
The Whitefish Bay School District



An Exceptional Place To Learn

WHITEFISH BAY SCHOOL DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

June 2011

The Whitefish Bay School District



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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

The Whitefish Bay School Board and Superintendent Mary Gavigan are committed to ensuring the ongoing engagement of the entire Whitefish Bay School District community by building upon the school district's tradition of excellence with a comprehensive communications plan that focuses on its unique situation.

For that end, the district employed a process that was facilitated by the Donovan Group LLC, which sought to gain insight from stakeholders, address the district's unique communications opportunities and lead to a comprehensive communications plan.

The communications planning process began with the creation of a Superintendent's Advisory Committee made up of district staff, administration, school board members and members of the community. The committee worked throughout the winter to determine key district stakeholder groups and to create and launch a communications audit that served as the basis for this communications plan.

The plan that follows is based on the active engagement of the advisory committee and the input of hundreds of members of various district stakeholder groups. This plan begins by reviewing some principles and goals, follows the work of the committee by identifying stakeholder groups and communications tools and reviews the findings of the communications audit. It continues with a month-by-month review of communications efforts and concludes with suggestions for monitoring progress.

The plan will be formally presented to the school board as a final document in June.

PART 2: COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES AND GOALS

Communicating about schools and school districts is a unique type of communications endeavor in that the district must not only inform, but also be transparent in its work to students, parents, taxpayers and even those with whom the district does not have a direct connection.

With this in mind, the most basic principles of school district communications are to engage the public, to be truthful and to be completely transparent. It is important to keep in mind the specific principals of effective communication as was reinforced by the advisory committee.

ENGAGEMENT

The Whitefish Bay School District seeks to engage all community members and stakeholders in a conversation. Even community members who do not have children attending the schools are interested in the district. They may have an affinity for education or understand, based on their experiences, the importance of local public schools. Many residents who are taxpayers just want to know how their money is being spent. Whatever their reasons, the district must go beyond communicating *to* community members and instead communicate *with* them, keeping in mind that the best method of communication is *dialogue*.

With this goal in mind, our communication efforts will aim to engage the community in the challenges and opportunities facing the district. The details of how we will do so are described in greater depth later in this plan.

TRUTHFULNESS

The Whitefish Bay School District must be honest and transparent in communicating with the public. The single most important factor in the success of any communications effort is trust. In communicating about its schools, the district must do more than simply tell the truth; it must also be wary of overselling achievements or presenting information in any manner that appears less than completely forthright.

Moreover, the district will provide reliable information, for which it will be wholly accountable to community members, and will fully engage the public in the challenges and opportunities it faces.

TRANSPARENCY

Through its communications efforts, the Whitefish Bay School District will raise the level of dialogue about its schools by educating stakeholders on district processes, relevant state and federal laws, budget information, school finance and any other critical issues. This often involves communicating about the exceedingly difficult-to-explain state and federal policies and laws. It is these types of issues that, in many cases, the district must be the most eager to communicate.

The district must continue to invite any and all questions, responding as quickly, clearly and completely as possible.

CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT

As in other areas, the Whitefish Bay School District will continue to improve in its communications efforts. To that end, its progress will be regularly measured against clear, well-defined benchmarks through a constant process of evaluation

aimed at improving performance. This information is detailed in the last section of this document.

PART 3: STAKEHOLDERS AND TOOLS

This communications plan aims to reach every member of the district's staff, every single student attending the schools and their parents and each and every community member living in the Whitefish Bay School District. However, in order to effectively implement the plan, it is necessary to break our audience down into smaller stakeholder groups. These groups are as follows:

Existing students: With regard to students who are currently enrolled at our schools, we not only want to inform them about the district, but to also learn from their experiences.

District staff: The single most important group of district communicators is the district staff. Our staff members must be knowledgeable about the opportunities and challenges facing the district, as well as about how our schools and communities have been affected by the new state budget.

Parents of students enrolled in the district: Communicating with parents whose children are currently enrolled in Whitefish Bay schools is crucial, especially as state and federal-level policy changes are enacted.

Parents of preschool-aged children: Although parents whose children are not yet old enough to attend school are a critical stakeholder group, they are often not well-connected to our schools. The district must reach out and build a connection with these parents.

