- Many focus group participants noted that while most information about the district is available on the website or via other sources, parents, staff members and community members often have to seek the information out for themselves.
- Several focus group participants cited the need for the district to find more ways to “toot its own horn” and to share the many good things happening in the district. Participants felt it was important to spread the “good news” because there are so many positive things happening in the district.
- Many focus group participants noted the need for the district to share information about the reasons behind decisions and to provide information on an ongoing basis so stakeholders know the status of issues.
- Several focus group participants noted the need for the district to communicate more about how it is using its financial resources. Participants were interested in knowing how the quality of education in the district relates to the amount of taxes that come from the community.

### Sources of Information

- Many focus group participants cited “word of mouth” and “local newspapers” as significant sources of information about the district. While the “district’s website” was cited by numerous participants, a large number of people seem to be getting information about the district from outside sources.
- The “Partners in Education” publication inserted into the local newspaper is seen as informative and a good way to communicate with residents without kids in school. It was suggested by several participants that the frequency of this publication or something similar be increased. Participants appreciated the district’s efforts in sharing information with the community.
- Because many people in the district rely on “word of mouth” as a significant way to get information about the district, there is a tendency for rumors to spread quickly. According to several focus group participants, it is at times difficult to know what is true and what is rumor because communication from the district does not combat rumors.

### Electronic Communication Issues

- Most focus group participants identified the school district’s website as an effective form of communication and gave the site high marks for its content, organization and ease of

navigation. This is a highly effective communication tool and is a great source of information for the community.

- The recent implementation of live webcasting of Board meetings was seen as a very positive step by most focus group participants. Participants noted that it demonstrates a positive effort by the superintendent and Board to reach out to the community.

### **Internal Communication Issues**

- There is an “information gap” between employees and the district office. There is a need for the district to increase the flow of information directly to staff members.
- Staff members described the need for more opportunities for dialogue and face-to-face contact with district leaders. More interaction would allow staff members to share input and feedback, which would work to build trust between staff members and district leaders.
- Employees in the focus groups noted that principals are out of their buildings too often, which makes building-level communication and work flow more challenging. They also noted their desire for district leaders to be more visible in the schools and to connect with all types of employees.

### **Parent Communication Issues**

- Many parents in the focus groups cited the Skyward Family Access system as an outstanding way for them to connect with their child’s school and to see details about their child’s academic progress. This is seen as a very effective way to share information with parents.
- The district’s use of its text-messaging system was seen as an effective way to share information quickly with parents and community members. While generally used to share information related to emergency situations, several parents expressed an interest in expanding its use to share other types of information.
- The district has many effective strategies in place to communicate and connect with its increasing number of Hispanic families. Focus group participants favorably noted past efforts and cited the need for continued work in this area as the district’s demographics continue to evolve.
- The implementation of new programs such as International Baccalaureate should be seen as opportunities for the district to communicate with parents. Parents in the focus groups cited the need for ongoing communication about these programs so that they can be informed about what is offered.
- There is a concern among some parent participants about the process used to select parents to serve on district committees. The process is perceived to be closed and one where parent members are hand-picked by district administrators.

- The amount and timeliness of information posted on the Skyward Family Access system varies by teacher. This inconsistency creates challenges for parents because access to information about their student is often different, depending on the teacher.

### **Reputation and Engagement Issues**

- Blaine County School District has a reputation of being “progressive compared to other Idaho districts” and is known to be a well-funded district. At the same time, many people from outside of the area may not fully understand the diversity that exists in the district.
- There is a gap in trust between the Board of Trustees/district leaders and many of the district’s stakeholders. While some perceive it as improving compared to past years, there continues to be a need to improve communication and connections with both internal and external stakeholders.
- Both parents and staff members in the focus groups noted that the district may seek their feedback or input, but there is a sense that this information is not always incorporated into the decision-making process. There is also a need for the district to communicate to parents and staff members how their input makes a difference in decision-making.
- There is a sense by many focus group participants that while a small group of parents and citizens may be critical of the district and its process for making decisions, there is a large “silent majority” that has not been engaged in district conversations, but whose voices need to be heard. Many of these individuals have had many positive experiences with the district and have much to contribute to the schools.
- Participants have a positive view of the many opportunities provided for them to be involved in the district. Participants suggested that parents can be as involved as they want to be if they are willing to seek out opportunities.

### **Overall Issues**

- Blaine County Schools’ newly developed strategic plan is the product of extensive community engagement. The plan outlines a well-defined direction that will guide the district for several years.
- Many focus group participants noted that the greater use of technology to communicate with parents is isolating people who do not have regular access to computers and other technology. Continued attention on using a variety of communication tools will help the district to stay connected to all parents.
- Many focus group participants noted that many residents perceive that the quality of education depends on which school students attend in the district. Participants also noted that schools may have different programs, but the quality of all schools is high even though the perception still exists.
- There is a sense among both internal and external stakeholders that Blaine County Schools needs a full-time communication/public relations director to help the district improve its

communication and public engagement activities. While the hiring of this position may not be possible given potential budget issues, it is positive that many participants are recognizing the value for the district in investing in such a position.

## Conclusion

The leaders of the Blaine County School District clearly realize the value of taking a comprehensive approach in communicating and connecting with stakeholders. The decision by the Board and district administration to conduct a communication audit signals their desire to improve communication with internal and external audiences.

There are many things that are working well in the district. There is a great deal of support and pride in the schools among both internal and external stakeholders. The quality of the school district draws people to the area. It is seen as an area “where people want to live and raise their kids.” The district has done a great job implementing programs and services to meet the needs of students and has a deep commitment to do “what is best for kids.”

The district has faced, and will continue to face, challenges, but leaders are well aware of these challenges and are prepared for them. The biggest of these challenges is the changing demographics of the student population. The increasing number of Hispanic students has forced the district to think and act differently. And while it has room to grow in this area, many people recognize that the district has already taken great strides to address this profound change. The work the district has done to more effectively communicate with Hispanic families has made a difference.

One of the issues that arose during the focus group portion of the communication audit process was the lack of trust between some stakeholders and the district. Based on the input from the focus groups, the lack of trust has been present in the district for several years, and according to some, has improved in the past few years. Nonetheless, it is still an issue that must be addressed. An increased focus on effective communication and the engagement of internal and external stakeholders will go a long way toward rebuilding trust in the district. It is also clear that the district is making progress in working on this issue.

The most significant overall finding from the communication audit of Blaine County Schools is that the district has accomplished as much as it can given its current level of investment in communication. The district is to be commended for its efforts in communicating with stakeholders. However, in order to address many of the issues outlined in the “Key Findings and General Observations” section, it is critical to increase the investment of time and resources in communication-related functions. Without it, the district is not likely to see much improvement in the quality or quantity of communication with its internal and external stakeholders.

The communication audit process has identified several issues that will help improve the communication and engagement climate in the district. The good news is that these issues can more easily be addressed through the implementation of the strategies recommended in this

report. Blaine County Schools has accomplished great things with its current level of communication and engagement and will benefit from an even greater return if investment increases. We strongly believe in a measured implementation approach rather than tackling too much in the first few years of implementation.

The other significant finding of the communication audit is that the district's current strategic plan lacks any communication-related objectives. The strategic plan is impressive and clearly outlines where the district is headed as an organization. However, the plan is missing objectives that target the communication and engagement of stakeholders. There is also no communication plan for articulating and disseminating the goals and results of the plan to stakeholders. Adding these components will make the strategic plan more meaningful and comprehensive. It will also help stakeholders to better understand the implementation action steps of the overall plan.

It is also important to note two other significant aspects of the Blaine County Schools communication audit findings. First, the interest of the superintendent and Board in conducting this audit shows a willingness to solicit input and take action to improve. Very few school districts across the country – especially smaller districts like Blaine County Schools – seek this level of review of their communication efforts. Second, it is important for stakeholders to know that the findings of the Blaine County Schools audit are similar to those in other districts where NSPRA has conducted communication audits. These are issues that can easily be addressed with a focused communication effort.

The Board and administration of Blaine County Schools are committed to keeping the school district on the leading edge of education innovation. They are to be commended for their willingness to evaluate current communication efforts and have the vision to set forth a plan to improve. The recommendations presented in this report are designed to provide a framework to help Blaine County Schools improve and expand the overall communication program to better meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders in the community.





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## Implementation Schedule and Recommendations

The recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* focus on strategies and activities Blaine County School District can implement to develop a more comprehensive communication/community relations program that will build greater staff and community support. A broad spectrum of communication needs is covered on the following pages. It would be unrealistic to attempt to undertake all of the proposed strategies and activities in one year. We advise district leaders to carefully consider and prioritize those recommendations that can be implemented immediately with the staff and resources available and incorporate others into long-range plans.

In addition, we have developed a suggested implementation schedule for the district to consider. This framework will help to determine priorities and establish expectations for what recommendations the district will opt to implement and when stakeholders can expect implementation to begin.

### Consideration for a One to Three Year Implementation Timeline

- Incorporate information from the district’s overall strategic plan into regular and ongoing communication efforts (related to Recommendation 1).
- Use “communication protocol” questions to guide thinking when decisions are being made (item under Recommendation 2).
- Add a “How this [issue, decision, information] will be communicated” section to agendas for Board, administrative, principal and advisory committee meetings (item under Recommendation 2).
- Develop clear “purpose” statements for committees to outline the work of the group (item under Recommendation 4).
- Identify how input gathered from engagement processes will be used by the district in the decision-making process (item under Recommendation 4).
- Communicate the results of surveys and other information gathered from stakeholders (item under Recommendation 4).
- Place special emphasis on engaging Hispanic families (item under Recommendation 4).
- Focus on an “inside out” method of communication (item under Recommendation 5).
- Produce and distribute an electronic internal newsletter on general and strategic news and information (item under Recommendation 5).
- Create a weekly electronic newsletter for administrators and principals to help streamline meeting agendas (item under Recommendation 5).
- Prepare talking points on key issues for principals, administrators and Board members (item under Recommendation 5).
- Continue and expand the scheduling of regular meetings with the superintendent and school staff (item under Recommendation 5).

- Continue and expand the involvement of employees in decisions that impact them (item under Recommendation 5).
- Continue and expand the sharing of information about school and district issues and decisions directly with school administrative assistants and office staff members (item under Recommendation 5).
- Use electronic publication and newspaper inserts to drive people to the district website for more information (item under Recommendation 6).
- Include district news and key messages in school newsletters (item under Recommendation 6).
- Re-establish a Key Communicators' Network (item under Recommendation 6).
- Continue to use the district's website as a key communication tool (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop guidelines for teachers to post information on Skyward Family Access (item under Recommendation 6).

### **Consideration for Three to Five Year Implementation Timeline**

- Use key messages to focus communication on critical issues and to ensure consistency (Recommendation 3).
- Develop a district-wide visibility plan and schedule (item under Recommendation 4).
- Hold "listening lunches" or "coffees" (item under Recommendation 4).
- Hold community forums and study circles on "hot topics" that emerge from "listening" sessions (item under Recommendation 4).
- Provide opportunities for public input that don't require attendance at a meeting (item under Recommendation 4).
- Emphasize the role of employees as ambassadors for the district (item under Recommendation 5).
- Monitor the scheduling of district-level meetings to reduce the amount of time that principals are away from their schools (item under Recommendation 5).
- Create a Staff Advisory Committee (item under Recommendation 5).
- Transition the "Partners in Education" newspaper inserts to a different, more frequent format (item under Recommendation 6).
- Create a new e-newsletter to deliver time-sensitive news and key messages in a brief, reader-friendly format (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop an annual content plan for publications (item under Recommendation 6).
- Develop target information materials (item under Recommendation 7).
- Implement a "See for Yourself" program (item under Recommendation 7).
- Develop guidelines for offering school tours (item under Recommendation 7).
- Create a "Moving to Blaine County School District" section on the district website (item under Recommendation 7).
- Develop user guidelines for the district's Facebook page (item under Recommendation 8).
- Post discussion topics on the district's Facebook page to solicit feedback and input (item under Recommendation 8).
- Implement a Twitter account for the district (item under Recommendation 8).

- Cross promote the district’s social media outlets in district publications and on the district’s website (item under Recommendation 8).
- Schedule special announcements on Facebook and Twitter as a way to boost participation (item under Recommendation 8).
- Consider the use of a blog by the superintendent (item under Recommendation 8).

### **Consideration for a Long-range Implementation Timeline**

- Create a strategic communication plan to support and coordinate with the district’s existing strategic plan (Recommendation 1).
- Consider creating a Government Advisory Council (item under Recommendation 4).
- Implement an outreach campaign to real estate agents (item under Recommendation 7).
- Evaluate “first impressions” at all district schools (item under Recommendation 7.)
- Provide communication training to district staff members (Recommendation 9).