Parents of graduates: Parents who once had a strong connection to the schools while their children were students typically tend to be less engaged once their children have graduated. While these stakeholders' relationships with the schools change after their children move on, it is essential that, as community members, they continue to be engaged in the district's work.

Community members who do not have children: Community members who do not have children also have a vested interest in the district, if for no other reason than because the district contributes to the community in meaningful ways and because all homeowners, whether they have children or not, pay taxes that go toward the schools.

Parents whose children attend Whitefish Bay Schools, but who do not live in the community: The Whitefish Bay School District is the school district of choice for many families from outside the area. As these families make the

decision to send their children to the Whitefish Bay Schools, the district must ensure that they are engaged.

Alumni: Our alumni have a special connection to their schools. This relationship must be strengthened and fostered over time. The district must recognize, stay in touch with and receive feedback from this group.

Senior citizens: One of the groups that school districts tend to be the least connected to are seniors, despite their desire to know and understand what is happening in the schools. The district, like all others, must continue to create stronger bonds between the senior community and the schools.

TOOLS

Part of this ongoing conversation, especially among district staff in these increasingly difficult and complex educational times, is about *how* to communicate.

Before delving into the specifics of our communications efforts, it is necessary to discuss the tools we will use. Please note that the list below is by no means exhaustive. It simply identifies the most commonly used communication and feedback tools at our disposal, regardless of their current appropriateness for the Whitefish Bay School District.

The following internal communication tools are used to reach out to and inform members of our community.

Staff newsletters, memos and meetings: The district has found that these are excellent tools for the sharing of information and are, in fact, one of the preferred ways in which staff wish to continue receiving information about the district.

Staff email newsletters: Email newsletters are a terrific way to quickly provide information to staff members. While some staff members complain about receiving too much email, others say they want more, especially if it contains information about the work of district staff and the school board.

Tools used for external communication aim to reach a much wider audience. They include:

Community email newsletters: Permission-based email newsletters are a great medium for keeping stakeholders informed, and email is one of the ways in which community members wish to receive information. There are numerous vendors that allow for the quick creation of web-based forms that can be integrated into the district's website for newsletter distribution. Most of the vendors provide this service on an inexpensive monthly basis.

Advertisements, articles, guest columns and “op-eds” in local newspapers: Whitefish Bay residents benefit from having a regional daily newspaper that assigns reporters to cover the school district, as well as various weekly publications. While readership may be lower than in the past, submitting articles, columns and opinion pieces is a simple and effective way of communicating important district news. Increasingly, local weekly publications are allowing districts to submit paid ads that mimic news stories. This is also a tactic that should be explored and pursued, as is noted in the calendar section of this report.

Media relations: Many of the issues the district will be facing over the next year will be reported on by local media outlets. To assist these reporters in their efforts, the district should provide information that can be easily included in news stories, while district leaders should be available to provide background information and on-the-record quotes. Often, background information that is provided to one reporter can be provided to another at a later date. Moreover, background information on a topic, such as the annual meeting, can and should be reused every year for the same purpose.

The district’s website: One of the communications issues raised through the communications audit was the need to update the website. The website is currently being revised for easier navigation and to allow more staff throughout the district to update the site. These changes will have a significant and positive impact on the way in which the district communicates.

Because stakeholders find the website trustworthy, continued efforts should be made by the district to continue expanding the website with new information.

Social media networks: Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are a great way to provide new and important information in a very timely fashion, and its importance will likely grow in time.

The challenge with social media is that staff time must be committed to it. Outdated posts reflect very badly on the district, and an abandoned Facebook or Twitter page, especially if it is linked to or integrated with the district’s website, is worse than having no social media presence at all.

Direct mail: Letters, district reports and postcards are terrific for sharing information with community members, particularly those who do not have a natural connection with the district. In fact, some stakeholders, especially parents whose children are no longer attending district schools, have noted that they like to be “interrupted” by information from the district.

Service club outreach efforts: One of the best ways to communicate with members of a variety of service groups is to connect with them at their regularly occurring social events. Meetings of local chapters of the Rotary Club, the

Kiwanis Club and other organizations are terrific venues for sharing information about the district and for engaging club members in its challenges and opportunities. Reaching out to service clubs in Whitefish Bay can be difficult because they tend to serve several communities in addition to Whitefish Bay.