While we encourage the district to consider Recommendation 10 to create a full-time communication position as soon as possible, we understand that the ability to act on this recommendation depends on budget issues. Nonetheless, we believe that this position will help to implement many of the other strategies noted above and may likely quicken the pace of implementation.

## **Recommendation 1: Create a strategic communication plan to support and coordinate with the district’s existing strategic plan.**

The Blaine County School District is currently implementing numerous communication strategies which, according to many focus group participants, are making a difference. However, what is missing is a more comprehensive communication plan. We strongly recommend that the district develop a comprehensive strategic communication plan to guide its overall communication efforts as well as to support and coordinate with the district’s strategic plan. This plan, when completed, will serve to tie the district’s efforts together in a coordinated direction.

We were impressed with the quality and comprehensive nature of the district’s overall strategic plan, but the plan is clearly missing a communication component. A strategic communication plan can help the district to manage the many strategies it should implement as a result of the communication audit. This communication plan should coordinate directly with the district’s existing strategic plan and include strategies that will help advance the overall goals and direction of the district.

The first step a school district should take in establishing an effective communication program is to develop a comprehensive communication plan. As a process, this includes: research of constituents’ needs and wants; assessment of all current communication-related strategies and activities; identifying the best ways to reach stakeholders and build relationships; and evaluating the strategies and methods used. All phases of the plan should be considered in terms of their support of the district’s mission and goals. For Blaine County Schools, a strategic communication plan that is aligned with the overall strategic plan will help to move the entire district toward its strategic goals.

The resulting document is a “road map” that will enable Blaine County Schools to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of communication efforts and ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication that can overwhelm school districts. With goals tied to the district’s strategic plan and measurable objectives for communication activities, the plan will also provide a means for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability. While time-consuming, good communication planning usually takes much less time than dealing with controversies that arise because of poor communication.

A strategic communication plan should include the four-step public relations process of research, planning, communication and evaluation and address the following questions for every action or activity the school district undertakes:

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

Finally, the most effective communication plans are revised annually, not only to assess progress, but to include goals for any new district initiatives planned for the coming year. Major change can be threatening to stakeholders if the rationale behind decisions is not communicated and those impacted do not have opportunities to offer input or ask questions.

NSPRA recommends that when the new communication plan is finalized, and when annual changes are made, the document be submitted to the Board of Trustees for consideration and approval. This step in the planning process ensures that all district leaders will be well-informed about communication strategies and activities, and it sends a clear message to all stakeholders that the district is serious about communication. Sample plans are available from NSPRA, upon request.

## **Recommendation 2: Implement strategies to create a culture of communication in the district.**

As Blaine County Schools moves forward with enhancing its communication program, it will be important to establish a culture where all staff members recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools (see Recommendation 5). Everyone should be encouraged to think about how communication can be improved and be given the tools to make it happen. At the administrative level, we recommend two basic strategies to help leaders consider how and what to communicate when making decisions:

- Use “**communication protocol**” questions to guide thinking when decisions are being made. Communication – how, when and what to share with others – is often an afterthought in the decision-making process of many organizations. By incorporating

several protocol questions into discussions of major decisions, communication is integrated into the process and not overlooked or added on at the end. These questions help raise awareness about important communication issues, highlight the importance of closing the communication “loop,” and are also helpful in shaping decisions. This process can be used as a regular component of the superintendent’s administrative meetings and adapted for department or school-level meetings as well. Protocol questions include the following:

- ✓ **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- ✓ **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 stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district and community.
- ✓ **Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue.
- ✓ **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 statements 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 on the issue with the news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute printed copies for use in the discussion. Over time, these questions will become routine and an integrated part of the district’s communication process.

- **Add a “how this [issue, decision, information] will be communicated” section to agendas for Board, administrative, principal and advisory committee meetings.** This suggestion is simple, but can help to create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. Such a reminder on agendas will stimulate discussions about decisions and issues, and will lead to better and more timely communication with key stakeholder groups. Like the communication protocol questions, this addition can help district leaders become more strategic in planning communication as issues unfold.

### Recommendation 3: Use key messages to focus communication on critical issues and to ensure consistency.

People appreciate hearing the “good news” about their schools, but trust and credibility are built through open communication about the business of the school system – good and bad. The public is interested not just in what decisions are being made about the education of students, but also the rationale behind the decisions. This is a comment that was heard numerous times in the focus groups. It is important to foster open communication so that Blaine County Schools is perceived as a district that shares *all* the news. This will also help to bolster support of district initiatives among staff members, parents and community residents.

Issues that will influence relationships with the public and the image of the district such as the budget, program implementation, student enrollment growth or decline, and student achievement should be looked at in numerous ways and then reduced to key, consistent talking points or messages that will help stakeholders better understand the situation.

One effective strategy is to put teams together on identified key issues to assist in assessing and framing messages around specific district issues (i.e., budget issues, program implementation, and referenda) as well as issues that impact the greater community. Issues teams should be composed of parent and community members, as well as staff. Educators often frame issues very differently from the public, and in order to connect with stakeholders, the district needs to understand the public’s perspective and messages must be presented in a way that is clearly defined and that resonates with target audiences. When timing is an issue, it may be necessary for messages to be developed outside the committee’s work.

We recommend, however, that the “wordsmithing” be assigned to one or two individuals. The resulting key messages could be used to create a single fact sheet on each issue that could be produced in both print and electronic versions. It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they are communicated to the public. As an example, a fact sheet on the implementation of the district’s strategic plan might include the following:

■ Issue at a Glance	■ Implementation of strategic plan initiatives
■ Description	■ To operate more efficiently and better meet the needs of students, Blaine County Schools is implementing various initiatives as identified in its strategic plan.
■ Work to Date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Explain efforts that are underway and the progress made to date.</li> <li>■ This saves staff time in explaining what has been done on this issue in the past.</li> </ul>

<p>■ Barriers to Progress</p>	<p>■ List items such as budget, time, community groups, approvals, etc.</p>
<p>■ What's Next</p>	<p>■ Explain work yet to be completed. (This is especially important for the strategic planning implementation because there are so many components that will span several months or years.)</p>
<p>■ Your Involvement</p>	<p>■ List next meeting dates, if appropriate. Inform internal and external stakeholders about how they can assist in the implementation or have input into issues yet to be decided.</p>
<p>■ Key messages/ Talking Points</p>	<p>■ List key messages or talking points on this issue.</p>
<p>■ Further Info</p>	<p>■ List names and contact information of district administrators who will respond to questions or provide more information.</p>

Fact sheets could be posted on the district’s website; a subscription service for electronic communication could be set up on the website and fact sheets sent to individuals who sign up; and fact sheets could be provided to members of advisory groups and committees. Of course, updates will be needed as changes are made.

Key messages from the fact sheets could be adapted for use in other regular internal and external communication, thus assuring that consistent messages on key issues are being disseminated and reinforced. Additional key messages could be developed annually to support new initiatives for the school year. Some suggestions for disseminating key messages include:

- Communicate messages to staff members via staff meetings, internal newsletters or e-mails. Provide opportunities for staff members to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed so that they clearly understand the rationale and process behind decisions.
- Include messages as headings on the district and school websites and publications.
- Share key messages with key communicators and members of district study groups.
- Include messages in presentations to senior citizens, business/civic groups, Realtors, legislators and parent groups.

In addition to developing key messages for long-term goals and new initiatives, similar steps should be taken when the district has to communicate specific information (referendums, crisis responses, program and policy changes) to administrators, staff, Board members and opinion leaders in the community. By being proactive and getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the front lines of communication, the district can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the void, thus co-opting the district’s ability to manage its message and communicate effectively.



## **Recommendation 4: Continue efforts to engage the community in the work of the district.**

Blaine County Schools has made several great strides toward more engagement of the community in the work of the district. The most recent and significant example of effective public engagement was the development of the district’s strategic plan. The district did a tremendous job of reaching out into the community and involving staff members, parents and community members in the development of the plan.

The largest challenge for the district as it relates to public engagement strategies is to broaden the number and type of individuals who are engaged with the district. Several focus group participants referred to the need for the district to “tap the silent majority.” According to many in the focus groups, there are many people in the district who are generally satisfied with what is happening in the district and choose – for a variety of reasons – to not participate in the engagement and input opportunities that the district has provided. Consequently, the district not only sees a smaller number of people who are connecting with it, it sees the same people who choose to get involved. While it is positive that people are choosing to engage with the district, there are many more voices that need to be heard by Blaine County Schools’ leaders when making decisions.

Any school district appreciates the input provided by stakeholders. However, there is a risk attached to soliciting this input when a broad cross-section of voices is not involved. For example, if the district only regularly hears from parents who live in a particular part of the community or whose children attend a particular school, it will not be receiving a balanced representation of viewpoints. To more fully understand how parents feel, it is necessary to seek out thoughts and opinions from parents in all parts of the district. While “tapping the silent majority” may require additional time and effort on the part of the district, it will result in decisions that truly represent a broad cross-section of district stakeholders.

Along with the strategies suggested in this recommendation, we strongly encourage the district to work diligently to bring more voices into its decision-making processes. Engaging people who have not been engaged in the past may take extra effort, but it will result in a larger number of people who will more readily share their input and feedback.

Another related issue that came up in the focus groups is the feeling among many participants that the district does not always listen to the input it gathers. The strategies listed under this recommendation will more directly address this concern. However, we also want to share three important reminders with the Board and district leaders. First, do not ask for input from stakeholders if the decision has already been made. When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, stakeholders can easily feel that their input does not matter because the decision has already been made. In these cases, stakeholders feel like they are being “sold” an idea rather than being provided with the opportunity to help shape a decision. Public input is critical for Blaine County Schools to make decisions that accurately reflect the community’s values, but this input should only be sought in cases where it will be considered by those making the decision.

The second reminder is to use the input to help shape the decision or direction. In some cases, a Board or district administrator may have a strong sense of what decision to make, but holds off on a final answer until public input is sought. In cases where the public input is in favor of a direction that is different than what the administrator initially considered, the administrator has an interesting decision. The administrator can either go with their initial idea or listen to the input and make a decision that is different than what they would have done before receiving the input. We strongly encourage Blaine County Schools to seek input on all important issues and to listen to that input as part of the decision-making process. Asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause stakeholders to disengage from the district. If the district does not listen to input it requested, it will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future.

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

The concepts of “public engagement” and “transparency” are compelling for educators because they require school districts to engage constituents in meaningful ways that build trust and create a civic investment in our schools. We recommend that Blaine County Schools continue to make a concerted effort to open up the decision-making process from start to finish so that stakeholders are kept informed and involved. The district has taken a big step in this direction in the past. Now, it is time for the district to take the next step and strengthen its commitment to community engagement and fine tune the activities already underway. The following are some suggestions to consider:

- **Develop clear “purpose” statements for committees to outline the work of the group.** When forming a committee, task force, study team or other group to assist in the decision-making process, it is important to clearly outline the purpose of the group. This “purpose” statement should outline the role of the group and who has the authority to make the final decision. It should also outline what the group does not have authority to do. For example, in a process to fill an open position, an interview committee could be charged with interviewing six candidates and selecting three to be interviewed and considered by the superintendent, principal or other administrator. The committee needs to understand that they are not authorized to hire, but to interview and narrow the field. Without these purpose statements, groups can often perceive their authority to be different than originally intended. The decision-making authority should also be outlined in the purpose statement.
- **Identify how input gathered from engagement processes will be used by the district in the decision-making process.** Two significant perceptions were shared by many focus group participants. First, many felt that although stakeholders are asked to provide input on an issue, the Board and administrators have decided the issue well in advance. Second,

there was a sense that when input is solicited, it is not necessarily considered by the Board or administrators. Both perceptions can quickly cripple any attempt to engage stakeholders in a way that makes them feel their input is valued. When the district seeks input from stakeholders, it is important to clearly communicate how their input will be used in the decision-making process. It is also important that the district not seek input from stakeholders if a decision has in fact already been made. Efforts to engage stakeholders need to be genuine and not exercises designed to make people feel as though they were involved. Follow through by considering stakeholder input in the decision-making process and communicating back to those involved on how their ideas and suggestions were used, or if rejected, the reasons why they were not feasible.