Local cable television and web-based video broadcasts: Increasingly, video-based information is being presented to community members by school districts.

However, while processes can be created to allow for some efficiencies in filming and launching video, it takes time and there are often additional expenses for the district. In this way, video is not presented as an option in this plan, but should be considered at a later time.

Issue-specific “Frequently Asked Questions” and “one-pager” documents: FAQs and one-pagers about issues of specific interest can be made available to stakeholders, both on the website and in print form. Creating FAQs is a great method for presenting complex information in a way that stakeholders can embrace.

Updates from and meetings with parent-teacher organizations and advocacy organizations: Whitefish Bay PTOs and advocacy organizations are important not only because of the critical support they provide, but also because their organizers typically have a deep connection with a widespread network of parents. Meetings with the members of the different PTO and advocacy groups will provide them with more information on district initiatives and allow them to share their perspectives.

District marketing materials (brochures, banners, introductory DVDs, etc.): New community members, parents of possible open enrollees, realtors and business leaders often want “quick-hitting” information about the district.

Marketing materials, including web-based videos and DVDs, brochures and banners are a great way to share information quickly and to reinforce the district’s messages. While this kind of marketing material is not presented specifically, it is an important option to consider in the future.

As with internal audiences, the following tools can be used to gain feedback from a wider variety of community members:

Surveys: Online surveys are a particularly effective way for the district to quickly gain feedback on various issues from external stakeholders. The fact that so many of the district’s stakeholders were willing to participate in the audit survey suggests that community members are happy to weigh in with their thoughts and opinions.

Focus groups: As with surveys, focus groups allow for a greater understanding of the trends and specific issues uncovered by surveys.

PART 4: AUDIT FINDINGS

The foundations of this communications plan are the findings of a communications audit that was recently conducted by the district. The district used two sources of information for the audit, the first of which was a review of the district's current communications practices. Using a form that was emailed, administrators were asked to report on the regular communications they have with staff and community members. Moreover, special attention was paid to district-level communications practices and tools including, among other things, the district's website. This information was then reviewed within the context of established best communications practices.

The other source of information for the audit was from communications surveys that were conducted with community members, staff, administrators and board members between February 1 and February 22, 2011. Surveys were conducted both online and in hardcopy form, and efforts to notify stakeholders were made to generate a good return from all stakeholder groups. This information was augmented by interviews held over the telephone and face-to-face with a self-selected group of board members and administrators.

A total of 456 people took the community survey. Of the 456, 7% were 18 or under, 0.7% were 19-25, 5% were 26-34, 30.7% were 35-44, 39.5% were 45-54, 5.5% were 55-64 and 6.1% were 65 and over.

Approximately 92% of respondents reported living in Whitefish Bay, 4.4% reported living in Milwaukee and 3.3% reported "other."

When respondents were asked to describe their situation, 70.6% reported having school-aged children, 11.6% said they have preschool-age children, 63% said they have children who currently attend or have once attended a Whitefish Bay public school and 1.2% said they have grandchildren who attend or have attended a Whitefish Bay public school. Finally, 14.9% of respondents said they attended a Whitefish Bay public school themselves.

When asked, "If you have children who previously attended a Whitefish Bay public school, what was the last year they attended?" most respondents said their child attended within the last ten years, as might be inferred from the ages of respondents.

Respondents who reported having children in schools noted that their child or children attended the following schools:

- Richards Elementary School 17.6%

- Cumberland Elementary School 15.4%
- Whitefish Bay Middle School 28.9%
- Whitefish Bay High School 32.7%
- Public school outside the district 0.0%
- Private school inside the district 1.3%
- Private school outside the district 1.7%
- Home-schooled students 0.4%
- Other 2.0%

A total of 231 staff members took the communications survey. Of all staff responses, 18.2% said that they had worked for the district for 1-3 years, 26.4% said for 4-7 years, 31.6% said for 8-15 years and 24.2% said they had worked for the district for more than 15 years.

Of all staff respondents, 64.9% were teachers or librarians, 6.5% were aides, 4.8% were support staff, 5.2% were Pupil Services staff, 12.1% were secretaries, 1.3% were custodians and 5.6% were “other.”

When asked how long they had been in their current field, 9.5% reported 1-3 years, 17.8% reported 4–7 years, 41.1% reported 8–15 years and 32% said more than 15 years.