- **Continue to communicate the results of surveys and other information gathered from stakeholders.** When the district conducts a survey or solicits input from staff members, parents or community residents, it is important to report the results back to those who provided the data. We recommend that Blaine County Schools develop a plan to communicate survey or input results as part of the survey or engagement development process. The district’s engagement efforts in the development of its strategic plan is an example of how sharing input results was effective. Sharing how information will be used can help build trust with stakeholders. If there is a concern about sharing particular information, district leaders should think carefully about whether to ask the question. The adage in research – “don’t ask the question if you don’t want to hear the answer” – is something that must be considered. We recommend that communication about this *Communication Audit Report* be the first opportunity to practice this principle. Many people shared their time and offered input as part of the process. Proactively “closing the loop” by sharing the results of the communication audit will help them see that their time was well spent.
- **Develop a district-wide visibility plan and schedule.** Engagement and connection with the community cannot occur if key district leaders are not visible in the community. We recommend that the district develop an annual visibility plan and schedule that clearly charts when staff will be present at community events, meetings and activities. The plan and schedule should include dates for presentations to community groups such as the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, community organizations and churches. This effort will build improved community relations between the district and its constituents and will create opportunities for further connection and dialogue. The district will likely find that it already has a wide presence in the community, but may need to add groups or increase the frequency of attendance. While the superintendent is often the person who would take the lead in a visibility effort, other district administrators and principals can also play a role in participating with community organizations.
- **Hold “listening lunches” or “coffees.”** Because most opportunities for the public to interact with the school district involve citizens coming onto school “turf,” taking the district to the public can often be an effective way to encourage engagement. One example is for Board members, the superintendent or other district administrators to establish a monthly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversations about the district. The shops and businesses in the district would

provide a perfect setting. Consider partnering with area coffee shops, restaurants or churches to host these events. Set a regular time and day (for example, every second Tuesday from 7-9 a.m.). Administrators and Board members could team up and rotate attendance.

To be most effective, provide a structure for the conversations by designating topics. For example, one session might focus on proposed curricular changes, another on the budget or state legislative issues. Remind participants that open-ended “venting” sessions are not particularly useful, and facilitators should also remember the importance of honoring the school district’s chain of command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel.

The key is to meet with community residents on their turf and to listen to concerns they may have about issues impacting the district. It should be clearly stated that these “listening” events are just that – no decisions will be made based on conversations that take place. They should be positioned as opportunities for the Board and administration to gather information and hear opinions. When district representatives go to where members of the community are gathered, there is a greater chance to engage people who may not otherwise be engaged. These “listening sessions” in the community are another way to “tap the silent majority.”

- **Hold community forums and study circles on “hot topics” that emerge from “listening” sessions.** We recommend that the district continue to offer opportunities for parents and community members to participate in a dialogue with district leaders – to listen, speak, and more importantly, to be listened to. Sessions could be held in conjunction with school open house programs or PTA meetings. Community forums could be held in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce or service clubs. Perhaps a brainstorming session among administrators and Board members could be used to identify other opportunities for convening engagement sessions.

While important to get ideas on the table and build trust, community forums are not conducive for an in-depth discussion of specific topics of concern due to the format and large numbers of people involved. Study circles are facilitated groups that involve 10-25 people who convene to discuss a particular topic over the course of several weeks. These provide an opportunity to consider all sides of an issue, as well as underlying concerns that may affect the outcome. NSPRA can provide more information on coordinating study circles, upon request. Again, the key to the success of these forums is to broaden attendance so the district hears from a broad cross section of the district.

The sessions suggested in this recommendation are similar to the “town hall” concept suggested by several focus group participants. These sessions – depending on the format – provide a forum for one-time feedback opportunities and for more in-depth exploration of ideas. And again, it is critical for the district to work hard to reach more people to participate in the process.

- **Provide opportunities for public input that don't require attendance at a meeting.** Designate a section on the website where constituents can record comments or reactions to a specific question, issue or proposal before the Board. Provide “communicards” at Board meetings, in schools, and at community sites such as restaurants and banks. These should include a question about an issue with space for patrons to write a response. Cards could be returned to schools or the district office. These opportunities for input could also be shared through the district's website or through e-mail. The use of social media tools outlined in Recommendation 8 can also be effective in soliciting input without attendance at a meeting.
- **Consider creating a Government Advisory Council.** The district already meets regularly with some government officials that represent part of the district. According to the individuals who attend these meetings, the meetings are a very helpful way to connect with the district. However, other officials commented that they were not as connected to the district. To address this issue, we recommended that the district implement a Government Advisory Council. This council would be composed of at least one representative from each government entity in the district. These representatives could be staff members or elected officials, depending on the organization.

The goal of this council is to improve the flow of communication and level of connection between the district and other government entities. Members could be invited to meet with the superintendent and other administrators several times a year to discuss budget planning, management, marketing, technology and resource challenges facing the school district. Initially, the purpose of this council would be to open communication channels between the district and other government entities. However, as the council evolves and there is greater connection between participants, other cooperative projects and ventures will likely grow out of these discussions.

- **Place special emphasis on engaging Hispanic families** – It was the general consensus of focus group participants that the district is working hard to engage and communicate with Hispanic families in the district, and that great strides have been taken in the past few years. It was also noted that while good work has been accomplished, much more is needed. As the district works on expanding its engagement activities to include a broader cross section of the district, we recommend that special emphasis be placed on engaging Hispanic families. To accomplish this, it may be necessary to offer more and different opportunities for engagement.

If the district is conducting a series of focus groups, we recommend that at least one group be facilitated by a Spanish speaker, preferably someone who has a connection to Hispanic parents. If the district generally holds input sessions at school facilities, we recommend that one or more sessions be held at a location and time that best fits the schedule of Hispanic families. It should not be assumed that Hispanic families are not interested in sharing their input if they do not attend the typical engagement activity. It is important to recognize that Hispanic families share the desire to be involved, but may not be able to fit the usual schedule. These efforts may require more time and planning at the

front end of the engagement process, but this work will most certainly pay off in the long run.

## **Recommendation 5: Enhance communication content and processes to improve the flow of communication with staff members.**

One of the most overlooked efforts by school districts is the effective communication with internal audiences. There tends to be a great need in most school districts to bolster communication with staff members. Blaine County Schools is not an exception. Staff members who participated in the focus group process indicated a strong need for greater communication and connection between them and the leadership of the school district.

Most staff participants felt that information is not shared by district administrators on a regular basis. Staff members also noted that they often do not receive information on a timely basis, but hear of news from parents or read it first in newspapers. The “grapevine” and “rumor mill” were also cited as regular sources of information. Unfortunately, information spread this way usually is not accurate or complete.

The recommendations included in this report are based on the premise that effective external communication with parents and residents begins with solid internal communication. In any successful public relations program, district leaders must recognize the value of keeping employees in the information loop. In addition, employees must recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. For Blaine County Schools to better connect with staff members, we recommend consideration of the following strategies:

- **Focus on an “inside out” method of communication.** To be most effective, all communication of issues must start with staff members. Information should be shared first with staff before it is disseminated to parents and residents. This strategy is critical because parents and community residents often come to staff with questions about the district. By providing staff with information first, the district will create a wider network of people who are aware of an issue and understand the facts. The “inside out” approach is more of a shift in attitude than a formal strategy, but it can have a tremendous impact on the district’s communication program.

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

One strategy for addressing the dissemination of information that can be used for any type of working meeting involves completing a simple action grid. At each meeting someone is designated to fill in the grid and distribute it as soon as possible afterwards to all meeting participants so that the information can be cascaded to staff in a timely manner.

A grid might look like this:

Item	Action/Discussion	Next Step	Responsibility	Deadline
Testing Notice	Principals to parents	Draft Letter	Sam Smith	11/18/10
Key Communicator	Invitation Letter	Send Letters	Sally Jones	12/1/10

Copies of the grid can also be used to set the agenda for the next meeting.

All district office and building-level administrators should clearly understand the importance of their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner and be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. However, in order for administrators to communicate effectively, they must be included in the communication loop and receive all critical information of importance to district operations, and this simple grid helps ensure that everyone has the same information at the same time. It can also help expose communication gaps that occur when information flow is interrupted due to lack of follow-through.

- Produce and distribute an electronic internal newsletter on general and strategic news and information.** As stated previously, two of the information sources cited most frequently by focus group participants – including staff members – were the newspaper and the “grapevine.” This indicates that there is a lack of information coming directly from the school district. Consequently, the information that eventually flows to staff members may not be completely accurate or complete. The district needs to develop its own strategies to communicate directly with staff members. A weekly or bi-weekly electronic newsletter covering a broad spectrum of district and school news and information will systemize communication with staff members and serve as a regular update for staff. This does not have to be a “fancy and slick” publication, but can be a simple, straightforward e-mail or link to the website.

Any employee newsletter should be a “must read” document. The content should be viewed as a component of strategic communication and focused on delivering key messages to staff so that they feel informed on the latest developments across the district, especially the “big picture” issues such as budget allocations, new initiatives, and the rationale behind important decisions. Information should be included on other things that employees need and want to know, and ideally, information would be prioritized so that staff members know which items need immediate review and which they can read later when they have more time. Topics that NSPRA has found to be of interest to employees include:

- ✓ Policies, procedures and rules that govern their jobs and their relations with students and other employees.
- ✓ Highlights from Board of Trustees meetings.
- ✓ Opportunities or suggestions for improving job performance.
- ✓ Best practices.
- ✓ Promotional and job opportunities in the district.

- ✓ Messages from the superintendent and other administrators.
- ✓ Strategic plan and financial updates.
- ✓ Explanation of district philosophy and direction.
- ✓ Updates on projects or programs.
- ✓ Updates on state and federal legislation that will affect local schools.
- ✓ Background and resolution of campus incidents.
- ✓ Communication tips on sharing information with parents and the public.
- ✓ Special events, activities and awards at school sites.
- ✓ Recognition/appreciation of staff achievements.

Present information in a brief, tightly-written format and drive employees to the website for more extensive or detailed information. This will keep the newsletter short and reader-friendly and build use of the website as an information source. Special “alert” editions also could be produced as needed, for example, on time-sensitive or crisis topics such as bomb threats. An e-newsletter can become yet another way to increase use of the website as a communication resource.

It probably will be necessary to print/duplicate and post copies of an e-newsletter if all employees do not have ready access to a computer. The need for printed copies can be evaluated in a survey. Once this newsletter has been published for about six months, a readership survey should be conducted to determine specifics on how to improve the publication and to ensure that all staff members have access to it.

It is also important to communicate to staff members that the district’s electronic newsletter will be the primary source of communication between the district and staff members. They need to know that the district has an expectation that they will regularly read the newsletter so they are well-informed. The district’s part of this commitment is to regularly – weekly or bi-weekly – share information in this format. If the district commits to provide regular and comprehensive updates, it can also expect staff members to regularly read the newsletter, as long as it is produced in the format described above. The focus of information in a regular employee newsletter should also cut down on the need for district administrators and departments to send e-mails or other information to staff members. With planning, this information can be folded into the electronic newsletter.

- **Emphasize the role of employees as ambassadors for the district.** Communication is not just the responsibility of the superintendent, district administrators or principals. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with their internal colleagues and external stakeholders. All employees must share the role of representing the district to the community.

One excellent way to create employee “ambassadors” is to include a communication component as part of a new employee orientation. This provides an opportunity to stress the importance of relating accurate information and facts to the public and an opportunity to do some “myth busting” of employee and community perceptions of the district. Orientation should acquaint new employees with the Blaine County Schools’ mission, vision, culture and overall strategic directions. It should review procedures and help them



feel like they're part of the team. Employees new to the area and the district may be unfamiliar with local customs and communication styles and this can help them feel more comfortable in the community. All new employees should be given an orientation packet that includes general information about the district such as its mission, beliefs and goals; an employee handbook; tips on being a "Blaine County Schools Ambassador for Education"; guidance on who to contact when they hear a rumor; and any required forms.

It is important to provide these orientation components to support staff as well because they are viewed as credible sources of information by community members. All employees should receive a clear message that communication is an important part of their jobs and not just a function of the principals or administrators.

- **Create a weekly electronic newsletter for administrators and principals to help streamline meeting agendas.** One of the issues raised in the employee focus groups was a concern that principals are too often pulled out of their buildings to attend district-level meetings. Their absence from the buildings makes it more difficult for the work process and communication flow to go smoothly at the building level. To address this, we recommend that the district develop a "K.D.S. (Know. Do. Share.) Administrative Update" electronic weekly newsletter. This format is similar to the "Who Does What by When" piece currently produced by the superintendent's office. The content of the newsletter should be simply organized around "K.D.S." using the following guidelines:
  - ✓ Know – This is information that the superintendent or other district-level administrators want principals and others to know and understand. This information can include weekly updates on ongoing issues or one-time notices that people need to know as part of their work.
  - ✓ Do – This is information that principals and/or administrators need to act on. It may be as simple as completing and returning a form or calling someone to schedule a meeting. Readers will know that items included in this section require some action on their part.
  - ✓ Share – This is information that should be shared with other audiences. The preparation of information in this section should be such that a principal or administrator can simply "cut and paste" it into information pieces targeted at staff members or parents.

The logic behind this type of electronic newsletter is three-fold. First, it delivers information to administrators and principals in a well-organized, concise format. The information is delivered to everyone at the same time and with consistent messages that lessen the possibility of misunderstanding. Second, it has the potential of freeing up meeting agendas for discussion and deliberation and less of the "sit and get" format of information-sharing. In other words, meeting time will not be needed to share information that can be easily communicated in a weekly electronic newsletter. And third, this format has the potential of reducing the number of e-mails and other communication from the superintendent or district-level administrators. If planned and executed effectively, the "K.D.S." newsletter can and should become the key source of information for administrators and principals. Like the employee electronic newsletter,

there should be an expectation by the superintendent that all administrators and principals will regularly read this newsletter and follow through on information that is included.

This newsletter should be sent out on a weekly basis and on a regular schedule. For example, the superintendent should commit to sending each week's edition on Friday afternoon (or some other designated day). Each Friday's edition will include information for the following week. To prepare information for each edition, it is important for the superintendent's cabinet to briefly discuss items to be included at weekly meetings. This activity will create a routine around including information in the "KDS" newsletter rather than sending it out in different ways.

Like the employee newsletter, information should be written in as brief and concise format as possible. Detailed information can either be shared by attaching other files or through including a web link.

A similar type of electronic newsletter could also be used by the superintendent and district administrators to provide information to the Board members. Other districts have used a "KYI" or "Keeping You Informed" format newsletter to share information. In many ways the content will be similar to the "K.D.S." format, but may also include information targeted to the Board. This information could include follow-ups on past decisions and issues, updates on ongoing issues, and previews of future Board agenda items.

- **Monitor the scheduling of district-level meetings to reduce the amount of time that principals are away from their schools.** As noted earlier, district employees in the focus groups commented on the length of time that principals are out of the buildings for district-level meetings. We recommend that the superintendent and district administrators more closely monitor meeting schedules and seek out ways to combine agendas and use principals' time more efficiently. The use of the weekly bulletin will help, and with careful scheduling, it may be possible to hold fewer administrative meetings. There certainly will be times when more meetings are needed, but by considering ways to limit the number of meetings and streamline agendas, meetings should become more effective and principals will have more time in their buildings.
- **Prepare talking points on key issues for principals, administrators and Board members.** District leaders have frequent opportunities to connect with both internal and external stakeholders. By providing talking points on important and emerging issues, Blaine County Schools can share more consistent and accurate information. Board members and administrators should work with the superintendent prior to making public statements to ensure the accurate and consistent delivery of key messages. Whenever Board members or administrators are asked to respond to the media or speak to community groups, they should have a list of talking points related to their topic, or, if they are giving a general overview of the district, a list of programs and initiatives that directly support the district's goals and objectives as well as information on progress toward those goals. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that

people appreciate having it in order to feel confident that they are truly voicing the school district's position and message.

- **Create a Staff Advisory Committee.** One of the concerns brought up by employees in the focus groups was the perception that staff members did not have sufficient opportunities to provide input and feedback to the district administration on important issues and decisions. In order to establish a better connection with staff members, one recommendation is for the district to create a Staff Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from every school and department. The superintendent and other administrators could meet with the group on a regular schedule. Meeting agendas could include presentations of information from district leaders, as well as time dedicated to soliciting input from the group and discussing staff members' perspectives on current or emerging issues. Committee members should be asked to report back to colleagues. This group would provide another means for leaders to connect regularly with staff throughout the district. Summaries from these meetings should also be posted on the district's Intranet for all staff to read. The Staff Advisory Committee should be structured in a way similar to the Key Communicators Network outlined in Recommendation 6.
- **Continue and expand scheduling of regular meetings with the superintendent and school staff.** To increase the visibility of the superintendent and other district administrators and to serve as another opportunity for staff to provide input and feedback, we recommend that regular meetings or input sessions be held at all schools. Sessions with the superintendent and other key leaders could be scheduled at each school. Meeting agendas should be simple and focus on sharing information about issues in the district and allowing for questions, comments and ideas from the staff. These should not be "stand and deliver" sessions for the superintendent, but rather provide an opportunity to dialogue with staff and keep them "in the loop" on key issues. We suggest a five to 10 minute update from the superintendent or a district administrator and then use the remaining time for comments and questions. To be most effective, strive to hold at least one session a semester at each school.
- **Continue and expand involvement of employees in decisions that impact them.** Staff morale in many districts often hinges on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. In the focus groups, many employees expressed the belief that their opinions are often not sought, or if they are, are not considered before decisions are made. In addition, participants in the employee focus groups felt they do not have opportunities to share their concerns or ideas for problem-solving with district administrators. When decisions need to be made that directly impact employees, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is particularly vital for administrators whose decisions affect the jobs of numerous employees throughout the district. Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. It will help to make employees feel that they were part of the decision-making process instead of having a decision handed to them.

- **Continue and expand sharing of information about school and district issues and decisions directly with school administrative assistants and office staff members.** The front-office staff members in the district’s schools are among the first information contacts for many internal and external stakeholders. They are often in the position to communicate information and to answer questions from staff members or parents, if they have the appropriate information. We recommend that a process be developed for sharing important information on key decisions with school administrative assistants and office staff. Copies of the fact sheets and key messages mentioned in Recommendation 3 should be given to these staff. By doing this, administrators will find that communication with both internal and external stakeholders will improve and that fewer questions will come to them because they can be answered by office staff.

### **Recommendation 6: Enhance communication with external stakeholders by increasing the flow of communication from the district to the community.**

According to focus group participants, the main sources of information for parents, community residents and other external stakeholders are local newspapers and “word of mouth” sources. While external stakeholders do receive some information directly from Blaine County Schools through the “Partners in Education” inserts in the *Idaho Mountain Express*, there is a need to increase the amount of information that flows from the district directly to external stakeholders.

It is important for the district to continue to use local newspapers as a way to share information. It was clear from the focus groups that many people in the community regularly read the newspaper and look to it for school district and other community news. However, an over-reliance on these sources can mean that others outside of Blaine County Schools are crafting and communicating the district’s key messages. District leaders need to do more to “bypass the media gatekeepers” and communicate directly with stakeholders.

In considering the content for communicating with external stakeholders, the district needs to provide a mix of information. Along with information on ongoing “big picture” issues, many focus groups participants asked for more “good news” about the district to be shared. The “good news” category can include student accomplishments and successes, staff awards and achievements, features on programs for students, and other positive information about the district.

While many external stakeholders are interested in and able to receive information from the district via electronic means, there are others who will not have ready access to technology as well as some who may not want to receive information electronically. To serve the entire community, the district should develop a multi-layered approach to delivering key messages and information. Some suggestions for improving and enhancing external communication include:

- **Transition the “Partners in Education” newspaper inserts to a different, more frequent format** – Several focus group participants cited the “Partners in Education”

newspaper inserts as a great source of information about the school district. The downside of this publication is that it is only produced a few times each year. It also is a labor-intensive project and requires a great deal of staff time to produce it. The idea of including school district information in the local newspaper is one that is working for Blaine County Schools, but it needs a bit of a twist. Instead of the large publication inserted a few times each year, we suggest that the district consider purchasing a half-page or full page in the newspaper once a month. This will allow the district to more frequently communicate with its external stakeholders. The information included in these monthly sections should be prepared in a brief, concise and attractive manner. These monthly sections will allow the district to provide more current information directly to its stakeholders.

**Create a new e-newsletter to deliver time-sensitive news and key messages in a brief, reader-friendly format.** E-mail and electronic publications are two of the fastest and most cost-effective ways for a school district to provide timely information to stakeholders, while retaining the ability to control messages. An e-publication can provide links to the website for readers interested in more in-depth information or to access forms, etc. Special editions of the e-newsletter can be used to address single-topic issues, such as budget information, curriculum or policy changes or referendums, and e-Alerts can be used for crisis communication or other time-sensitive situations.

Readers should be encouraged to sign up online for the e-newsletter through existing communication channels such as pieces in local newspapers and building-level newsletters, on the district and school websites, and at meetings. The district may also want to place an ad in the newspaper or print postcards to leave in various community venues that promote the new e-newsletter and encourage citizens to subscribe online. Although we are recommending the addition of a new e-publication, the nature of electronic communication makes it fast and easy to produce once the initial design and network has been created.

- **Develop an annual content plan for publications.** The core content of each issue of the newspaper inserts and the e-newsletter should be planned on an annual basis, with allowances made to incorporate unexpected or emerging issues and topics. Each issue should contain information that will appeal to key audiences based on research of readers' interests. This could include information about what and how students are learning; reports on issues such as strategic planning updates; comparative test scores; budget accountability; updates on Board actions and rationale behind decisions; student progress and college attendance rates; outstanding student and staff performance; and information on how community members can support the schools.
- **Use electronic publication and newspaper inserts to drive people to the district website for more information.** The content of each issue of the electronic publication and the newspaper inserts could serve to provide an overview of issues and programs and then drive readers to the website for more specific details, in-depth analysis, and updated information. It should be viewed as one component of a multi-layered communication

process. Once at the website, stakeholders can sign-up for the e-newsletter to receive more timely updates and breaking news about the schools.

- **Include district news and key messages in school newsletters.** NSPRA has found that in school districts around the country, individual school newsletters are consistently cited as being a valued information source for parents. Research in school communication shows that the local school is usually seen as the public opinion barometer of how schools or school districts are doing. It is a natural center for communication not only with parents, but also with neighborhood residents and can become a major component of the entire communication effort.

We recommend that school newsletters be used to provide information, especially the “big picture” issues, about the entire district. This could include information about how the school system is managing funds to obtain maximum benefits for students, regular updates on goals, student achievement data, news about “hot issues,” curriculum decisions, and other Board action items. The information should be prepared in short paragraphs and sent to the schools. School newsletter editors can then include the information under a “School District News” or “Five Things Parents Need to Know about Blaine County Schools” heading. This will make it easier for the schools and will ensure message consistency across the entire district. These brief updates should also drive readers to the district’s website for more information.

- **Re-establish a Key Communicators’ Network.** A formal Key Communicators’ Network is a good way to stimulate two-way communication, gain community support, address rumors and create an authorized “grapevine.” Blaine County Schools has the basic structure of such a network and we believe it is advantageous to maximize the network as an effective communication and engagement tool. Business and community leaders in the focus groups are interested in what is happening in the schools and could be more effective ambassadors for the district and its schools if kept up to date and provided with key messages.

The purpose of this group is to identify people who are opinion leaders and communicators in their respective circles and share information with them so they become more knowledgeable about the schools and can alert the Board and administration to rumors or concerns circulating in the community. Their role is also to help contribute current, accurate information about school issues in conversations with family, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

To organize a Key Communicators’ Network, ask each principal, district administrator and Board member to recommend two or three people – parents or community members – who are well known, respected in their neighborhood or the community, and who have an interest in the schools. In addition, add the names of local leaders of well-known organizations or businesses in the community. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible. Membership should be limited to a manageable size that allows for productive face-to-face meetings.

Each person should receive a letter from the superintendent explaining the key communicator concept and inviting him or her to participate. Members should meet two to four times a year with the superintendent. Depending on the size of the group, these meetings could be broken down into smaller groups and held at different times. At these meetings the superintendent should outline overall plans, explain the background of issues, both current and potential, and respond to questions.

Between meetings, each key communicator should receive copies of all district publications, updates on Board actions and decisions, and information on special events or crisis incidents. This information could be easily delivered in an electronic news format. We suggest that an e-mail database be set up in order to deliver important information or breaking news to key communicators as quickly as possible. They should also be given a “hot line” number and contact to call if they need information or an erroneous statement or rumor needs correcting.

The goal is to establish a two-way communication network so that key communicators become better informed and are able to receive and provide prompt responses to questions, concerns or issues that arise in the community. It is also important to identify key communicators on staff and enlist their aid in disseminating information internally (see Recommendation 5).