When asked, “In which building do you work?” 26.0% said Richards Elementary School, 24.7% said Cumberland Elementary School, 20.4% said Whitefish Bay Middle School, 37.2% said Whitefish Bay High School and 2.6% said Lydell Community Education and Recreation Center.

When asked, “Do you live in Whitefish Bay?” 23.4% said yes and 77.1% said no.

THEMES

The audit surveys identified several common themes:

- This is a community that loves its schools. One of the most identifiable themes from all surveys and interviews is that Whitefish Bay is a community that is very fond of its local schools. In the community surveys, parents point to the district as one of the reasons they moved to the area, and when asked to describe the district, the responses were glowing. While nearly every community holds its school district in high regard and has a certain level of pride in it, this is especially true in Whitefish Bay.
- Staff members are extremely happy to be working in Whitefish Bay. As with community members, Whitefish Bay Schools staff report high levels of satisfaction with the school district and seem very happy. The comments of staff members about the school district could be

interchanged with those of community members in that they also have a great deal of pride for the schools and their students.

- Community members are hungry for information. While staff members generally report having the information they need to do their work, community members, including those who do not have children in the schools, report wanting more information, especially regarding performances and events.
- The website is used as a primary source of information. Parents and other community members, including those who do not have children in the district, report using the district's website as a primary tool for receiving information about the district.
- Staff and community members trust the school district. Responses from all stakeholder groups reflect a high degree of trust in the school district. In fact, when asked about sources they find to be most credible, the most common response was the district itself.
- We cannot reach community members through the newspaper alone. Readership for the local newspaper is quite low, less than 20%. Moreover, community members did not suggest in high numbers that the newspaper was the best or most credible way of reaching them. These numbers have likely declined in recent years.
- People want to be interrupted. Communications tools can generally be categorized into two forms: What might be described as "passive" or "permission-based" communications and what we might call "interruption" communications. Permission-based communications include newsletters that are sent by email, requiring readers to sign up in order to receive information from the district. Passive communication is when people seek out information, as in the case of visiting the website. Interruption communications is when information is put in front of people, or they are "interrupted" with information from the district. Community survey respondents noted that they wanted to receive information from the district in a style resembling interruption-based communications.
- Word of mouth is critical. One of the things that came up again and again in surveys and interviews is the importance of word-of-mouth communication. The simple fact is that community members are informed by what they hear from their neighbors and find the information to be very credible.
- Email is important. While community members want to receive information by mail, many others, especially parents and staff, said they also liked to

receive information by email and wish to be communicated with in this way.

- Keep an eye on capacity. While stakeholders are hungry for information about the district and seem to welcome the opportunity for more communications, we must also be mindful of the fact that the district does not have a dedicated communications staff person or have extra capacity to implement a broad range of communications efforts. In this way, communications planning must be mindful of the realities of limited capacity.
- The importance of what was not mentioned. It is worth noting that in addition to having a great deal of pride and trust with and of their schools, a large number of stakeholders did not mention any problems with the district. Therefore, the school district does not undertake this communications planning effort from a deficit position. This is not often the case for school districts.

GUIDING PRINCIPALS

Based on the surveys, interviews and reviews of district communications practices, the audit identified a series of guiding principles related to the district's communications efforts.

First, the audit noted that the district must be its own reporter. The audit report suggested that it is likely that if we had conducted this audit a decade ago, the readership of the local newspaper would have had a dramatically larger circulation among Whitefish Bay residents. In this way, changes in local newspapers, including in Whitefish Bay, have resulted in gaps in coverage. While it is likely that traditional newspapers will change in the amount of column inches they provide to the district, and new news sources are likely to come on the scene, the fact remains that no school district can count on the amount and type of news coverage they once received.

Therefore, this creates a situation where the district must actively work to push news out to the local community in a way that it might not have in the past. To use an old analogy, school districts must not only report on their own news, but also create and run the printing press to distribute it.

Second, it was said by one respondent that the informal networks of neighbors and friends is critically important for community members and is an important way in which people receive information about their schools. The survey responses seem to confirm this. We suggest moving forward with the communications planning with full knowledge of this.

Third, the audit report recommends the full utilization of the website as a communications tool. In addition to the fact that a large number of people use the website to receive information about the schools, it also seems that they tend to return for updated information. With this in mind, the district should view the website not as a repository of information as so many other districts do, but as a primary source. In this way, a redesign of the website that will better convey information and allow more staff members to update the site is an important endeavor.

Fourth, the audit recommended seeking passive and active communications efforts. A strong theme developed among community members, including those who do not have children in school, that they want to receive information from the district. Community members who once had children in the schools bemoaned the fact that when their children graduated, information about the schools and district immediately stopped. These community members want to actively receive information from the district, perhaps through the mail.

In addition, community members also said that they would like an opportunity to sign up for updates on a more regular basis, perhaps via email, which would allow them to stay current on school issues. One of the guidelines we should follow is to ensure that communications use both passive and active techniques.

Fifth, the audit report encouraged district leaders to continually look to the future. The way in which people communicate with one another is changing dramatically. Just as we must ensure that our communications planning efforts build on best practices, so too must we work to ensure that we continue to look to the future to keep up with the way in which community members communicate. This is true even though stakeholders are not clamoring for the newest and latest in communications.

Sixth, the audit report suggested the need for the district to communicate “messages.” The Whitefish Bay School District is in the unique position where staff and community members already have an overwhelmingly positive view of the local schools. Even with this, it is important for the district to seek ways in which it can provide community members with good, useful information about its challenges and opportunities. This is especially true during these challenging financial times. It is also important that the district, perhaps through its strategic planning efforts, identifies and reinforces messages about where it is going and how it plans to get there.

Finally, the audit report encouraged the district to create a culture of communications. The Whitefish Bay community is comprised of community members who are deeply interested in their schools, even if their children no longer attend them. The simple fact is that the community is hungry for more information. While the communications plan will be created for the district, it

alone cannot be crafted in such a way as to anticipate every opportunity to communicate or every challenge that will come to pass.

In this way, the district must work to create a communications culture in which important decisions that are made by the district are followed with the questions: (1) Who will be interested in learning more about this?; and (2) What tools should I use to communicate this news?

Similarly, the district should continue to look for new ways in which it can communicate during times of crisis. This includes continuing to refine crisis communications plans and incorporating new tools, when it is appropriate to do so, into the plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the community, staff and school board/administration surveys, interviews and a review of district communications, the audit report will make the following recommendations:

Create new communications tools: The Whitefish Bay School District is in the enviable situation where community members trust it as a source of news and are interested in learning more about what is happening in the schools. However, the district currently has relatively few communications tools available.

The following recommendations suggest some tools for the communications plan. However, in addition to the specific items that are listed, it is important for the district to continue seeking and evaluating the possibility of adding new communications tools and new practices that help to advance its efforts.

Begin a key communicators group: In an effort to provide information to the social networks of neighbors and friends that make up these informal yet important communications channels, the district should create a key communicators network comprised of influential community members who meet a few times during the year, are briefed about issues and are encouraged to ask questions about topics of their choosing. It is nice to have people meet in person, but the groups can also function virtually using email.

Revise the website: The district's website is critical to the success of its communications efforts. Not only is it the clearinghouse for district information, it is the primary source of information for many Whitefish Bay community members. The website, however, is badly in need of an upgrade. Not only should the pages be designed to convey information better, but just as importantly, a content management system should be built into the system to allow for more school staff to be able to update the site on a more regular basis. It is important to note that I have reviewed the plans for the website upgrade underway, and the concerns raised by community members and staff will be addressed by the

upgrade as long as efforts are made by more staff members to regularly update the website.

Create a comprehensive communications plan: The key to effective school-community communications is to ensure that it is ongoing and maintained over time. A communications plan that generally outlines what will be communicated, when, by whom and how will be critical to the district's communications success moving forward. This plan should include and build on already successful staff communications efforts.

Creation of a district-level newsletter: In many districts across Wisconsin, newsletters mailed to community members have been a great way of ensuring that all stakeholders received information about the district. While many districts previously eliminated these publications due to the high costs associated with mailing, increasingly these mailings are coming back.

Because community members have said that they want to receive information by email and through the mail, one option is to mail a hardcopy newsletter, perhaps at the beginning and end of the year, and an email newsletter at different times during the year.