- **Continue to use the district’s website as a key communication tool.** School district websites often provide the first impression people have of the district and schools. They also offer a fast and economical way to communicate time-sensitive information to large numbers of a district’s many audiences. While the website will not eliminate other communication channels, its role as an important communication tool will continue to grow as more people gain Internet access. The district’s website is generally well-designed, attractive and easy to navigate. We commend Blaine County Schools for realizing the value of creating a website that is user-friendly and functional. We encourage the district to continue this focus and to keep using its website as one of its main communication strategies.
- **Develop guidelines for teachers to post information on Skyward Family Access.** There is no question that most parents greatly appreciate the information that is provided through the Skyward Family Access system. The one concern that arose in the focus groups was that information is not consistently posted by teachers. Some teachers post on a more regular schedule while others are inconsistent or infrequent posters. We recommend that the district work with principals and teacher representatives to develop guidelines and expectations for when and how often information is updated on Skyward Family Access. This working group should establish guidelines that are reasonable and that fit expectations of parents. Once finalized, the guidelines should be shared with all teachers so they know what is expected of them. The guidelines should also be communicated to parents so they know when to expect information to be posted.

## **Recommendation 7: Develop marketing strategies to continue to enhance the image of the district and schools, and to connect with new residents.**

Blaine County Schools is recognized as an outstanding school district and clearly has a reputation as a “destination” district for families seeking excellent educational opportunities for their children. The district is in the fortunate position of being able to focus on maintaining and building its strong reputation. Nonetheless, a good reputation is something that can quickly turn negative if it is not effectively managed and tended to. We recommend that Blaine County Schools invest in strategies that will help to market and positively position the district and its schools with current families and residents as well as prospective families and staff members. To this end, Blaine County Schools should consider developing a marketing plan, which could include the following strategies:

- **Develop targeted information materials.** Information packets should be developed to focus on a variety of audiences, including real estate agents, families new to the district, business leaders, community development representatives and potential teacher candidates. Materials should be included specific to the audience or purpose. For example, a teacher recruitment packet could include a list of quotes from teachers about what it is like to teach in Blaine County Schools, along with salary and benefit information. What will make these materials most effective is to provide information specific to the target group so people do not have to sift through information that is not relevant to them. These materials could also be posted on the district’s website or created in an electronic format to be e-mailed to interested individuals.
- **Implement a “See for Yourself” program.** One of the most effective ways of demonstrating the quality of educational programs is to let people see teaching and learning in action. “See for Yourself” or “Shadow Day” opportunities enable business leaders, community members and parents to spend a couple of hours or a day following a principal, teacher or student. These opportunities are similar to the “Academy in Action” activity that the district conducted in the past. This first-hand experience is especially enlightening for those who may not have been in school for a long time. Designed primarily to provide a greater understanding of the district for external audiences, this type of program also exposes district staff to different ideas and perspectives and provides a channel for dialogue between school leaders and community residents (many of whom may not have children in schools) on the challenges facing today’s schools. The program should include a “debriefing” at the end of the day for participants to discuss their observations and ask questions.
- **Implement an outreach campaign to real estate agents.** Many school districts have made a concerted effort to nurture strong relationships with real estate agents, which enables them to promote the merits of the district and accurately respond to questions about the schools. Real estate agents are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community and they play an important role in creating a positive “first impression” of the schools; so it is important for them to present accurate information about Blaine County Schools in their discussions with prospective buyers.



One way to share information with local real estate agents is an information seminar. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year in one of your schools. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Provide them with information packets and a checklist of information that is available on the district website. The district may also want to offer agents materials that they can give to clients when showing homes in the district.

By working with the state Realtors association, it may be possible to obtain continuing education credit for the seminar, which provides further incentive for agents to attend. In some districts, real estate broker or agent groups are now funding the cost for a district to host a seminar. The district might want to investigate possibilities for partnering with a real estate group to provide information sessions or seminars. Real estate agents are key communicators who need to be kept informed on how the district is handling current issues so that they do not give out false impressions or inaccurate information about Blaine County Schools.

- **Evaluate “first impressions” at all district schools.** We recommend that Blaine County Schools examine the first impressions that visitors get when calling or visiting a school. While employees are well-intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception based on how a phone is answered or the “curb appeal” of a school building. Some districts use “secret shoppers” to conduct a review of how visitors are approached, whether the school presents a welcoming façade and how problems are handled. Once a school has been evaluated, we recommend that an improvement team of staff and parents be created to address problems identified and make specific suggestions about how to improve the “first impression” environment in the schools.
- **Develop guidelines for offering school tours.** Research indicates that people who have recently been inside a school building have a better impression of schools than those who have not. We recommend that the district develop guidelines for offering school tours to community members, and particularly parents of preschool students. A school tour is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighborhood residents and prospective families to promote the benefits of the schools. Along with developing guidelines, training should be provided to key staff and to student leaders who could serve as tour guides.
- **Create a “Moving to Blaine County School District” section on the district website.** For many new or prospective families, the first connection with any school district is through the district’s website. We recommend that the district create a section on the website that serves as the major source of information for families considering a move into the area. Much of the information included in the marketing materials recommended above should also be included in this section.

## **Recommendation 8: Continue to expand the use of social media strategies to communicate and connect with stakeholders.**

The exploding use of social media tools has opened another set of communication strategies for school districts. In some ways, getting a handle on an ever-expanding set of strategies can be challenging. At the same time, the wide array of social media tools currently available allow districts to communicate and connect with stakeholders in different ways. Social media tools should not be approached with fear and nervousness, but with optimistic possibility for expanding ways to communicate and build relationships with stakeholders.

Blaine County Schools has already dipped its toe in the social media pool by launching its Facebook page. Like most districts, Blaine County Schools is seeing a small, but regularly increasing number of “friends” connecting with the district on Facebook. Even though initial numbers are small, we recommend that the district continue to use Facebook and other social media outlets to communicate. There are more and more people – especially young parents and recent alumni – who will choose Facebook or other social media outlets as their way to stay connected with the district. It is unlikely that the number of people who connect with the district’s Facebook page will ever outpace the numbers of people who receive information about the district in other ways. However, Facebook and other social media outlets have tremendous potential to be effective strategies for communicating with stakeholders.

As the district creates its communication plan (as noted in Recommendation 1), we recommend that the following social media strategies be considered as ways to communicate and connect with stakeholders:

- **Develop user guidelines for the district’s Facebook page.** We recommend that the district develop user guidelines that can be posted on its Facebook page to guide the use of the page. These guidelines do not and should not be complicated, but should provide expectations for how the page will be used. NSPRA may be able to provide some samples of guidelines, upon request.
- **Post discussion topics on the district’s Facebook page to solicit feedback and input.** While Facebook is an effective way to share information and push people to the district’s website for more information, it can also be used as an engagement tool. We recommend that the district post questions and discussion topics on current issues and encourage the exchange of ideas and input. It is important to re-emphasize the user guidelines for discussion to keep it focused on the topic, but other than regular monitoring of the page, it is a fairly simple and inexpensive way to seek feedback.
- **Implement a Twitter account for the district.** Twitter is another simple and inexpensive way to share short news items and announcements with stakeholders. Once the district creates its Twitter account – which is done by logging onto Twitter and following the simple instructions – people can begin to “follow” the district. One of the most effective uses of Twitter is to draw people to the district’s website and Facebook page for more information or to share input.

- **Cross promote the district’s social media outlets in district publications and on the district’s website.** The best way to get stakeholders to use the district’s Facebook page and Twitter account is to aggressively promote their use. We recommend that the district regularly promote its Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets in its regular publications and on its website. Individuals who are not currently aware of the district’s Facebook and Twitter presence will not be looking for these accounts unless they are drawn to them in some other way. Promotion should be done on an ongoing basis.
- **Schedule special announcements on Facebook and Twitter as a way to boost participation.** Many businesses have effectively used special announcements to increase the number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers. For example, concert promoters make announcements on Facebook first before the information is released to the public. Because people are interested in getting information early, they will sign up on Facebook or Twitter to be part of the special announcement. While it may be more difficult to identify special announcements for school districts, it is an effective tool to boost participation. Examples of special announcements for Blaine County Schools could include the availability of the next Board agenda, position hiring announcements, posting of information on the district’s website and “good news” about student and staff accomplishments. Facebook or Twitter should not be the only source for this information, but it could be the first place the information is available.
- **Consider the use of a blog by the superintendent.** A blog can be an effective way to share information with stakeholders in a less formal manner. It can also be an effective way to solicit comments and feedback. Leaders in other school districts across the country have used blogs to stimulate discussion around a current issue and to get stakeholders to think about an important issue. Like Facebook, it is important to lay out some guidelines on how the discussion will be managed and to keep it focused on the topic at hand. The use of a blog is also more immediate in that it can be posted quickly as supposed to being printed in a publication or newspaper.

It is important to note that Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets will not replace other communication strategies. However, using these communication tools will help the district reach more stakeholders and communicate with them in a way that they are seeking and consuming information.

## **Recommendation 9: Provide communication training to district staff members.**

In order for Blaine County Schools to have a strong and effective communication program, it is essential for all employees to understand their role in building positive relationships for the district. To meet the current and ongoing needs of the district’s staff members, we recommend that district leaders consider an investment in regular communication training for staff members. Priority should be given to the following types of training sessions:

- **Communication with parents.** Even though some teachers are strong in this area, it is important to support all instructional staff with strategies to help them communicate more effectively with parents in informal situations and at formal activities such as open house programs and parent conferences. NSPRA’s communication guidebook and CD for teachers, *Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy*, may be a useful resource.
- **Public engagement.** For any public engagement effort to be successful, it is essential that Board members and district administrators have a thorough knowledge of the engagement process. Understanding how strong engagement efforts can have a positive impact on the way the Board of Trustees operates and makes decisions would be beneficial to district leaders.
- **Customer service training.** By establishing standards of service and providing staff with training in phone etiquette, dealing with difficult people and general communication expectations of “customers,” the district will support them in their roles as ambassadors. First priority should be given to “front-line” staff in school and district offices. NSPRA has a CD training product, *Unlocking Sensational Customer Service: Tools for Tapping the People Power in Your Schools*, which could be used for staff in-service sessions.
- **Crisis communication.** While some employees are more involved in dealing with crisis situations than others, it is essential that regular training and review of crisis procedures be conducted. We recommend that effective communication be included in all training sessions about dealing with crises and crisis response.
- **Media relations.** Principals and other key administrators could benefit from regular opportunities to hone their media relations and interviewing skills. Offering basic media contact training for administrators and staff on what constitutes a news story and how to alert the media about a special event will help the district tell its story to the public. The training should also explain the role of the media vs. the district’s responsibility to communicate directly with stakeholders.

### **Recommendation 10: Consider creating a full-time position to direct and manage the district’s communication program.**

Blaine County Schools is receiving considerable benefits from its current investment in communication. The primary responsibility for the communication function rests with an administrative assistant position, which is held by Kate Heinecke. There are many positive results from her work, with the most significant area being the district’s website. Focus group participants cited many positive aspects about the website in their comments.

The district’s ability to accomplish more through its communication efforts will depend on its future investment in the function. Maintaining the current investment will likely provide the same result as in the past. However, a greater investment of both time and financial resources will allow Blaine County Schools to achieve more in the area of communication and to more aggressively accomplish the strategies listed in this report.

To this end, we recommend that Blaine County Schools consider the creation of a full-time director of communication position to oversee the district's communication program. This position could help expand resources and the focus on communication and engagement in the district. We strongly believe that any additional investment in this area will pay huge dividends in the future. NSPRA can provide sample job descriptions for this position upon request.

## **Considerations for Staffing and Implementing Recommendations**

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication, engagement and marketing needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* and it would be unrealistic to expect Blaine County Schools to undertake all of them immediately. This report contains many more recommendations than can be accomplished in a single year, particularly without a dedicated communication position. We present them to provide district leaders with overall guidelines for establishing a long-range strategic communication plan. This report can then be used to help identify target areas to address each year. It is important to keep this in perspective so that the implementation of a strategic communication program does not seem overwhelming at the start. But as evident in this report, building the type of communication program Blaine County Schools needs to advance its mission of helping every student succeed will require a full-time effort.

In order to support the districts efforts to successfully implement a strategic communication plan it is important that consideration be given annually to the budgetary and personnel resources that will be needed as communication needs grow. The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive and district leaders must prioritize by need and importance how communication resources are expended.

A number of the recommendations in this report involve communication activities that can be managed at the school level by principals. Each school can also create a communication team of staff and parents to assist with newsletters, websites, surveys, staff celebration and recognition activities, and other events. In any successful communication program, it is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools.

However, in the long-term, we believe Blaine County Schools will need to give serious consideration to creating a full-time communication position in order to maximize communication, engagement and marketing efforts and develop the strategic communication program that it desires. Today's successful school systems recognize that communication is most effective when it is a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. Recognizing that budget limitations are a concern, we have tried to provide recommendations that can be implemented at minimal expense or by reallocating existing funds. One example is the suggested change in the "Partners in Education" inserts to monthly ads. However, it is also important that staffing and budget allocations for communications be reviewed annually to determine needs and ensure continued effectiveness.