Use of social media: While social media was not a central finding on the communications survey, I encourage the district to consider its use. Sites such as Facebook are becoming increasingly important for connecting with alumni, and are often very useful during times of crisis. Moreover, by using free and simple tools such as Hootsuite.com, posts that are made to one site can automatically be sent to several others, and feeds from the district can be included on the website.

Reinforce the messages included in the strategic plan: The Whitefish Bay School District is in the unique position of conducting its communications planning during its strategic planning process. It is important that, to the degree possible, these plans work together. In most cases, the communications plan dovetails with the strategic plan to convey important information to stakeholders, as well as critical messages.

Create a culture of communications: The Whitefish Bay community is comprised of community members who are deeply interested in their schools, even if their children no longer attend them. The simple fact is that the community is hungry for more information. While the communications plan noted above will create regular occurring communications opportunities, as well as illustrate key stakeholders and tools for communicating, there are numerous issues that will come up through the years that we simply are not able to anticipate. In this way, the district must work to create a communications culture where important decisions that are made by the district are followed with the questions: (1) Who

will be interested in learning more about this?; and (2) What tools should I use to communicate this news?

PART 5: COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

As noted above, the creation and launch of this communications plan requires careful consideration of the district's ability to implement it. Because the district does not have a great deal of extra capacity, the plan must aim to make the heaviest impact and gain the highest return on investment, in terms of both time and money.

As such, this plan involves a staged approach to communications efforts. Items that are considered to be most urgent and offer the greatest return are addressed in the first year, while less urgent but no less important items are included in subsequent years. It also provides a general outline for some additional items that should be considered in the third year. It is of the utmost importance that communications efforts be continued from year to year, and be carried out with careful consideration of the time and money invested in them and their success in meeting the district's communications objectives.

YEAR ONE COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

The year-one communications efforts are those considered to be the most critical to the success of district communications and also the most urgent, based on the communications survey.

School district website:

The district is currently engaged in a process to improve its website. This project will entail the launch of a new site design and the engagement and training of staff to more regularly update the site. The project has its own process and timeline, which are not included here.

It is important to note that the website revision process will likely take a great deal of time and effort. Its completion is therefore the single most important effort involved in this plan.

Town hall meetings and outreach to parent organizations:

The district will work to engage parents and other community members through two separate types of face-to-face activities, each designed to meet the unique needs of the two groups.

First of all, the district should hold a "state of the district" event in October of 2011, in the new high school space. With remarks to be given by the superintendent, the state of the district event will allow parents and non-parents

to learn about the vision of the district and the challenges and opportunities that it faces.

The advertising of the event will be carried out via the website and through various school and district-level communications efforts mentioned in this plan. Also, special invitations will be sent out to local leaders and other influential members of the community.

In addition to this event, the superintendent will continue to seek opportunities to speak at one parent-teacher organization (PTO) meeting each year at every school, as well as at one meeting of each of the district's advocacy organizations.

At both the PTO meetings and state of the district events, feedback cards of a similar size to a postcard will be made available to participants, so that they can provide feedback about the meetings. This will help to determine whether the meetings should be continued as they are, improved on or discontinued.

District mailing enhancement and/or expansion:

Community members appreciate receiving mail from the district. This is especially true for those who do not have children attending the schools. Ideally, the district should distribute two mail pieces annually, including a budget document in the fall and a performance document in the spring. The problem with these documents is that they can be prohibitive in terms of costs.

Based on the communications audit, I suggest enhancing the current mailing or expanding the number of district mailings. If this is not viable, the district could consider alternative opportunities to provide information to community members.

Creation and launch of two-issue district e-newsletter:

Like other mailed materials, a hard-copy newsletter can be financially prohibitive. Therefore, the district should consider creating and launching an e-newsletter, on a limited basis, during the first year of this plan. The e-newsletter should include a short letter from the superintendent, as well as three or four other short articles that are of interest to both parents and non-parents.

A variety of vendors allow the creation of web-based forms that facilitate website visitors' subscription to free newsletters. These same vendors also allow for the simple creation of templates of the newsletter and aid in the launch of newsletters to subscribers.

The district's e-newsletter should be distributed after the mailing of the hard-copy newsletter. The mailed newsletter should include instructions for community members on how to subscribe to the e-newsletter.

At the end of the year, statistics, including the percentage of subscribers who opened the e-newsletter and the amount of time that was needed to assemble

and distribute it, should be used to determine whether publication of the e-newsletter should be continued.

Superintendent's column:

September is a good time for the superintendent to draft a "beginning of the year" column. This column can be presented to local newspapers for publication and can also, at a later date, be added to the e-newsletter.

YEAR TWO COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

There is a tendency in communications planning to add items to the plan year after year without careful consideration of whether the efforts in the first year were successful. In this way, I strongly urge the district to avoid making these mistakes by determining, after the first year of the plan, what efforts worked, what efforts did not work and what should be added.

For each of the items detailed in year one, those efforts that did not work should be improved with the target audience in mind. Year two of the plan should build on the processes that were created in year one and should include, if possible, additional items that are detailed in the Future Efforts section of this plan.

To be implemented in year two:

Town hall meeting and outreach to parent organizations:

Based on the feedback from the previous year's state of the district event and PTO and advocacy organization talks, these events and talks will be improved on and expanded, or discontinued.

Enhance and/or expand district mailing:

Based on the feedback from community members, district mailings should continue to be evaluated and improved.

Improve the district e-newsletter:

Based on feedback from community members, the district should consider how many issues of the e-newsletter it wishes to publish, and should continue to fine-tune the process for creating and delivering it. If it is determined that the newsletter is not being read by parents and other community members, the e-newsletter should be discontinued.

Superintendent's column:

The superintendent should draft and distribute two columns.

YEAR THREE COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

After establishing the basics of a communications program, the district should continue to seek new avenues for communication, maximizing its investment of

time and money. Toward that end, the district should continue building its website by regularly updating information, including the use of videos and written documents.

In this way, the website should take on a larger role in the district's communications efforts, serving as a repository for communications-related items, as well as a source of new information.

As with year two, the district should continue working to evaluate and improve past efforts. In evaluating its communications, care should be taken to evaluate why the district is engaged in the effort and if the goal is being realized. If the decision is made to eliminate an effort, it should be replaced with one that achieves the same goal. The district must ensure that it continuously moves the effort forward.

As noted for year two, the district should regularly evaluate the ideas noted in the Future Efforts section of this report to see if additional items can be added to the plan.

To be implemented in year three:

Continue improving town hall meeting and outreach to parent organizations:

As in year two, the year three town hall meeting and efforts to reach out to parent organizations should be improved, based on feedback and data. Where appropriate, video of meetings should be captured and placed on the website.

Continue enhancing and/or expanding district mailings:

The district should continue to improve on its mailers based on the opinions of community members.

Continue improving district e-newsletter:

Efforts to improve the district's e-newsletter should continue to be made, including considering the use of video. Here again, if the e-newsletter is not being read by parents and community members, it should be discontinued.

Launching social media efforts:

Many school districts are using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to connect with parents and community members. While the use of such tools represents a great way to communicate, social media should be used after the creation of more basic forms of communication as discussed in the Future Efforts section below.

In year three, the district should launch a robust social media campaign that is fully integrated with the website.

FUTURE EFFORTS

Many of the efforts described in this plan focus on the creation of what might best be described as foundational items; that is, efforts to create a comprehensive communications effort for the district. The key, as described in this plan, is to begin creating new communications vehicles and processes in the first year, and then evaluate them in later years to determine whether they should be continued, modified and expanded.

An important piece of this planning effort is something that is described in the audit as a need to create a communications culture. What this means is that it is critical for the school district to seek new opportunities to communicate. The new communications tools that are created in year one will facilitate this, but a true culture must continue to be fostered where issues, ideas, challenges and opportunities that come about are communicated effectively. While no plan can account for all these items, district staff should be encouraged, when presented with these types of situations, to evaluate the communications vehicles they have and determine what tools are best used for the particular situation.

Central to this planning effort will be calling on the committee that was assembled for the communications audit and plan. The committee represented veteran members of staff and community members that are not only committed to the ongoing success of the school district, but have extensive knowledge of communications. With that, I would encourage the superintendent to continue calling this group together to gauge the success of the communications efforts that have been identified and to make recommendations for future years' efforts.

Because of the need to evaluate year one activities before determining exactly what should be done in years two and three, those years lack the next details. In lieu of identifying exactly what might be accomplished in future years, I suggest that the superintendent, perhaps with the communications committee, discuss additional items at a later date. Outlined below are only suggestions for consideration.