Making the commitment to improve communication is the first step in creating a successful two-way communication process that builds support for education and understanding

of the important role of public schools in our communities and nation. We believe that Blaine County Schools has the components necessary to continue to improve and excel – visionary leadership, dedicated staff, strong community support, and a commitment to planned, strategic communication.



## Perceptions of the Focus Groups

The following is a summary of comments and perceptions gathered in focus group sessions held during the on-site visit April 14-15, 2010. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the auditor's questions. Rather, it summarizes what the auditor felt were significant beliefs, concerns and suggestions of participants. *It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.* Input from the focus groups led to many of the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report*.

### Group: Parent Group #1

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

#### Current Strengths

- Board meetings are available online.
- District uses technology effectively to communicate with parents.
- Using the text-messaging system is very positive.
- "Partners in Education" newspaper insert; gets information to people who may not be involved.
- Foundation also has a newsletter which is informative.
- Seems like there is a new spirit of openness and doing better to help communicate with the community.
- Seems like district is soliciting parent feedback and input in a more heartfelt way.
- The audit is a good step in the right direction of wanting to get feedback from parents.
- Superintendent met with small groups during the levy to share information.
- District seems to want to be more open and transparent; seems like it is not quite as secretive.
- More open to partnerships with other organizations to share information.

#### Communication Challenges

- Need to push more information to parents and not rely on the newspaper.
- Needed to communicate that not all money from the levy was going to building projects.
- District needs to share more information about what is happening in the district.
- Negativity appears in the newspaper without a balanced view from the district.
- District needs to be open to people who come here from other parts of the country with high expectations about education and who have their own sense of a "gold standard" of education.



- Have seen defensiveness and suspicion of people who come with different ideas.
- There is a perception of people of being too demanding.
- Hiring of assistant superintendent from within shows a little bit of suspicion of outside viewpoints.
- Hiring of assistant superintendent did not get communicated much until after it happened.
- Sense that the district is not always being truthful with parents.
- May perceive that data is not correct because of trust issues.
- See district as being too political.
- Need community to understand district leaders as people and have opportunities to engage with them.

### **Current Image**

- Blaine County Schools is the “crown jewel” when compared with other Idaho districts.
- Perceived as progressive with a lot of parent involvement and money.
- People who lived elsewhere came here for the schools.
- School district is very “smug” and is satisfied with being the best in Idaho.
- Superintendent Barber is willing to look beyond and compare beyond the state.
- Used to be complacent about image because of great past performance.
- Strategic planning helped promote larger goals of bigger comparisons.
- There is a perception that district leaders choose who they want on committees.
- Parents are raising the bar and district is responding.
- Have brought in more progressive thinkers to the district.
- District is evolving and the “measurement yardstick” is more of a national yardstick with broader comparisons and not just statewide.

### **Sources of Information**

- Try to attend Board meetings or listen to it online.
- Newspaper.
- PTA meetings.
- Can volunteer on committees.
- Talk to principals and others who are in the know in the district.
- Grapevine.

### **Information Desired**

- Information is flowing outward from district and schools.
- Website is extensive and provides a lot of good information.
- Information is made available for people on the website.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Some parents would like to know more about IB program; the district has a good story to tell and needs to share more information.
- Need to provide more positive information rather than just on the controversial issues.
- Refueling facility issue has created some distrust; district said it was not going to do it, but then decided to do it.

- District needs to do a better job of sharing their messages and reasons behind decisions.
- Need to share information with community in multiple ways.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- E-mail works well.
- Send regular information through e-mail newsletter.
- Need to have multiple ways so all people have access.
- Need a multi-prong approach to communicate.
- Need to make sure information is translated for non-English-speakers.
- Need to do a better job of selecting people to be involved in committees.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Have opportunities now, but have not necessarily had them in the past.
- Have to push yourself to be involved; district does not always seek people out.
- Parent organizations could play a role in sharing input.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Need to have more information shared with parents.
- Need to build trust with the community.
- Push information through the local newspaper.
- Need to make the case that a strong school district will make the community a better place.
- Need to better market and position the district as a quality place.
- Need to see more positive information to counter all of the negative stuff in the past.

## **Group: Parent Group #2**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- There is a great deal of information provided on the district's website.
- Board meetings are available to view online.
- Text-messaging system to communicate with parents.
- Good to communicate through the newspaper.
- "Partners in Education" piece inserted in the newspaper helps to share information with community.
- Handouts that students bring home help parents stay well-informed.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Information is inconsistently shared by schools; informational folders are sent out at different times so parents have information before or after others.
- More information could be shared electronically to save paper.
- E-mail could be used more to share information.
- Need to continue to focus on what was included in the levy so people know how their money is being used.

### **Current Image**

- District has a good image and is viewed as having a lot of money.
- Known as a wealthy district.
- Have many great students and great teachers.
- Viewed as a strong district, but this image could change in the future.
- Ill-conceived perception that the quality of education in the district depends on where you live in the valley.
- Some perceive that schools in the north are better.
- May be need for some marketing in district between schools to address issues.
- Different opportunities available at different schools within the district.

### **Sources of Information**

- Website.
- Newspaper.
- Employees.
- Word of mouth.
- Involvement in school activities.
- Skyward Family Access system is helpful source of information.
- Get information from students.

### **Information Desired**

- Information from teachers on Skyward Family Access system is not always updated.
- Information on Skyward Family Access system varies by teacher; consistent standards for sharing information are needed.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- More information about what is happening in the district.
- Need facts about what happens at schools.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- E-mails work well.
- Access through phone calls.
- Need to use newspapers to share information with people who don't have kids in school.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- District seems to be grateful for any involvement.
- There are a vast number of opportunities for involvement.
- Can be as involved as you want to be.
- Opportunities are there if you are willing and able to participate.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- May need to improve how we communicate with Hispanic families.
- Need to work on building relationships between Anglo and Hispanic cultures.
- May need to share more information about the dual immersion program so people will better understand.

- Find better ways to share information instead of “backpack delivery.”
- Select one day when information folders go out to students.
- Newspaper should not be the first place people see information about the district.
- Consider using an automated phone system to share information with parents.

### **Group: Parent Group #3**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

#### **Current Strengths**

- Middle school does a great job informing parents.
- Website is a great source of information.
- Web-streaming of school Board meetings.
- Skyward Family Access is a great source of information.
- People in the district offices are very accessible to meeting with parents.
- Teachers are open to communicating with parents.
- Teachers make a big effort to communicate with parents.
- Text-messaging update system is helpful for parents.

#### **Communication Challenges**

- District has a hard time listening to parents who have differing opinions.
- District uses a lot of old ways of communicating; too much paper coming home with students.
- Follow-up information needs to be shared with parents in emergency situations.
- Perception that there needs to be more parent input when hiring district positions.
- Need more transparency on important issues.
- General feeling in the community that the district is a “good old boys” network.
- Things feel “sneaky” and not planned; like things are trying to be sneaked onto the Board agendas.
- Feel that parent representatives on hiring committees are hand-picked.
- Don’t like the fact that building projects have been put before curriculum issues.

#### **Current Image**

- District is seen as having top-down decision-making.
- Parents feel helpless because it does not seem that district cares about sharing ideas.
- District engages with parents, but does not always use the input.
- Community members stop coming when input is not used.

#### **Sources of Information**

- Newspaper.
- Information is available, but parents often have to seek out information.
- Different schools have different strengths related to communication.
- High school needs to do a better job communicating directly with parents.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Testing schedule and background information from schools.
- Information on open positions before hiring is completed.
- Information on how parents are selected to serve on hiring committees.
- Share the process for forming district committees.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- E-mail.
- Should schedule town hall meetings for parents and community members to share input with school Board.
- Forum with Board members and parents.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Feel like the district does not always want parent input.
- Parents do not see how the district wants to work collaboratively with them.
- Do not necessarily see how the district is using the input when the decision is different than what parents wanted.
- Need to find ways to have other voices included in the process.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Need to streamline communication through the use of e-mail.
- Need to make sure parents are well-informed on emergency issues.
- Agendas for Board meetings should be shared earlier so parents have enough lead time to share input on agenda items.
- Need to have ways to connect with Board; Board should ask more questions.

### **Group: Parent Group #4**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Skyward Family Access system has good information for parents.
- Text-messaging system in emergencies is effective.
- E-mails from schools as reminders.
- E-mails from teachers.
- Written message from principal on weekly basis.
- Friday folders have great information; distribution varies by school.
- Nice to get monthly calendar of events.
- School websites have a lot of information.
- Feel like the superintendent and administrators are very accessible to parents.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Share more information on district budget and how money is spent.
- Parents have higher expectations of the district to meet needs.

- Need to help parents with tools to support children.
- Provide information on options for parents for after-school child care.
- Need to have more consistency among teachers and principals on communicating with parents.
- District needs to communicate how parent input is used in decision-making.

### **Current Image**

- Progressive image because of the quantity and quality of programs offered to students.
- May be perceived as an “elitist” area.
- Reality is that the district is very well-funded compared to other Idaho districts.
- There has been controversy around curriculum in the district; communication needs to continue around the issues to back down the emotion surrounding the.

### **Sources of Information**

- Newspaper.
- Word of mouth.
- Get information from Board members.

### **Information Desired**

- More detailed information about is happening in the district.
- District should provide more factual information to counter rumors that circulate.
- Parents need to know where to go to find information.
- Information about important issues needs to be shared on an ongoing basis so parents can continue to follow the issue.
- When information is not offered, people get angry and start rumors.
- Need to understand what value the community receives from funding the district at a high level.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Need more information on International Baccalaureate program.
- Want to know how the district is meeting the goals of the strategic plan; information should be shared in multiple ways.
- Tell the whole story about the district’s academic statistics; do not report data with Hispanic student data removed.
- People want to see how kids who are not in dual immersion can be exposed to global languages.
- Need to share the benefits of being a well-funded school district.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- Need information in as many formats as possible.
- E-mail information.
- Find ways to best meet the needs of individual parents.
- Consistency of communication; need to be more predictable in delivering information.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Parents want to be partners with the district and want to be involved.
- Need to know that involvement will be used and lead to a positive change.
- Parents need to understand from the district the results that will come from parent participation.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Tell people how the IB program will be rolled out in the district.
- Need to “over-communicate” and get information out to parents in multiple ways.
- Need to continue to work on connecting and communicating with Hispanic families.
- Have newspaper do a weekly column from the superintendent.
- Continue to share positive information on students.
- Communicate to the public all the time, not just when the district needs money.
- Follow through with communication so parents know the results and decisions from involvement.

### **Group: Business/Civic Leaders**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- City has monthly meetings with the superintendent and business director.
- Board seems to hire the right people with the right skill sets.
- Have an open line of communication and a great relationship with the district.
- Great website that is full of information.
- Relationship with recreation department is great; have great connections that benefit residents of the district.
- Focused on communicating and engaging with parents.
- Have good connections between cities and district.
- Quality of school district is touted as a community development tool.
- Quality of district is a key factor in recruiting businesses and families to the area.

### **Communication Challenges**

- There is a disconnect between the district and some elements of the community.
- May lack common understanding of important issues.
- District leaders have a tendency to retreat on tough issues; they need to stay connected until issues are resolved.
- There is a perception that the administration runs the Board rather than the Board directing the administration; though this perception is less so now than in the past.
- Execution of plans is not always well organized.
- Trust issues exist between the district and community.
- Past Board chair was less open and interested in public opinion.
- See some Board members as interested in public opinions.

- Public may feel shut out on some issues because they are not able to comment on individual issues at board meetings.
- Need more opportunities for people to comment about issues being discussed at board meetings.

### **Current Image**

- Seems to be a lack of transparency at some board meetings.
- Appearance of some back room decisions at board level instead of openly discussing issues.
- General perceived gap between the community's view of the quality of schools and how the district sees itself.
- Involvement of community is asked, but district is not always willing to listen.
- Fair to say that there can be arrogance by the district around certain issues and an unwillingness to listen.
- District does not have a communication department to handle these issues.
- Problem with the way information is managed; a communication expert could help the district to manage the communication function.
- Vocal minority can currently swing the perception of the school district.

### **Sources of Information**

- Word of mouth from teachers, parents and students.
- Some information gathered from newspaper.
- District's website.
- Get e-mails from individual schools.
- Daily interaction with staff in district.
- Direct mail and informational packets from schools.

### **Information Desired**

- May not be getting detailed information about important issues.
- Want to know how to better connect with district.
- District needs to improve follow-up process and get back to people who have questions.
- Need to know if and when information is going to be shared with community.
- Need to see how input is used to help shape decisions.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Would like to know what happens in a typical day of a school and how time is used to help students.
- Would like to know how in-service days are used.
- Information would help the community understand what is happening and be more understanding of how time is used.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- Need to improve the process of two-way communication between district and stakeholders.
- Need to have the district respond in a timely manner.
- Need to have a tone of willingness and transparency.



### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Struggle between defensiveness around certain issues that gets in the way of collaboration and engagement.
- Trust and transparency is creating an obstacle.
- Need Board to set the direction and the administration carry out the Board's direction.
- Great on the outreach to parents and community, but more dialogue and follow-up is needed.
- Need to be cognizant of the tone of communication from the district.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Need to have better follow-through on questions from the public.
- Need to have a reconnection to make sure people feel as though their time is valued.
- Need to build capacity to better respond to community requests and questions.
- Need to exhibit genuine openness and collaboration.
- Need to have more transparency and openness.
- Strategic plan is elaborate and maybe there is a need for greater focus and understanding on how the plan translates to the success of the kids.
- People need to understand the details of the district's strategic plan.

### **Group: Seniors/Empty Nesters**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- District has made a concerted effort since last school Board election to be more transparent.
- District has been working on sharing information through website.
- District has been working on trying to improve communication.
- Tours of the schools were helpful for residents to better understand what is happening in the schools.
- "Partners in Education" insert in the newspaper is informative.
- Appreciate the district's openness.
- District is not afraid to embrace difference.
- District is willing to find ways to improve and does not deny that they need to improve.
- Can call and reach people in the administration; people are open and willing to dialogue.
- Appreciate that they reach out to people without kids in schools.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Not successfully imparting the quality of education as well as they could; there are great things happening but the wider community does not necessarily know what is happening in schools.
- Do not understand the benefits that are coming from the amount of funding invested in the schools.
- District needs to be reminded that communication needs to be diplomatic.
- District sometimes "shoots itself in the foot."
- District needs a fulltime director of communication to help guide communication issues.

- Public relations is important and should be funded.
- Feel as though there is a divide between north and south schools.
- Do not feel that Board is working together as much as they should.
- False information can be circulated quickly and need the district to pay attention to countering misinformation and rumors.
- Blaine County is a diverse community, but that diversity is an asset.
- Getting involvement of Hispanic parents in the district is a challenge; need to continue to find ways to connect with Hispanic families.

### **Current Image**

- Wonder about the quality of education in the district compared to the money being spent.
- People may not fully understand the direction of the district.
- Best spokespeople are the teachers, but teachers generally do not understand that they are role models and leaders.
- Students need to understand that they are representatives of the community and the quality of education.
- District needs to deal with the perceptions that the community has of the schools.

### **Sources of Information**

- Features on students at high school in the “Weekly” newspaper.
- Information included in the “Partners in Education” newspaper insert.
- Involvement in school committees and activities.

### **Information Desired**

- Information may not be provided if people are not directly involved in the district.
- People may not be aware of what they do not know about the district.
- Would like know how funds are being used.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- People are interested in learning about accomplishments of students.
- Community needs to hear what kids are saying about the district.
- Need to know the vision and direction of the new high school.
- Need connection with the new principal of the high school.
- District needs to realize that its competition is beyond schools in Idaho.
- Teachers need to better prepare students.
- Teachers need to be better spokespeople for the district.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- Newspaper; younger generations do not read the paper as much.
- Find ways to draw senior citizens into the schools.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Need to find ways to better engage Hispanic families.
- Need to have opportunity to go into schools and see what is going on.
- Find ways to bring people into schools and connect them to the schools.

- Find ways to take advantage of the expertise and knowledge that residents possess.
- Need to find ways to have high school teachers open to using community members to work with students.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Need to take advantage of data and information that is collected.
- Continue to share photographs and stories of graduation seniors.
- Need to work harder to inform seniors who may not be actively involved in the district.
- Need to find ways to tap seniors into things that are happening in the schools.
- Involve seniors in programs that are happening in the schools.
- Need opportunities to connect with district leaders.
- District needs to work on trust issues with the community.

### **Group: Teachers**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Updates on health insurance sent from Human Resources.
- Use of the local newspaper to respond to issues.
- Information is presented in a professional manner.
- District is open to sharing information.
- Emergency alert text system works well.
- Website is well done and informative.
- Skyward Family Access is very helpful.
- Good links on the website to help get communication from other places.
- Parents can access teachers through the website.
- New phone system upgrade has helped parents to contact teachers.
- Orientation program is good; do a good job preparing people to work in system.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Challenge in communicating with parents who do not speak English.
- Greater use of technology to communicate is isolating people who do not have access to technology.
- Need to find a better way for teachers to share information between buildings.
- Need more information about what happens at the district office.
- Need to keep teachers in the loop on new hires and why positions are needed.
- District leaders need to be more visible in the schools.
- District leaders need to seek more feedback from teachers and other employees.
- Need technology staff and others to understand what it is like to be in the classroom and to seek input from teachers before implementing technology.

### **Current Image**

- People from other areas see this district as better because of its level of funding.
- District has a strong reputation and is known as a district that prepares students well.
- Strong support from the community in supporting levies.
- Forward-thinking and known as a district that is progressing and looking ahead.
- Seen as progressive compared to other districts in Idaho, but may not be as progressive when compared with districts in other states.
- Public has high expectations and wants to see all needs met.
- The perception that, “You should be able to do it because you’re Blaine County” is widely held.
- Often seen as privileged; perception may not match the reality of what is here.
- People from outside the district do not understand the diversity in the district.
- District is perceived as “jumping on the next new thing” without following through on implementation on previous programs.

### **Sources of Information**

- Website.
- Principal e-mails.
- Faculty meetings; every school shares information differently.
- Newspaper.
- Information and gossip through the grapevine.

### **Information Desired**

- Information is available, but individuals often need to seek it out.
- Need to communicate long-range data about how new programs are working over time.
- Need more time to reflect on what programs are being implemented.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Current status of strategic initiatives and where district is headed in the future.
- Information does not always filter down to teachers.
- Large size of district has taken away some of the personal feel of a smaller district.
- Need for more opportunities for healthy communication between teachers and district office leaders.
- Teachers need to feel empowered about helping the district to move ahead.
- Need to better understand the economic issues and how teachers are affected.
- Concern that teachers have not received raises for the past few years, but new positions have been added at the district office.
- Need to share results of surveys so teachers know feedback is being used.
- Need to better assess the quality of programs that are implemented.
- Need to see data about how students are doing in the dual immersion program.
- Need to have more materials on dual immersion program.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- E-mail works for information-sharing.
- Need to have more opportunities for dialogue.

- Need to have face-to-face contact.
- Trust-building and idea-sharing happens when teachers get to share their input and feedback.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Many opportunities for input came with the strategic planning process.
- May give input, but it may not always be heard and incorporated.
- Surveys are done but results are not shown.
- Not always sure committee involvement is meaningful.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Have more time available to have conversation and connection.
- More time to work with people in other buildings and to connect with grade-level colleagues.
- Like to feel that they have truly been heard and not just asked.
- Create a regular newsletter to share what is happening in the district.
- Need to provide more information to staff.
- Want to see district office employees in the schools more often.
- Better planning so principals are not out of the schools as often.
- Visit all parts of the schools and connect with all employees.

### **Group: Office Personnel and Support Staff**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Website is full of information on a variety of topics.
- Web-streaming of school Board meeting.
- Calendar of events listed on the web.
- Website can be translated into Spanish by clicking on a tab.
- Text-messaging system in district is effective.
- Staff can refer people to website for information.
- Skyward Family Access provides parents with information about students.
- Have all employment and position application information on line.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Difficult for all teachers to keep information in the Skyward Family Access system up to date.
- Many Hispanic parents may not have access to computers; have obstacles in communication because of lack of technology.
- Communication between schools and departments; employees do not necessarily know what is happening in other departments and in schools.
- Need better communication between departments.
- Information does not always filter down to levels from administrators and principals.
- Need to have information to employees flow more smoothly.

- Principals are out of the buildings too much, which affects the communication between the principals and building staff.
- District needs to schedule fewer and more effective meetings so principals can be available in schools.

### **Current Image**

- People come here for the schools.
- Good schools and safe for families.
- Have problem with people lying about where they live to get kids in school.
- Residency is an issue; need some better process to make sure people live in the district.
- Smaller student-to-teacher ratio is a draw for families and prospective teachers.
- There are many program and activity offerings for students.
- District is well-funded and organized to be able to meet the needs of students.
- Need to continue to communicate that the district is fiscally responsible.
- Outside image is that Blaine County Schools is spending more money than other Idaho districts.

### **Sources of Information**

- Website and calendar information.
- Announcements in the schools.
- Information through e-mails.
- Word of mouth and through other employees.
- District sometimes forgets to focus on internal communication.
- Need to do a better job of communicating with each other.
- Need to have more person-to-person contact to build relationships.

### **Information Desired**

- Information is available, but you often need to seek it out.
- Employees need to know where to go to find information if they want to be informed.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Need to know more about hiring of new staff.
- Need to know in buildings when people are going to be gone.
- Need to know if teachers are not going to be available for conferences.
- Need to have guidelines for teachers to update websites and to communicate with parents.

### **Best Way to Communicate**

- E-mail.
- Provide updates to staff members on what is happening.
- “Partners in Education” newsletter is a good way to communicate externally; main way to share information with people who do not have kids in schools.

### **Opportunities for Involvement and Input**

- Some employees have opportunities to be involved and some do not.
- Involvement depends on where people are on the “ladder” in the district.

- There is a perception that some employees are more valued than others.
- Need more opportunities for employees to share their views.
- District needs to listen to all employee groups.
- Support staff not always included in staff meetings.
- Support staff members need to be more engaged in classroom activities.
- Communication is inequitable and is different with employee levels.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Many of the communication tools already exist, but we need to better use them to communicate with staff.
- Need to find more ways to communicate other than staff meetings.
- Need more face-to-face opportunities to communicate.
- Need more direction of priorities from the top.
- Need ways to dispel rumors that get circulated; may not always know what is true and what is not.
- Custodians may not feel a part of the staff; need ways to better connect with support staff.
- Strategic planning process was great because it solicited input; need ongoing ways to communicate about progress and need to find ways to further engage people in other issues.
- Employees need to see the product of goals and what is happening.

### **Group: Principals**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Website is a good tool for communicating with parents.
- Have parents trained to look at the calendar on the website.
- Have strong administrators; principals talk about their schools and bring people in to be connected.
- Mindful of parents who are not English-speakers; continual push to reach out.
- Skyward Family Access is helpful for parents to see grades and student information.
- Staff buying into creating own websites; more and more people are involved.
- Younger teachers more likely to do websites.
- Get regular notifications of what is going on at elementary schools.
- Use e-mail a lot to communicate; send out a lot through electronic means.
- Web-streaming of school Board meetings.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Finding a way to connect better with high school parents.
- Keeping contact information up to date with parents.
- Ongoing challenge to keep in contact with parents of non-English-speaking families.
- Ongoing challenge to translate materials into Spanish.

- No centralized organization for our Hispanic community, which makes it more difficult to connect with families.
- Work schedules of Hispanic parents make it more challenging to connect with parents.
- Continuing challenge of finding ways to get good stories out about the district.
- District and schools need to be more proactive on sharing good news.
- Reporters do not come into schools for positive stories; district needs to take responsibility to share information on positive things.

### **Current Image**

- From a statewide perspective, district is seen as having many good things happening and as being an innovator and a model school district.
- Also viewed as a spoiled district that has everything.
- Core of community supports district and schools, but a small vocal minority has challenged the district on every issue.
- Small group of vocal parents has changed how the district has functioned.
- People may view district teachers as highly-paid and open to criticism especially in difficult economic times.
- Some parents would rather call the district office or Board instead of dealing with administrators at the school level.
- Modern forms of communication allow people to avoid being known; can create distrust anonymously without taking responsibility for their opinions.
- Have to caution people about effectively communicating to parents to make sure there is not anything misunderstood.
- Amazing pressure to make sure we are “perfect” with kids because some parents are ready to criticize the schools for things that they do not agree with.
- District has a lot of self-appointed experts; they do not see the professional level of the administrators and teachers in the community

### **Sources of Information**

- Newspaper.
- Word of mouth.
- Website.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Parents want information about other students that cannot be shared.
- Parents may want principals to violate laws to share information.
- Parents want information about student transitions to other schools and grade levels.
- Parents are asking questions related to curriculum.
- Questions about school Board and directions of the district.