Marketing efforts:

The outstanding reputation of the Whitefish Bay School District has meant that it has not had to market itself at the same level as many other school districts. However, beginning a marketing effort, perhaps focused on those who are considering purchasing a home in the community, is warranted. This effort can be as simple as creating a series of pages on the district's website for potential homebuyers, hosting a superintendent's get-together with local realtors, creating a handout for local realtors to provide to potential buyers or developing a web-based video that highlights the district's achievements and vision.

Demonstration of performance:

The district currently provides a great deal of achievement data to parents and community members. However, in the future, it may also want to consider creating a performance document that is similar to the school district's budget

document, which would be released in advance of the annual meeting. This document could present data in a way that mimics a corporate report, stressing progress toward meeting specific achievement targets.

Surveys:

The participation rate among staff and community members for the communications survey was very high, suggesting that if you ask staff and community members' questions, explain how the data will be used to improve the district and promote the survey just as district staff did for the audit, people will participate. New technology in online surveying allows for the simple creation of online surveys and are an effective way to gather information quickly and efficiently from key stakeholders.

Key communicators group:

In the suggestions outlined in the communications audit, I suggested the creation of a key communicators group, made up of influential members of the community who would meet during the year to learn about the district so that they have key information as they communicate with others. A key communicators group requires a fair amount of time to organize and manage. In discussing the key communicators group with the committee, it was decided, and I believe rightly so, that the district should forgo this effort due to the limited amount of time available to launch the communications plan.

However, the district should consider creating such a group in the future, or even create a more robust information network that could accomplish much of the same goals.

Staff updates:

The communications audit suggested that, for the most part, staff communication was already quite good. However, as external communications efforts are launched, the district should also seek new ways to engage and inform district staff.

Social media:

The use of social media by school districts may well prove to be a very important part of its communications efforts. However, as noted earlier, the use of social media by schools often requires the ongoing commitment of staff to ensure that posts are made on a regular basis and that the accounts are consistently checked.

The Whitefish Bay School District must address some very basic communications-related things in the coming years. It is for this reason I suggest that the district's communications efforts outlined in this plan are implemented first, because they will serve as the foundation of the district's social media efforts. Moreover, school districts that begin social media campaigns often must abandon them after realizing the amount of time that must be focussed on them.

While social media is moving so quickly that what we know to be social media now, most notably Twitter and Facebook, may be significantly different three years from now. Nevertheless, the culture of communication described above should include monitoring progress in social media, as well as careful consideration of when, how or if and how it should be implemented. To be sure, social media should never be seen as a panacea.

Additional uses of media:

Just as social media is changing, so too are other forms of media. Currently, many districts are experimenting with the use of video. Some are contracting for services with a local video production company or in-house services to record and distribute web-based video updates. These can take the form of a simple two or three minute update from the superintendent. They can also take the form of something akin to an interview show, where the superintendent interviews someone on staff or in the community about a timely topic.

Other districts are exploring the use of video that is recorded using a cell phone or amateur video camera. While the quality may not be as good as a professional recording, the on-the-fly nature of the video and authentic feel makes them a good choice for a “video blog”. Also, some superintendents are turning to video that is shot from a webcam to make timely announcements to staff in a way that feels more personal than a memo or email message.

The key to the success of the Whitefish Bay School District communications efforts is the launch of the high-value processes and communications tools outlined earlier. It is also in the careful consideration of the impact of those communications efforts after they have been employed and the use of the outstanding committee that has been assembled for the purpose of evaluation. With that, I would encourage district leaders, in the spirit of the culture of communications that has been described, to select from the list above some of the easier-to-implement tools to determine their effectiveness, as well.

PART 6: MEASURING PROGRESS

As was noted in the communications audit report, the Whitefish Bay School District is in the rare situation where it is not implementing this communications plan with significant communications-related issues. While the communications audit found that a comprehensive plan needed to be created and implemented, the district does so from a very good position.

This creates a situation where determining progress is more difficult. However, it is no less important.

In September of 2012, another communications-related survey should be conducted, using all or most of the same questions as the original audit survey. The data from both surveys should be compared to see what progress has been made and to determine a course of action for a follow-up plan.