(A portion of the principals’ focus group was used by the auditor to gain an understanding of issues that had surfaced during other conversations.)



## **Group: District Administrators**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Communicates well with Hispanic parents; most publications translated into Spanish.
- Very open and honest when sharing information and through community conversations.
- Parent liaison website helps parents navigate special education.
- Created a staff portal for staff to communicate.
- Administrators work well and communicate together.
- Tiered communication process that keeps administrators informed.
- All district administrators are issued cell phones for ready access.
- Most administrators have Blackberrys and are accessible.
- District is open to having a special forum when there is a significant community issue.
- Text-messaging system for parents.
- Hearing positive feedback on video streaming of Board meetings.
- Skyward Family Access system helps parents find information about their students.

### **Communication Challenges**

- Time; there is too much going on in the district and not enough time to keep people informed about the many projects.
- Challenge to keep track of what decisions are made; need a way to keep track of what was decided.
- Cell phone has created 24/7 accessibility; administrators are always “on.”
- Communication has become more rapid and has led to decision-making that is not always as thoughtful as it should be.
- Finding the appropriate means of communication to fully share information with people.
- People may be using texting and other electronic communication that can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding.
- Need to have more personal connection.
- Keeping up with the communication styles of the students; have a digital divide between staff and students.

### **Current Image**

- High performing school district.
- District is striving hard to improve achievement to be a model for other districts.
- Loaded with opportunities for kids.
- Silent majority of parents and community members that is very satisfied.
- Small group with issues that get more attention.
- Seems to be a high satisfaction rate, but vocal minority gets a lot of attention.
- People move here because of the schools.
- People sometimes sneak kids into the district because they want their kids to attend the schools.
- Other districts in the state view Blaine County Schools as highly funded.

- District reaches out to help others.

### **Sources of Information**

- Word of mouth and gossip.
- Sometimes things come out that are rumors and administrators need to respond.
- Need to have more information available to staff.

### **Information Desired**

- Some staff may feel that they are getting everything they need.
- Other staff members may not be as informed.
- Internal communication is an area that needs to be improved.

### **Information Not Currently Receiving**

- Perception that the district is not transparent.
- There is a perception that some issues may not be fully communicated.
- Sometimes information about the district that is not true gets provided by outside sources, which causes difficulties and rumors for the district.
- Work to be open to sharing information, but time can often affect how much can be shared.

### **One Thing to Improve Communication**

- Slow down and let our staff do some of our work; need others to help with the communication piece.
- District would benefit from internal blogging and document-sharing so committees can store and share information; could do a similar thing on the public side.
- Having available time to communicate is a challenge.
- Need to find other ways for public to comment.
- Need to find ways to communicate other than public meetings.

### **Group: Board of Trustees**

*It is important to note that thoughts and opinions shared by focus group participants were personal perceptions and not necessarily accurate or factual.*

### **Current Strengths**

- Have extraordinary group of building administrators who are dynamic and highly focused on their jobs.
- Website is a good thing and great source of information for community.
- Webcasting of school Board meetings is resonating for people.
- Have made strides in improving communication with the public.
- Added second opportunity for public comment at Board meetings.
- Local newspaper does a good job reporting school information.
- Working to be more responsive to public.
- Foundation is a great asset for the district.
- Text-messaging system is helpful in communicating with parents.
- Added Hispanic section on the website.

### **Communication Challenges**

- District works at communicating with public, but public often does not think the district communicates enough.
- Need to focus messages so public can clearly understand what district is communicating.
- Need to broaden engagement opportunities to hear from more people.
- Get more voices into the discussion.
- Need to continue to strengthen communication among Board members.
- The Board only has power as five and should not speak as one.
- Need to find ways for the public to more easily access Board members.
- Need to find ways to more effectively share information with the media.
- Need to communicate with different populations differently.
- Board members are elected from zones, but need to represent the entire community.
- Public needs to understand that individual Board members cannot act alone and concerns should be forward to the entire Board.
- Need to have Board members available to gather information from the public.
- Need the public to understand the reasons behind decisions.
- More communication of ongoing issues is needed before decisions are made.
- Not enough outreach to people who are not happy with Board decisions.

### **Current Image**

- “We hear from people that district is great, and from people who are not satisfied with anything that we do.”
- People may not understand the challenges and the demographics of the school district.
- Need to better communicate what is happening in the district.
- Perspective of people is often focused on individual students.
- Board needs to be aware of each student, but needs to take the needs of all students into account.
- District is perceived as being heavy-handed and forceful on certain processes.
- May not have done things to educate people about why the levy was needed and how the money would be used.
- Perceived as a wealthy district.
- Perceived as a district where people want to work.
- Have trust issues with public.
- Need to be better at “tooting our own horn.”
- Need to have more people know what is happening in the district.

### **Sources of Information**

- Grapevine.
- Conversations in community from people who are unhappy about the school district.
- Website is becoming a tool that more people are using.
- Word of mouth.
- Sense that the district does not provide enough information to the community.
- Need to have some regular tool to share information with Board members.
- More information about agenda items needs to be shared with Board members.

- Additional meetings would help to discuss issues and for Board to learn more about issues.
- May need a policy about chain of command; not going directly to Board members.

**One Thing to Improve Communication**

- More opportunities for teachers and other staff to share input and feedback with the Board.
- Need to build trust among teachers by listening to them.
- Need to have conversation with all stakeholders to discuss and find solutions.
- Find more ways to “toot our own horn” and share the good things happening in the school district.
- Schedule town hall meetings to solicit input.
- Provide regular reports to community.
- Keep kids as the centerpiece of the district and communication.



## Appendix

- Focus Group Questions
- What is NSPRA?
- Auditor's Vita



**Blaine County School District  
Focus Group Discussion Questions**

1. What are the current strengths of Blaine County School District's communication?
2. What are the communications challenges facing the district now and in the future?
3. What is the current image of the district?
4. Where do you currently get your information about what is happening in the district?
5. Do you receive the information you need from the district and the schools?
6. What information do you want that you are not currently receiving?
7. What is the best way for the district to communicate with you?
8. Do you have opportunities to be involved in the district and have input into decisions?
9. What one thing could the district do to improve communication?





## *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 Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

With 75 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files, and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

NSPRA has 32 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.

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

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each July. This four-day conference offers over 70 topics and expert speakers on a wide array of school communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement topics.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter, *Network*, is a communication resource for all school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major communication issue and offers proven strategies educators can use to address it and other concerns. *PRincipal Communicator* is our monthly building-level newsletter for school principals that provides practical communication tips to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.

Our four e-updates, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor*, *NSPRA Alert*, and *Opportunities* offer summaries of breaking national education news, in-depth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products and services available to educators. *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

The NSPRA website at [www.nspr.org](http://www.nspr.org) offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public site and more comprehensive, in-depth information in our Members Only section, including discussion forums, article archives and access to the e-Knowledge Portal of the Educational Research Service (ERS).

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

NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people. In addition, NSPRA is a sponsoring agency of the Educational Research Service (ERS).



## Robert B. Noyed, APR

Robert B. (Bob) Noyed, APR, brings over 24 years of experience as a school public relations professional and educational leader to his work as a communication auditor. He has worked directly with superintendents, school board members, principals and other school administrators, and understands the obstacles, challenges and opportunities in public schools.

Bob currently serves as Director of Communications for Wayzata Public Schools in Wayzata, Minnesota. Prior to joining the district, Bob was Assistant to the Superintendent for Community Relations in Elk River (MN) Area School District. He has also served as the Senior Associate for Community Relations for Robbinsdale (MN) Area Schools and ran his own communication consulting business specializing in education.

His primary work as a consultant has been to assist large and small school districts with referendum-related communication projects and other marketing efforts. His district responsibilities have included oversight of strategic planning and leading a team of stakeholders involved in creating a public engagement assessment tool in conjunction with NSPRA as part of research being done with the Kettering Foundation.

He has been and continues to be a frequent presenter at state and national conferences on topics including marketing of schools, crisis communications, customer service, public relations for principals and media relations. Bob also has experience in working with school districts on developing and implementing legislative communication efforts designed to advocate for key education issues with legislators and other elected officials.

Bob received his undergraduate degree in mass communications and English from St. Cloud State University, Minnesota. His education and training has continued with a focus on public relations, marketing, politics and K-12 education. He has also studied in the area of quality, continuous improvement and systems thinking. In 1998, he was one of 24 Minnesota educators selected to participate in the Bush Educators Program (Group IV) and completed this leadership program in June 2000. He co-wrote a book on education governance in Minnesota as part of this experience.

Bob served as 2006-07 NSPRA President. His involvement in NSPRA also includes a three-year term as the North Central Region Vice President, which ended in October 2002. He is the 2005 recipient of NSPRA's Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award, recognizing his work in mentoring new PR professionals and providing leadership in professional development. He co-authored NSPRA's best selling CD *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for tapping the people power in your schools* and edited the second edition of NSPRA's book, *School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education*. He also co-created the NSPRA New Professionals Program, which began in July 2001 and continues to be one of NSPRA's most popular professional development workshops. He has coordinated and facilitated the program each year since it began.

Bob has also co-written more than 150 non-fiction books for young children.

# Communication Audit Report

## **Blaine County School District Hailey, Idaho**

**September 2010**

**National School Public Relations Association**

# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- Take a snapshot of current internal and external communication activities



# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- Take a snapshot of current internal and external communication activities
- Discover what's working and what's not working



# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- Take a snapshot of current internal and external communication activities
- Discover what's working and what's not working
- Learn best ways to communicate with key target audiences





# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- **Assess content, channels, and frequency needs of audiences**



# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- **Assess content, channels, and frequency needs of audiences**
- **Assess communication capacity and credibility of communication effort**



# Communication Audit

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## Purposes

- **Assess content, channels, and frequency needs of audiences**
- **Assess communication capacity and credibility of communication effort**
- **Provide baseline data to measure progress in the future**



# Communication Audit

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## Process

- Review all current communication vehicles and tactics



# Communication Audit

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## Process

- Review all current communication vehicles and tactics
- Review organizational capacity, budget, and organizational flow of information



# Communication Audit

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## Process

- Review all current communication vehicles and tactics
- Review organizational capacity, budget, and organizational flow of information
- Facilitate focus group discussions to discover the “perception versus reality” areas of focus as well as communication gaps



# Communication Audit

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## Process

### ■ Analyze findings



# Communication Audit

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## Process

- Analyze findings
- Report on findings and recommendations for improvement





# Communication Audit

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## Key Points from Report

- Many good things happening and recognized by many
- Credit to board and superintendent for conducting audit – willingness to identify and address challenges
- Perceptions reflect beliefs of participants



# Communication Audit

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## Key Points from Report

- Findings similar to those in other districts
- Issues can be addressed with focused communication effort
- Seize audit as growth opportunity



# Communication Audit

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## Highlights of Findings

- District website is an effective form of communication
- “Word of mouth” and “local newspapers” as significant information sources
- Webcasting of board meetings well received



# Communication Audit

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## Highlights of Findings

- **Need to bolster internal communication**
- **Admirable effort in communicating with Hispanic families**
- **Trust has improved, but gap still exists**



# Communication Audit

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## Highlights of Findings

- Need to “tap the silent majority”
- Need to expand strategic plan to include communication and engagement strategies
- Current investment in communication needs boost to change results



# Communication Audit

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## Overview of Recommendations

- **Recommendation #1 – Create a strategic communication plan to support and coordinate with district’s existing strategic plan**
- **Recommendation #2 – Implement strategies to create a culture of communication in the district**



# Communication Audit

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## Overview of Recommendations

- **Recommendation #3 – Use key messages to focus communication on critical issues and to ensure consistency**
- **Recommendation #4 – Continue efforts to engage the community in the work of the district**



# Communication Audit

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## Overview of Recommendations

- **Recommendation #5 – Enhance communication content and processes to improve the flow of communication with staff members**
- **Recommendation #6 – Enhance communication with external stakeholders by increasing the flow of communication from the district to the community**





# Communication Audit

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## Overview of Recommendations

- **Recommendation #7 – Develop marketing strategies to continue to enhance the image of the district and schools, and to connect with new residents**
- **Recommendation #8 – Continue to expand the use of social media strategies to communicate and connect with stakeholders**



# Communication Audit

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## Overview of Recommendations

- **Recommendation #9 – Provide communication training to district staff members**
- **Recommendation #10 – Consider creating a full-time position to direct and manage the district’s communication program**



# Communication Audit

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## Implementation Suggestions

- One to three year implementation time line
- Three to five year implementation time line
- Long-range implementation time line



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